



## **NEWSLETTER**

**April 2008**

# **Participation in a Victim Offender Conference presents offenders with a number of opportunities**

Those of us working in the Restorative Justice Unit are often asked about the benefits for people who participate in victim offender conferences. Each occasion when a victim of crime and an offender come together is unique. The benefits for each participant are individual and personal.

In general terms, we certainly identify that participation benefits both victims of crime and offenders. The focus of this newsletter issue is on the benefits for offenders.

Participation in a victim offender conference presents offenders with a number of opportunities. The chance to face up to what they've done and the opportunity to apologise to someone they have harmed. It may help them feel better about themselves and about going back into the community. It cannot help reduce a sentence, and it does not better the chances of parole.

### **The benefits for one offender in meeting with the wife of the man that he had murdered**

Johnny is a forty five year old, knock about kind of a bloke with a lengthy history of drug and alcohol abuse and involvement with the criminal justice system. A series of events across the course of a day in the late nineties

culminated in Johnnymurdering a loving husband and father of four. In sentencing the offender to twenty years for murder, the Judge concluded that "the offender's culpable intention was to cause really serious injury."

About three years into his sentence the wife of the deceased referred to the Restorative Justice Unit. With the support of her counsellor, she wanted to tell the offender about the impact of the loss of her husband on her and her children.

At the victim offender conference the offender acknowledged full responsibility for his actions and answered all of the wife's questions about the offence and what he has done in custody to address his offending behaviour. A comprehensive outcome agreement was reached.

As a result of the victim offender conference the wife reported that she was able to make the offender understand how her family has been affected by his actions, had all her questions answered and felt the best she had since the offence.

The offender reported that he was honest in the conference, probably for the first time. Now he felt that he could begin to forgive himself and

stop using the drugs that he used to blot out his feelings of guilt

But has anything really changed for Johnny in the year or so since participating in the victim offender conference? The best measure in order to get a real sense of this is to review his performance and behaviour in custody. Firstly, what was this like before meeting with the victim of his offence?

In the three and a half years leading up to the victim offender conference, Johnny failed numerous urinalysis tests and refused to provide a sample for analysis on certain occasions. Across that period he spent almost three quarters of the period on boxed, non-contact visits. For a quarter of that same period he was also off either buy-ups, leisure activities, amenities or the right to watch TV. Johnny was penalised on half a dozen other occasions for a range of breaches of discipline.

For a while Johnny was seen as potentially violent towards officers and other inmates. He had more than one association alert after incidents with particular individuals. There were also periods where he was assessed as at risk of self-harm.

In the year after meeting with one of the people most affected by his actions, Johnny has come good on his undertaking to stop his habitual drug use. Not one positive urinalysis result or failure to supply a sample for testing has occurred. In fact, he incurred no fresh institutional charges at all. Nor were there any longer the concerns regarding risk to himself or

others. Johnny managed to maintain stability even when there was tragedy within his own family of origin.

In the same month as the victim offender conference, he applied for and won a four year apprenticeship. He has stuck with this, receiving positive reports along the way and is reported to be a great worker. In addition, Johnny has worked diligently toward achieving his General Certificate of Education for Adults. He undertook a lot of reading and writing homework independently and was noted for great classroom contribution.

In 2008 Johnny continues to work with staff in addressing his offending behaviour. He is now undertaking more courses and is in the process of completing his referral assessment for an intensive custodial therapeutic program.

Under the heading of Restorative Justice and Rehabilitation, a restorative practitioner of twenty years, Marian Liebmann observes that "One of the results of restorative processes may be to increase offenders' motivation to make use of such resources. For instance, doing victim awareness work, or meeting the victim, can lead to a greater commitment to deal with an alcohol or drugs problem"<sup>1</sup> Participation in a victim offender conference presented Johnny with opportunities, which for him have resulted in just such increased motivation.

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<sup>1</sup> Liebmann, Msrian. 2007, *Restorative Justice How It Works*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers UK.