

SUMMARIES FROM MARCH 1 COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONSⁱ

JUVENILE JUSTICE IN SONOMA COUNTY **Building Pressure** – Looking at Alternatives Saturday, March 1 2008

Please note that the summaries below reflect the highlights of the *Community Conversations at the March 1, 2008 Juvenile Justice Forum. The content of the discussions does not necessarily reflect the positions of the co-sponsors, the League of Women Voters of Sonoma County and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Commission of Sonoma County. However, this material may be used in the final documents of the LWVSC's study of Sonoma County's Juvenile Justice System.

SCHOOLS

The discussions revealed that there is a strong racist bias in schools especially regarding discipline. There was a feeling that more effort should be made to communicate with parents, more bilingual communication.

3 main points – first session:

1. Mentoring – role models.
2. Cultural awareness with effective family communication.
3. Early intervention.

3 main points – second session:

1. Address institution-wide racism.
2. Community outreach – Restorative Justice, rights awareness for students & parents.
3. True communication with parents of students (not just fliers.)

PARENTS - with kids in the Justice System:

3 main points:

- 1) After being incarcerated, youth come out depressed and with post traumatic stress disorder symptoms. This causes them to be unable to return to school in a "business as usual" methodology. Youth need psychiatric and emotional support systems post detention/incarceration. The entire family is affected (parents, siblings). There is a need for independent emotional, psychological counseling and intervention services that address the various forms of depression that affect the entire family.
- 2) When youth are incarcerated each and everyday they miss school; thus, they fall further and further behind in studies. There is no mechanism for them to catch up adding to the overall depression of the youth.

3) Non-English (Spanish-speaking or other) parents do not understand how the juvenile correctional system functions (probation, probation officers, juvenile court, public-defenders vs. paid attorneys, juvenile detention centers etc.). Parents need someone that can explain the entire system to them. Police presence in schools, as "resource officers", causes alienation between school efforts and staff who are trying to help the youth. A space, and/or entity, that solely looks out for the interest of the child, without police participation, needs to be created for youth to access when they feel pressured to participate or join a gang.

PARENTING/MENTORING – discipline & life skills.

The discussion's emphasis was for the earliest involvement by parents in their children's lives, and more integration of systems. Parents should have support and not be blamed for difficulties. Defining and solving family needs are important at the lowest level, and recognizing the importance of positive and relevant mentoring – cooperative not competitive. And how do we hold the media accountable for destructive role modeling? There needs to be support to reunify family and/or to create an 'extended' family.

There was discussion about various models such as Sweden's Social Welfare model vs. privatization. Questions arose: Who is willing to pay? And can we utilize Fresno's social workers practice of seeing "Little kids with adult issues" to pull in parents?

3 main points:

1. Dialogue – Education for policy makers i.e. police/teacher – mental health – not escalating violence. Public education – whose job is it? – Police/teacher? Do our institutions meet needs? Or, are we asking them to meet needs that they aren't trained for?
2. What do families need? Food, shelter, child care, parent education.
3. How do families create a sense of trust? How do we get government to know our priorities: children & families?

HEALTH/MENTAL HEALTH

The group raised the question – How to bring rival interest groups together without competing? There needs to be more education of elected officials, police, and more school funding for intervention programs and spend more dollars on action & education. Is Restorative Justice appropriate? Police should take mental health professional on calls. NAMI & Mental Health Coalition – not youth related.

3 main points:

- 1 Huge gap between youth and Mental Health services.
2. Providing more opportunities for youth to be active, engaged – physical.
3. Education key/awareness – breaking ignorance.

VICTIMS

The discussion emphasized Non-violent Communication in community organizations. The need for meaningful involvement of victims was emphasized.

3 main points:

1. Provide victims with opportunity to be involved in justice process and resolution.
 - a) Promote Restorative Justice opportunity.
 - b) Encourage diversion programs for low and medium risk offenders.
2. Recognize and address juvenile “offenders” as victims themselves.
 - a) Early intervention & identification – i.e. Truancy programs.
 - b) Provide ‘Safety nets’ in community.
3. Create opportunities and access to provide ongoing support and collaboration for Restorative education and practice.

FOSTER CARE

There was widespread agreement that the existing options for children who need to be removed from their biological families are not sufficient.

3 main points:

1. There are insufficient qualified and quality foster homes and there needs to be a proactive effort to attract more as Fresno County is doing.
2. There need to be additional options to foster care, including more group homes with qualified staff; more transitional housing and support services for those aging out of the system.
3. There needs to be foster care housing where siblings can stay together &/or be near family.

FUTURE – Preparing for a meaningful future

The discussions in this group addressed the question: How do we prevent juvenile delinquency and foster positive citizenry, within the theme of preparing for a meaningful future? In both sessions it was agreed that our youth must feel respected and enjoy varied options, including chances to express creativity and have mentors in their lives.

3 main points - first session:

1. Change begins with us. (Internal)
2. We, mentors, counselors etc, are responsible to create systems that support human potential (external).
3. Cultivate a culture of non-violence through honor, acceptance and interdependence.

3 main points - second session:

1. Promoting options to youth for the future.
2. Youth need “motivators” – mentors, etc. (counselors).
3. Funding programs is crucial.

RESPONSIBILITY

Shared accountability was a key theme. Parents, teachers, law enforcement and other community groups should all take responsibility for our youth.

3 main points:

1. Youth should be listened to and treated with empathy and respect.
2. Responsibility and accountability should be modeled by adults and taught to youth at an early age.
3. Children should be taught non-violent communication skills at an early age.

IDENTITY: Gender, Race, Class

The discussions in this group addressed the question: How do we prevent juvenile delinquency and foster positive citizenry, considering issues of gender, race and class? In both sessions the consensus was that a greater connection with community is vital; youth must feel valued and included in the larger community. Issues of gender, race and/or class help to alienate youth in the community.

3 main points:

1. Get rid of labels, stereotypes, preconceived notions and first impressions of youth and truly see them as humans.
2. Increase and support dialog between generations in the community.
3. Include more history of cultures, including positive role models from a youth's cultural heritage, in educational settings.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Discussion focused on ways to shift the paradigm from an emphasis on punishment to Restorative Justice. The grass roots are vital. Suggestions on more early intervention were given such as truancy and behavioral challenges of Kindergarten. Importance of forming groups to accomplish Restorative Justice was stressed. Action includes letters to legislators, top down/bottom up effort, and accountability up the chain.

3 main points – first session (on How to promote Restorative Justice):

1. Write legislators to gather political support as well as grass roots movements.
2. Prepare ballot initiative. Identify a legislator to endorse the initiative and carry it through.

3. Convene a multi-jurisdictional forum for collaboration. Identify all key players in Northern California and use the forum as a call to action as well as a resource for one another to expand the global utilization of Restorative Justice as an accepted practice as opposed to the territorial local programs. Develop a collaborative “presentation” that is inclusive of the many facets of Restorative Justice with both statistical information and human interest case studies.

Create/utilize publicity opportunities for the public education on the many facets of restorative philosophies.

3 main points - second session:

1. Support all Restorative Justice programs as a collaborative task. Think of ways to expand and share resources (both human and financial). (See 3 above; also share “best practices” evaluations and supporting data.)
2. Support early intervention/prevention. Request a portion of funds to be spent on prevention even as a pilot basis from schools, community policing efforts, government agencies.
3. Individually get political targeting school boards, city commissions, etc. Request the opportunity to give Restorative Justice presentations to those and many other community organizations such as Rotary Clubs.

* Community Conversations: These were the Break-Out Sessions held to elicit participants’ perspective and comments