



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE UNIT

Level 7 HDB 20 Lee Street Sydney NSW 2000 TEL: 02 8346 1054 FAX: 02 8346 1141

E: restorative.justice@dcs.nsw.gov.au

NEWSLETTER

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A Balanced Approach in Dealing with an Offence

Terry Lucey

As a relatively new member of the Restorative Justice Unit I am often asked by my previous co-workers in correctional centres what I do as a Restorative Justice Coordinator. My initial response is “organise, coordinate, interview and assess all the people related to referrals on my case load, with the aim of facilitating a victim-offender conference”. I think of the radical differences between my previous work as an Alcohol and Other Drug Worker and my present position. What a breath of fresh air those differences have been for me personally.

My current position in the Restorative Justice Unit has a primary focus toward the needs of victims of crime and a balanced approach towards dealing with the many people affected in the aftermath of an offence. Previously my primary focus has been on the needs of the offender. This is one of the most eye opening differences between the work of an Alcohol and Other Drug Worker and a Restorative Justice Coordinator. It feels some what akin to changing which team I’m playing for at half time of a football game. Although I’ve always been aware of the other sides’ presence and what it must be like for them, I had never so clearly focussed on their needs. How refreshing it is for me to speak to people who are immediately honest and open in talking to me about some of the most difficult and painful experiences of their lives.

Most of my work focuses on victim-offender conferencing where the offender meets with the person who was the actual victim or the family members of a deceased victim. The purpose of a victim-offender conference is to try to repair some of the harm that has been done. In the Department of Corrective Services, victim-offender conferences generally deal with the more serious offences. Often they concern matters where there has been the loss of a life or where a serious assault has taken place. Each case involves meeting and assessing the offender and also meeting with the victim and each of their support people. Meetings with victims and their support people usually take place at the individual’s homes, sometimes out of hours or on weekends. Sometimes a Restorative Justice Coordinator meets with people many times in preparing for a victim-offender conference.

In doing my work, I move from speaking to an offender in the stark reality of the correctional centre environment or a district office, to the very different and contrasting surroundings of the private homes of the victim and each party’s family members and other support people. Often there are pictures of deceased victims of crime on the walls and in bookcases in the homes I visit. This brings home to me the fact that the victims of crime that have lost their lives still live on as part of the day to day lives of their families.

Initial contact with victims often begins with a letter from a Restorative Justice Coordinator to the victim regarding Restorative Justice processes. There may then be telephone contact to indicate whether or not there is interest in participating in a victim-offender conference. This is our first verbal contact with the victim and can be a very difficult time for them as the letter often revives unpleasant memories of the offence and the harm that it has caused. It is at this point, when a victim replies, that the Restorative Justice Coordinator hears for the first time the impact that the offence has had. When first receiving these calls from victims I noticed the disparity in the personal accounts of the crime presented by victims compared to that offered by offenders. Offenders often speak of themselves and their own issues sometimes minimising or justifying their actions. Victims tell of their experience of what the offender did, how they feel as a result of the offence and how they and others close to them have been affected. Often the two versions are vastly different accounts of the same incident.

As a Restorative Justice Coordinator I am required to look at the “whole offence” rather than focusing so sharply on “the offender” and the issues that led to their offending behaviour. From where I sit nowadays I see for each individual offender, there are a number of victims. The offender is just one piece of the puzzle. As an Alcohol and Other Drug Worker the amount of effort I directed toward the offender seems to be somewhat one-sided in relation to the whole puzzle. Now in Restorative Justice I spend my time working with the whole puzzle, the victims and their

issues and the offenders and their issues. I get great job satisfaction assisting people to move on with their lives through participation in victim-offender conference or other Restorative Justice interventions.

My eyes have been opened to another model and process of dealing with offending, which I find very satisfying. I have worked with victims of crime and other members of the public who have entered correctional centres and confronted offenders who have affected their lives. I have seen positive changes in a victim’s appearance during and after a victim-offender conference. When debriefing victims who have participated in a victim-offender conference, I have experienced great satisfaction seeing how the process in the conference can address so many issues for victims and their families which have sometimes been impacting on them for many years. I feel privileged to be a part of such a process.

I now believe that I may have been somewhat naïve to the bigger picture surrounding offending behaviour. Particularly considering where I work and the clientele I have been working with. What really happens and to whom, when an offence occurs? Working in the Restorative Justice Unit has deepened my understanding of how “offending behaviour” impacts on much more than just how many offenders are either in custody or under community supervision. I would encourage my colleagues in the field to take a step backwards to recognise and acknowledge the whole picture. This can be a positive step and may influence some of the conclusions you reach and decisions you make in your current roles.