

Crime Victims Are

crime

victims

To The Re-Entry Equation

By Peter A. Michaud

Many respected, corrections professionals find it easy to simply acknowledge that crimes have victims. At the same time, these professionals find it difficult to see benefits for corrections becoming more victim-centered in philosophy and practice. This may reflect longstanding views of many experienced correctional staff seeking to protect the public and promote offender accountability. However, with today's renewed focus on offender re-entry into the community, there is an important opportunity for additional focus on crime victims' needs and interests. Doing so can improve corrections professionals' public safety role as they encourage released offenders to be responsible citizens.

Many of today's policy-makers and justice professionals recognize the importance of continually improving systemic responses to crime. Although a realistic solution for eliminating crime may never be found, there are ways to continue improving the correctional response to crime on behalf of victims, offenders and all citizens.

Responding To The Harm

In its simplest form, crime is behavior that harms someone. It is easy to acknowledge that most crimes have victims. Additionally, most crimes are deemed serious enough to be prosecuted by the state on behalf of its citizens. In corrections, most crimes are addressed in ways that are intended to correct. Correctional efforts to correct are generally viewed as a com-

bination of punishment and opportunities for offender change. Equally critical to success is better integration of individual and systemwide re-entry initiatives with a sensible understanding of crime impacts and resulting victim needs.

Although different correctional jurisdictions vary in mission and scope, each strives to respond to factors influenced by the offenders' histories and actions. Prior record, instant offense and substance abuse are some of the typical factors being addressed. As inmates are poised to re-enter communities, much attention is focused on their individual needs. Employability, training and community-based support are critical for helping offenders successfully reintegrate into the community as responsible citizens.

Although crime can be simply defined as harmful behavior, the responses to crime tend to focus on much more complex factors. Addressing substance abuse, mental health and employability are examples of factors that have challenged correctional systems for many years. Another challenge is for corrections professionals to continually improve their responses to the harmful behavior itself. To successfully respond, corrections professionals must deal with the harm the offenders have caused. In order to do that, they must actively inform and involve the people who were harmed — the crime victims and community members.

A victim-centered approach to offender re-entry does not merely acknowledge that crimes have victims, nor does it dodge correctional responsibility for public safety and offender

accountability. When properly implemented, such an approach enhances safety and accountability. Victims of crime are a central part of the public to be protected.

Being victim-centered promotes safety of the people already hurt and usually most anxious about the offenders' return to the community. It also encourages offenders to accept full responsibility for the harm they caused. Citizens personally experiencing the impact of crime bring an extraordinary perspective to correctional agencies striving for public safety. Crime victims have dealt with the offenders and the crime with truly firsthand knowledge and pain. If the aim is to correct or to help the offender "make it right," then the person harmed by the offending behavior has much to offer.

When addressing offenders' accountability, it is important to consider to whom they should be held accountable. As offending behavior harms real people, offenders should be responsible to those same people: crime victims and other community members. For example, victim impact programs for all offenders can help them learn, understand and empathize with the physical, emotional and financial harms experienced by crime victims, families and communities. Identifying the means for making amends to victims, such as restitution and apologies, helps hold offenders directly accountable to those harmed. Opportunities for meaningful community or public service work can provide a means for offenders to give back to the community and victim service organizations.

Ideally, effective offender reintegration into the community begins as soon as an individual enters a correctional facility. Connecting classification, facility programming and release planning, as well as community corrections and community-based supports, helps promote successful offender re-entry. Classification staff require not simply knowledge of inmate needs, but also a practical understanding of prison programming. Corrections program staff and support agencies in the community must see the interconnectivity of each other's efforts in encouraging changed behavior by offenders. Similarly, re-entry, community corrections and victim ser-

vices professionals must mutually understand inmate progress during incarceration and expectations upon release. Assuring such connectivity is challenging. Moving toward practices that address the victimization factor is no less challenging. Each player in the re-entry equation must see the advantages of close collaboration and communication — not for their own gain, but for the benefit of changing offender behavior and preventing further victimization in the community.

Addressing Crime Victims' Rights

Various statutory or constitutional crime victims' rights have been instituted in each state. Typically, these include a victim's right for fairness, respect, participation and input, safety, information, notification of offender status, and restitution. When correctional agencies honor these rights before and during offender re-entry, the interests and needs of victims are supported. They can honor these rights by understanding and supporting the following victims' needs:

Fairness and Respect. Crime victims want, and are entitled to, fairness and respect. They are not generally seeking to "have it their way and only their way." They want their concerns known and their voices heard. They need and deserve empathy from skilled corrections professionals who are knowledgeable about the impact of crime and respectful of the crime victims' experiences.

Participation and Input. In the past, crime victims were typically viewed solely as witnesses needed to prove a crime, thus, helping the state achieve an offender's conviction. Today, more and more policy-makers and justice professionals view crime victims as critical players in efforts to promote a just response to crime. Victim statements about the impact of crime, including input about sentence and release decisions, should be actively solicited, and reasonably honored. Appropriate victim participation in decisions about inmate release is a critical element of successful offender re-entry. For example, the victim should be invited to inform the releasing and supervising authorities about the harm caused by the crime and

how the offender might help "make it right."

Safety and Reasonable Protection. Like all citizens, crime victims want to be safe. Yet, unlike all citizens, those who have been victimized have certain concerns about safety and tend to focus on the harm that they were caused and the fear they feel about being revictimized. As offenders approach re-entry, victims' anxieties understandably escalate. Victim safety is central to offender reintegration within the community. Reasonable correctional and community efforts to protect the victim are vital components of successful offender re-entry planning. Support for victims in developing safety plans and identifying community resources can be helpful in addressing anxiety about an inmate's release.

Notification and Information. Timely and accurate information is fundamental to crime victims' rights. For interested victims, being informed about correctional programs and processes is helpful as they continue to recover from the long-term impact of crime. A general understanding of how offenders are managed in correctional facilities and communities is useful information. A little knowledge goes a long way in helping crime victims on the road to recovery. Formal notification of inmate custody changes, particularly release to the community, is a priority. Availability of victim service and other trained staff is another important resource needed for effective victim support.

Restitution. To be truly accountable for their crimes, offenders must recognize their responsibility for repairing the harm they caused by their behavior. Nationwide, the financial impact of crime on victims, survivors and communities is staggering. For some, the resulting out-of-pocket expenses, such as medical costs, lost wages and funeral expenses, can be devastating. As re-entry plans are developed, specific strategies for offenders' timely and complete payment of victim restitution must be assured. State-based victim compensation funds are also an important resource for victims of violent crime when restitution is not forthcoming from the offenders.

Roles And Relationships

Throughout the nation, correctional efforts to implement and support offender re-entry differ in magnitude and design. Each model promotes collaboration within and beyond the correctional agency. While delivery of re-entry services may vary with each offender's needs (e.g., job training, housing, education, batterers intervention, and mental health and/or substance abuse treatment), a common denominator for all offenders is that their behavior has harmed someone. In corrections, staff can do more than merely acknowledge that there are victims. With the understanding that each crime forces the victims and community into a painful relationship with offenders, corrections professionals can promote responses, which address the problem of harmful behavior and its impact. Programs teaching the many impacts of crime can improve empathy. Offenders with greater empathy are more likely to feel responsible for the harms they caused and seek ways to make it right. Financial restitution, sincere apologies and community service are some examples to consider.

With enhanced focus on that one factor shared by all offenders, correctional responses to crime can best meet victim and community needs and better promote offender responsibility. To succeed at holding offenders accountable and preventing recidivism, corrections professionals can lead collaborative efforts in educating offenders about the harm they caused, as well as how to make proper amends to their victims and their communities. Enforcing victims' rights during the correctional phase of the justice system is no less important than doing so prior to conviction and sentencing. Indeed, it is during this stage that many victims can move closer to reasonable recovery from crime's emotional and financial impacts. Effective correctional programming and community support play a significant role in promoting that recovery.

Crime victims and survivors deserve a seat at the decision-making table when the justice system strives

to correct offenders. Reparation of victims should be sought when striving for reintegration of offenders. In addition, when seeking to improve the competency of offenders, crime victims' capacity for improving offender understanding of the real impact of crime on real people should also be considered. When endeavoring to hold offenders accountable, corrections professionals should also ask themselves, and remind offenders, accountable to whom?

As corrections professionals focus on offender re-entry, they must do more than simply acknowledge that there are victims. While some in corrections do not view public safety as a business, more are recognizing the value of continually improving correctional responses to crime. Bringing the focus toward all of corrections' "customers," including crime victims, can improve the profession's public safety role and strengthen efforts in supporting released offenders in their transition toward more responsible citizenship.

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