

Communities Responding to Human Needs

RESTORATIVE
JUSTICE WEEK 2009



Restorative Circles.

Helping Imprisoned People & Loved Ones Meet Their Needs

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"I hurt a lot of people, especially my family. I wanna make things right with them. Can you help me get a Restorative Circle?" Herman asks. He is 28 years old and has been in prison twice since he was 19. This sentence has been for three years. Like many incarcerated people, his crimes are related to substance abuse.

Herman is going to be released back into the community within a year. When he leaves prison, he not only needs a place to live, but he needs current picture identification and a social security card to work and to open a bank account. He also needs to find a job, transportation, and most important, Herman needs a positive support system to increase his chances of staying out of prison in the future.

Herman's natural support system includes his loved ones, but to gain and solidify their support, he needs to make amends. His loved ones have also been directly and indirectly harmed by his criminal behavior and his incarceration, and they too need an opportunity to explore ways he may repair the harm.

The loved ones of imprisoned people, especially children, suffer trauma and health problems from having a parent or relative incarcerated. These serious problems have a disproportionate effect on minorities like Native Hawaiians.

A *Restorative Circle* is a three-hour group process developed in Hawai'i to address the needs of imprisoned people, their loved ones and victims. The Circles are normally held in prison and are convened and conducted by expert facilitators. While education and professional experience contribute to positive communication skills necessary for facilitators, Hawai'i is fortunate to have an indigenous culture that values facilitation, and some individuals learn these skills as a birthright.

Incarcerated people apply for a Restorative Circle, which is their "opportunity to make amends with loved ones; to find other ways to reconcile with unrelated and unknown victims; and to create a transition plan to address your needs for a crime and drug free life back in the community."

The first need addressed during the Circle is the need for reconciliation, which does not require a renewed or repaired relationship. Addressing the crime's consequences and making a plan to repair the harm is sufficient for reconciling in a Circle.

Herman's loved ones, attending his Circle, are each asked how they were affected by his criminal behavior and imprisonment. "I felt like it was my fault. We must've raised him wrong or he wouldn't have gotten into trouble," says his mother. When asked what he could do to repair the harm, she replies, "Mainly, I want him to have a good life." Explaining further what this means, she says, "Get a job he loves, work for things he wants, don't get hurt or hurt others, and stay clean and sober."

After addressing what each person needs for reconciliation, the group helps Herman find ways to meet his other needs for a crime and drug free life. The group comes up with different alternatives including where he can live, how he can find a job, and what he will do to maintain his emotional health. Herman chooses which alternatives will be included in his individualized written plan that also details what efforts will be taken, by whom, and by what date, to meet his needs. All Circle participants receive a copy of the plan, which includes follow-up Circles dates.

A year after the Restorative Circle, Herman goes home to live with his mother and father. It has been almost three years now since he returned home. He has lived up to the commitments he made to his family to repair the harm, including finding and keeping a job, and remaining sober. He works hard and long hours on another island and returns to his parent's house every weekend. He finds sobriety support by meeting regularly with other formerly incarcerated people who abused drugs. He spends his free time with clean friends. He loves to travel and saves his money for trips. He appreciates his drug and crime free life. He "lives more in the moment now."

Herman's mother is thrilled with his recovery. "He is a changed man. The Circle was important for all of us. It gave us a chance to make things right and find ways to help Herman help himself," she says.

For information on Restorative Circles see: *Restorative Circles—A Reentry Planning Process for Hawaii Inmates*, Walker, Sakai, & Brady, (2006), Federal Probation, Vol. 70:33, http://www.uscourts.gov/fedprob/June_2006/circles.html.

For information on how a restorative approach helped reduce domestic violence see *Pono Kaulike: Reducing Violence with Restorative Justice and Solution-Focused Approaches*, Walker & Hayashi (2009), Federal Probation Journal, June 2009, 73:23, http://www.uscourts.gov/fedprob/June_2009/FocusedApproaches.html.

The website for Hawaii Friends of Civic & Law Related Education, which developed and provides Restorative Circles is www.hawaiifriends.org.

