

CIRCLES OF SUPPORT & ACCOUNTABILITY

Executive Summary Prepared for the State of Vermont
Department of Corrections

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*Qualitative
Evaluation*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In spring 2010, Professor Fox was contracted by the State of Vermont Agency of Human Services, Department of Corrections, to conduct a qualitative evaluation of their Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA) program, specifically those funded by the federal Second Chance Act. CoSA will be explained in detail, but in short, CoSA is a community-based, non-professional model for assisting high-risk offenders returning to communities. Other jurisdictions that utilize CoSA confine their use to the management of high-risk sex offenders, but Vermont is unique in applying the model to other types of serious offending. The CoSA reentry program in Vermont was funded by the *Second Chance Act of 2007: Community Safety through Recidivism Prevention* (H.R. 1593/S. 1060), which has been funded by the U.S. Congress in increasing amounts over the past several years.¹ The initial funding supported 24 CoSAs in Vermont (described in detail below). Part of the grant narrative and budget allocated funds for an evaluation. Rather than a quantitative study about re-offense rates, which the Department of Corrections (DOC) can calculate for itself and may not be significant in such a small sample, Corrections requested an in-depth qualitative analysis of *how* CoSA works. In particular, there is a small but solid body of literature out of Canada that measures the impact of CoSA in studies that compare quasi-experimental groups to control groups. These studies have found a significant reduction in recidivism for high-risk sexual offenders—at times as great as a 70% reduction in re-offending among those with a circle of support & accountability compared to those without one (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009; Wilson & Prinzo, 2001; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2005).

¹ https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program_ID=90

When the Second Chance Act was re-funded in 2011, Corrections rolled its existing grant into the new funds and committed to funding a total of 48 CoSAs from this funding source, inclusive of both grants. This evaluation project was extended with the intention to include 48 CoSAs; however, as setting up CoSAs takes time, and are implemented incrementally, not all 48 are yet functional, or have not been operational long enough to be evaluated appropriately. The new forthcoming funding stipulations disallow a continuation of the grant in the form of a no-cost extension, thus it was decided by Corrections that the evaluator should complete the report based on the existing CoSAs. All CoSAs that were presently functional or that had been completed were evaluated.² The number of CoSAs evaluated was 21, which includes 21 core members (released offenders), 59 volunteers and 9 reentry coordinators. The evaluation includes a total of 89 participants.

² With the exception of one CoSA; the site coordinator thought I had been contacted and had interviewed participants of a CoSA but I had not, and the core member was returned to jail and was unavailable once we realized the error.

Description of CoSAs

In the 1990s, COSAs emerged out of a Canadian situation in which a high-risk sex offender who had served his maximum sentence was due to be released from prison but communities had concerns and Corrections had no jurisdiction over his whereabouts. A Mennonite pastor named Reverend Nigh agreed to create a circle around him with volunteers from his church, in order to protect and support the core member, and to contribute to community safety (Hannem, 2013; Hannem & Petrunik, 2007; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007). The program as described advocates the use of non-professional supports to surround the core member, with a circle of professionals augmenting the volunteers on the outside of the circle. The circle of volunteers is distinct from professional agents, such as Corrections or police, but functions with the same community safety concerns in mind. Although in Canada, Corrections had no jurisdiction over the released core member(s) who had served their maximum sentences, in Vermont, core members are virtually always released on conditional release status (i.e., furlough) which is an incarcerative condition within the community. Thus, the circles must operate in coordination with fairly strict correctional conditions.

Similar to the COSAs operating in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Minnesota, circles in Vermont have certain prescribed components:

- A Corrections-referred core member due for release, who is in need of support and is deemed moderately high risk to the community
- A team of three or four appropriately screened volunteers who commit to weekly, consistent meetings for a period of 12 months
- Corrections training and a signed “contract” of terms and conditions for all parties

Current Data

Since 2006, the state of Vermont has run close to one hundred CoSAs, funded by a variety of sources; however, this report is based solely on those funded by Second Chance Act monies since 2010. Although the capacity to run more CoSAs is available, setting them up is time and labor intensive and often they are slow to become operational. This report is based upon 21 CoSAs:³

Table 1

City/Town	CoSAs	Active	Completed	Evaluated	Revocations	Charges
Barre	5	3	2	5	0	0
Brattleboro	5	3	2	3	1	0
Burlington	4	2	0	1	1	0
Hardwick	3	1	1	1	1	0
Hartford	2	1	1	1	0	0
Montpelier	4	3	1	3	0	0
Newport	2	1	0	0	1	0
Rutland	3	3	1	2	0	0
St. Albans	5	3	2	2	1	0
St. Johnsbury	4	2	2	3	1	1
Total	37	22	12	21	6	1

³ Some CoSAs are not included in this evaluation because they may be too early in the process to evaluate or are funded by sources other than Second Chance Act funds, which this evaluation is confined to reviewing. In addition, for one CoSA I was only able to interview the team because the core member went back to prison. This CoSA is not listed here.

Does CoSA Work?

Although too small, a sample to determine definitively, CoSA is very promising as a recidivism reduction tool.

Only 1 out of 21 offenders (less than 5%) with a CoSA team received a charge for a new crime during the time period of the study from 2010-2013.⁴ Once all 48 CoSAs have convened, the sample will be a bit larger to make a more definitive determination. In addition, overwhelmingly, the reentry coordinators, core members and volunteers believed in the efficacy of the model. Although 37 cases is too small a sample to determine statistical significance, and many of the CoSAs are in the early stages, only one core member has faced new charges (not for a sexual offense), which represents 2.7% of the total – a notably low rate of re-offense.

Purpose of the Study

CoSAs are designed as a reentry support team for high-risk offenders to help released offenders navigate social life outside, learn how to develop mutual relationships, and be held accountable to their team, their victim(s), and the community. The model emanated out of Canada and is part of the Canadian Correctional Service. It has been implemented and evaluated in the United Kingdom (Nellis, 2009), and has been operational in a very few states in the US, namely Minnesota and Vermont (Duwe, 2013).

⁴ The small sample size, coupled with the fact that there is no control group, makes it difficult to determine definitively if CoSA has an effect. However, the number with a new charge is substantially smaller than would be predicted given the risk categorization of the group under evaluation and the general recidivism rate.

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) were introduced in Vermont in 2006. A few Community Justice Center (CJC) directors had learned of the program in Canada and began operating them after receiving training, when the first federal reentry funds came to Vermont through the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI). CJs received planning grants to develop locally appropriate reentry programs, and several developed CoSA. Because CoSA is an evidence-based practice (EBP) with documented success in Canada (Wilson & Prinzo, 2001; Wilson, Picheca, & Prinzo, 2007), and the fact that CoSA's restorative justice framework fit well with the mission of Vermont's Community Justice Network and Vermont Corrections' endorsement of restorative justice initiatives, CoSA was adopted as the sole model for CJC reentry programs for high-risk offenders with the Second Chance Act funding that arrived in 2009. Several other options are in place for improving reentry services, through other agencies in government, such as the Department of Labor, and the non-profit sector as well as Corrections' funding for better release planning in facilities.

With the Second Chance Act grant that Vermont Corrections received in 2009, money was allocated to conduct an external evaluation of the programs. Corrections commissioned a qualitative, descriptive study based on semi-structured, open-ended interviews with core members (i.e., released offenders who are beneficiaries of Circles support) and their team members (i.e., community volunteers who provide support) and reentry coordinators that are employed through CJsCs. Vermont Corrections commissioned an evaluation that would analyze the nature of CoSA relationships and how the program works (rather than whether or not it works). Since Corrections can calculate recidivism rates, and research demonstrates that the programs are effective, the potential value of a qualitative study is to answer these questions:

- How do CoSAs work?
- What is the nature of the relationships formed within Circles?
- How do the relationships support desistance from crime? In other words, why do CoSAs work?

Although eventually, the Second Chance Act will support 48 CoSAs, by the time this contract period ended, 21 were underway or completed. This analysis is based upon interviews with 21 core members, and their teams of volunteers (59 in total), and 9 reentry coordinators, for a total of 89 interviewees.

Key Findings

The CoSA program is having a profound impact on core members and volunteers. Overwhelmingly, the volunteers were positive about the effect and value of the CoSA program. Many had served on multiple teams because they were enthusiastic about the benefit for core members, the community and themselves. Core members were grateful for the support and enthusiastic about the program, saying they would recommend it to others. All but one core member was fully positive about the program; this particular member appreciated some aspects of the program but was largely motivated by housing assistance. In addition, and more significantly, core members expressed more positive senses of self as contributing members to society, a commitment to pro-social relationships, a sense of mutual obligation toward and trust of circle members, and somewhat greater optimism for the future. The interesting information to emerge from the qualitative interviews is the explanation of the nature of the relationships and what CoSAs actually do to assist core members in the community. Knowing that CoSAs “work” does not articulate how the CoSAs create a mechanism for desistance from crime. This evaluation found that CoSAs fill the gap that exists between programming inside prison and compliance and supervision in the community by probation and parole. The gap for high-risk offenders exists because of one or more of these factors:

- lack of support from family or friends;
- institutionalized sense of self because of a long term of confinement;
- Relationship and life skill deficits.

CoSA clearly provides a bridge over these gaps. Most core members offered that they would have been returned to jail without the help of the CoSA. Interestingly, many did not imagine they would commit a new crime, but rather would be returned for violating conditions, or just “giving up”. Thus, one key finding is that CoSAs help core members abide within their stringent release conditions—something that is particularly difficult for sex offenders who face more barriers to their freedom.

Although not specifically asked to answer the question of whether or not Vermont CoSAs “work” in reducing risk and recidivism, the data are striking.

How CoSA Works

The reentry coordinators serve a vital function as ad hoc trainers/supporters of CoSA teams, and quasi case workers for the core member.

Reentry coordinators not only recruit and screen appropriate volunteers, and schedule and coordinate CoSA meetings, they also help to monitor the group, model an appropriate balance between emotional and practical support and accountability. In addition, the coordinator serves as a quasi-case worker, helping the core member to navigate various services and agencies within the community. Finally, the reentry coordinator provides ongoing advice and problem solving for the teams, and in a sense, offers ongoing ad hoc training and support for volunteers. Thus, the CJC infrastructure provides benefits. If CoSA were run by Corrections, the dynamics would be different and would likely be less effective. Essentially, the CJC structure allows the reentry coordinator to serve in a more service-oriented role, whereas a Corrections run program would likely default to a compliance function.

Motivation matters, but only to an extent.

A few core members were motivated by reasons that might be considered less than ideal; for example, the need for housing and the prospect of gaining assistance with housing were motivating factors for some. Those few whose primary motivation was housing, or who were deemed too risky to release without a CoSA in place, tended to engage less readily and earnestly than others who openly embraced the support offered. However, in some cases, over time, core members grew to see the other benefits that CoSA involvement could offer, and to appreciate the volunteers' help and generosity. In addition, most of those who were dubious about the value of CoSA initially came to view it as extremely beneficial. For most, having strangers in the community care enough to help them on a volunteer basis was sufficiently unusual to elicit some initial skepticism.

CoSAs can be crucial in de-institutionalizing core members who have served long sentences.

A few of the core members mentioned that they were “institutionalized,” a process which can occur as a result of a long sentence during which time prison life becomes normalized, and connections to the outside world become weaker. This was an unexpected finding: team members helped overwhelmed core members transition to life outside, including adjusting to mundane aspects of civilian life. Many long-servers expressed a sense that they would have been returned to prison without the CoSA. Not only does the deinstitutionalization help create cost savings for the state; it also leads to a higher quality of life and more productive life for released offenders.

CoSAs help core members operate within their conditions of release.

Because of Vermont's strict rules for those released on furlough, such as restrictions on driving, CoSA team members make it more feasible for core members to stay within their conditions of release by providing rides to places, and accompanying them to places such as church or restaurants, where they may only be allowed if an approved person is along. By enabling core members to engage in activities they want, while remaining within their restrictions, CoSA teams demonstrate the value they add, while holding core members accountable to their conditions.

Vermont CoSAs function as intended based on the descriptions of CoSAs from successful programs in Canada and the United Kingdom.

The CoSA motto is: “*No one is disposable*” and “*No more victims*” (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007), which highlights the importance of both *support* in the former statement and *accountability* in the latter. Vermont CoSA teams understood the essentiality of both conditions and engaged in behaviors that simultaneously promoted both aspects of the model.

Why CoSA Works

CoSA works because of the role of unpaid, nonprofessional volunteers.

Several core members mentioned in interviews that it mattered substantially that the people spending their time devoted to supporting them and holding them accountable were volunteers. It created a sense of mutual respect and obligation that could not be easily forged with professional staff. Paid staff might be appreciated, and they were, but might not elicit the same sense of obligation that the generosity of volunteers did.

CoSA fills a gap between programming (rehabilitation) and community-based supervision.

Within the correctional system's design, there is an unintentional space between the programming that a core member receives while incarcerated, and the supervision s/he can expect upon released. Specifically addressing certain reintegration, such as the intense need for support and companionship, cannot be met with control agents such as probation/parole staff or treatment providers. In addition, CoSA team members can monitor for subtle signs of movement toward risky behavior and discover them earlier than a probation officer might.

CoSAs are generally more successful the deeper and more socially the team members engage with the offender.

If the team members retain a significant social distance from the core member, the relationship may not become as strong or be as productive in creating the mutual obligations and other positive effects that emanate from a CoSA. The positive effects of deep involvement arise from the team's willingness to devote time to the core member, but it could also be because of the impact of pro-social role modeling, and the team's tacit communication to the core member that s/he is a person worth spending time with. The CoSAs that had the strongest relationships, and the greatest investment by the core member, were characterized by deep involvement on the part of the volunteers. Although this is a problem in its labor intensity, the less successful CoSAs were characterized by a more shallow involvement, which often appeared heavier on accountability than support, thus the value of the team was less obvious to core members. Very few CoSAs fit into this latter category—most were successful in realizing the full potential of the model.

The training that Corrections and the CJs provide was considered excellent preparation for the tasks of volunteers.

Overwhelmingly volunteers and coordinators felt that the recently revised CoSA training was useful and effective. When asked if there were situations for which they felt unprepared, volunteers did not believe so. In addition, as situations arose, the reentry coordinators served as ad hoc trainers. However, volunteers wanted more information from probation officers about the reasons for certain conditions and for insight into particular risk factors for their core members.

The team approach is beneficial in many ways.

The team approach spreads the burden of time devoted to the core member among all members. In addition, more eyes on the core member lead to greater accountability and better risk management. Finally, the team approach reduces the risk of collusion with the core member, and allows all members to keep one another accountable regarding appropriate roles, obligations, and boundaries.

CoSAs work because of the power of normative and normal relationships in facilitating desistance from crime.

Triangulating data through the core members' perspectives, volunteers' perspectives and reentry coordinators' perspectives, a central theme emerged suggesting that the reason CoSA works is because the normative expectations of the core member are communicated through a trusting and honest relationship. The genuineness of the relationships both models positive relationships for the core member and legitimizes the intrusion of the volunteers in core members' lives. In other words, the team only has moral authority because of the caring and respectful relationships formed.

Recommendation #1: Retain and Expand the Use of a CoSA-inspired Model

Because of the enormous potential for CoSA as a model, the model might need to be adapted to require fewer volunteers (perhaps two people total), which may raise questions as to the ability to retain model integrity. Alternatively, Corrections and the Community Justice Network might consider ways to engage in public education to convince the public that serving on a CoSA is in the community's best interest. A version of CoSA-lite could be created which would be less labor and time intensive but offer similar support, perhaps for offenders who are less institutionalized, and somewhat less isolated but still in need of supportive community members to encourage them as they create new lives. In addition, a few respondents mentioned that there needs to be reimbursement available for meals out with core members, or for coffee, gasoline, etc.

In addition, virtually every respondent felt strongly that the CoSA program should be continued, expanded and extended to more types of offenders. The consensus was that anyone could benefit from the support. However, given that volunteers are a precious resource, Corrections should continue to use that resource judiciously in cases for which social support is clearly lacking.

Recommendation #2: Corrections Needs to do More Work to Get “Buy-in” by Staff

Respondents reported that there was inconsistent “buy-in” by Corrections’ probation and parole staff, and by community-based treatment providers. Many of the probation and parole staff members view the CoSA as an asset, but the cultures of field staff offices seemed to vary in terms of the support for CoSA. Although probation staff were not interviewed for this evaluation, several volunteers and reentry coordinators mentioned this as a problem that needed attention. Most advocated education for field staff as to the benefits of CoSA, not only for core members, but for the community at large, and also to the staff members themselves.

Consistent with this finding, one strong recommendation that emerged from the evaluator’s experience was that success within a CoSA should have some influence on core members’ conditions. In other words, community-based supervision should incorporate more “carrots” to reward core members. Moreover, having a probation/parole officer plus a community-based team of volunteers should provide sufficient monitoring that some of the conditions of release could be relaxed. If Corrections intends to devolve some of its supervision to the community level, CoSAs need more authority. In addition, this will motivate core members to enlist a CoSA team. Without a reduction in the potential “sticks” at Corrections’ disposal, the danger exists that CoSA will function to widen the net of social control for core members. At a minimum, probation officers could help identify the ways that CoSA could help facilitate some of the goal attainment that would satisfy core members’ human needs.

Recommendation #3: The Success of CoSA Provides a Roadmap for Correctional Practice More Generally

The lesson from CoSA in Vermont is that support and encouragement yield more positive results than control and discouragement. While recognizing that Corrections is responsible for community safety and thus is heavily oriented toward risk management, CoSA *is* an effective risk management tool insofar as support and accountability are synthesized into a model that organically builds social capital and a sense of community obligation among offenders. Social capital formation is what creates desistance. Compliance enforcement can be done within a supportive and reintegrative framework. Petersilia (2004) has found that reentry designs that are heavily control-focused are less effective than others. More sociologically-inspired models for reintegration acknowledge the limitations of purely psychological approaches that exist within the correctional treatment/programming models. Treatment cannot “fix” the host of reintegration challenges that offenders face upon release (Fox. 2013).

The lessons from CoSA should be extrapolated to correctional practice more generally. CoSA works because of the positive feedback that offenders receive from an engaged community. Within Corrections, the culture needs some rehabilitation to one that supports offenders, with incentives and rewards, in other words, more “carrots” and fewer “sticks”. Within the context of a larger culture that holds Corrections responsible for poor outcomes, changing to a more supportive culture may feel risky. But it works. The literature from desistance is consistent: stabilizers such as employment and housing are necessary but not sufficient. A cheerleading section is critical—ideally, one made up of pro-social individuals, with back up encouragement and reward from probation officers, therapists and case workers.

Maruna (2001) argues that identity shifts from criminal to non-criminal only occur through an integrative process with pro-social citizens, and important people who will validate the offenders' efforts to change. CoSA is the ideal prototype for how to achieve this in partnership with Corrections and the community.

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