

Community Restorative Boards

There is a rapidly growing interest among many criminal justice agencies, communities, and citizens in community members becoming substantively involved in the justice process. One strategy for achieving this is through the establishment of community reparation boards.

A community restorative board typically is composed of a small group of citizens, prepared for this function by intensive training, who conduct public, face-to-face meetings with offenders sentenced by the court to participate in the process. During a meeting, board members discuss with the offender the nature of the offense and its negative consequences. Then board members develop a set of proposed sanctions which they discuss with the offender, until they reach agreement on the specific actions the offender will take within a given time period to make reparation for the crime. Subsequently, the offender must document his or her progress in fulfilling the terms of the agreement. After the stipulated period of time has passed, the board submits a report to the court on the offender's compliance with the agreed upon sanctions. At this point, the board's involvement with the offender is ended.

One innovative example of the use of community reparation boards is the Reparative Probation Program, initiated in 1996 by the Vermont Department of Corrections with support from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The department was spurred to develop the program after seeing the response of Vermont citizens to a public opinion study, conducted in Spring 1994, which indicated broad support for programs with a reparative emphasis and active community involvement.

Goals

The goals of community restorative boards include:

- Promote citizen ownership of the criminal justice system by involving them directly in the justice process.
- Provide opportunities for victims and community members to confront offenders in a constructive manner about their behavior.
- Provide opportunities for offenders to take personal responsibility and be held directly accountable for the harm they caused to victims and communities.
- Generate meaningful "community-driven" consequences for criminal actions that reduce a costly reliance on formal criminal justice processing.

Implementation

Community reparation boards have primarily been used with offenders convicted of non-violent and minor offenses. Involving community members in the process of dealing with serious offenders can also be effective, however, as demonstrated in the sentencing circles conducted in Western Canada. Based on the experience of the Vermont program, the following factors have been identified as important elements of implementing a successful community-driven reparation board program:

- Marketing the program effectively to the criminal justice system (to judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys).
- Having a committed, well trained staff.
- Working with victim organizations, and ensuring that victims are represented and provided adequate opportunity to participate.
- Processing cases expeditiously and in a manner that is simple for community members to understand.

- Facilitating a positive experience for the board members.
- Providing quality training for the boards.
- Supporting the program with adequate resources (e.g., space, time, and staff).
- Striving for initial successes for offenders, victims, and community participants.
- Getting support from judges in limiting the time the offender is in the program and on probation.

Lessons Learned

Little quantitative data has been collected on the effectiveness of community reparation boards. There is a growing concern and understanding that evaluations of these interventions consider measures besides the standard offender-focused measure of recidivism. Measures should include victim and community responsiveness and satisfaction, as well as factors such as community beautification and indicators of healthy citizen relationships within the community. At this point, experiential and anecdotal information show much promise for community reparative boards as an effective response to non-violent crime.

For More Information

More information on Community Reparation Boards can be obtained from the following: Vermont Department of Corrections, 103 S. Main Street, Waterbury, VT 05671, 802-241-2270; the National Institute of Corrections Information Center, 1960 Industrial Circle, Longmont, CO 80501, 1-800-995-6429; *Restoring Hope Through Community Partnerships*, American Probation and Parole Association, c/o Council of State Governments, Iron Works Pike, P.O. Box 11910, Lexington, KY 40578-1910, 606-244-8196.

This *Restorative Justice Fact Sheet* is presented by a partnership among the Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, National Institute of Corrections, and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, all within the U.S. Department of Justice.