

Restorative Justice News

Bridges to Life: A Promising In-Prison Restorative Justice Intervention

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By MARILYN ARMOUR / Restorative Justice News

Bridges to Life is an in-prison restorative justice programme that facilitates meetings between offenders and unrelated victims. This article is drawn from a paper by Marilyn Armour, assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin. The complete article is attached.

Bridges to Life (BTL) is a non profit 501(c)(3) corporation whose mission is to connect communities to the prisons in an effort to reduce the recidivism of offenders and thereby effect a subsequent reduction of crime in Texas (Sage, 2004). The organization has two goals: a) to reduce the recidivism of program graduates and b) to facilitate the healing process of victim volunteers and offenders.

For victims, these goals are achieved by providing a safe place to interface with offenders on an ongoing and meaningful basis; feel their deepest pain and discover an often-illusory healing; come to understand the impact of the restorative justice methodology; and feel empowered to transform a painful experience into a positive outreach.

For offenders, these goals are achieved by providing a safe place to acknowledge the consequences of their behavior; feel their deepest shame and accept their guilt; take responsibility for their crimes; learn how to stop re-offending; and experience a “change of heart” (Sage, 2004).

The BTL program follows a twelve-week curriculum that explores the topics of crime, awareness, confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and reparation. Before the official program begins, separate three-hour orientation sessions are held for offenders and new volunteers that a) provide an overview of the program, b) discuss group dynamics, c) explore self-awareness, victimology/sensitivity, and the offender perspective, and d) provide helpful hints and an opportunity for questions.

Victim panels are used intermittently during the program to further sensitize offenders to the victim’s experience and the painful ripple effects of their crimes.

Groups are led by volunteer community facilitators who begin and end each session, monitor adherence to the curriculum, model active listening, encourage participation, and expedite the dialogue between the victim volunteers and offenders. All participants agree to adhere to a standard of strict confidentiality to ensure the safety necessary for sharing.

Each BTL prison project accommodates 5-7 groups based on the availability in each facility of private rooms for small group break-outs on a weekday evening. Groups are comprised of five offenders, two victims, and a facilitator. Offenders are recruited by

prison chaplains who use flyers, personal knowledge of offenders and information sessions to solicit interest in the program. Offenders are asked to fill out brief forms about their willingness to commit the time and effort the programs takes throughout the entire twelve weeks. Inclusion criteria for offender participation are a) pending release within 12 months and b) commitment to full participation and necessary personal changes.

Full participation includes attending all sessions, doing reading and writing homework between sessions, talking in small assigned groups about the crime(s) they have committed, and writing two letters that offenders read out loud in their small assigned groups at the end of the program. The first letter is to a victim of the offender's crime. If there is not a specific victim, the letter is written to society. The second letter is to a family member that has suffered because of the offender's crime. Offenders can exercise their own discretion about whether or not to mail the letters to the intended recipients. Offenders with a known history of sexual offenses are excluded from the program.

Victim volunteers are recruited by regional coordinators who are responsible for the BTL programs in their assigned geographic area. Volunteers may be drawn from community organizations, churches, other crime victim programs, prison ministries, and civic programs. They usually are picked from areas within an hours drive of the correctional facility.

Victim volunteers participate in small groups and/or on victim impact panels. Regional coordinators meet with new victim volunteers prior to their participation to determine where victim are in the victim cycle, length of time since their victimization, and their readiness to share in small groups. Victim panelists are selected for the diversity of their experiences and the potential impact of their stories on offenders.

Volunteer facilitators are also recruited by the regional coordinator. They usually have backgrounds in criminal justice, mental health, ministry, or come from other related fields, e.g. nursing, teaching and are selected additionally for their expertise, patience, understanding, and flexibility.

Over 300 volunteers have participated in BTL programs and commit close to 24,000 victim hours annually inclusive of attendance and driving time to and from prisons.

This curriculum is not designed to be followed exactly. Rather, it is the basis for the program and is implemented and utilized in some way each week, and the integrity and consistency of its use is upheld. BTL has developed a Volunteers Manual and a 200-page Operations Manual that provides consistency and standardization of the program.

A survey of BTL participants (Armour, Sage, Rubin, & Windsor, in review) found that they value their experiences in the program and believe it will lower recidivism and should be implemented in other prison units. Survey responses suggested that victim panels and victim stories help overcome offenders' denial, self-centeredness and lack of awareness, expose offenders to the impact of their actions, and help offenders feel the

pain their crimes created. The survey findings further suggest that cognitive dissonance emerges between the past and the present, making offenders less likely to return to crime.

Marilyn Armour
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You can view the original article at Restorative Justice Online [here](#).