

Thoughts For Restorative Justice Practioners

Tanya Nelson, secretary for the board of the Wisconsin Restorative Justice Coalition (WRJC), asked me to write a short piece on my thoughts about what we, as restorative justice practioners, should be working on to enhance the utilization of restorative practices. After spending this semester in Belgium teaching and working side-by-side with scholars looking at restorative justice in a more global way, I have a few suggestions.

Organizations such as the WRJC should consider partnering with other groups (both victims' and offenders' organizations as well as governmental and nonprofit agencies and universities) to gather data on current restorative justice projects, selecting a research and analysis model, and then advocating for legislative enactments that recognize and support justice processes as part of the solution in addressing the harm caused by crime.

Great care has to be taken by those of us in the field, not to lose the independence and value driven processes that exist, just to have them become diluted to the point that the fundamental principles of restorative justice are lost. Those of us who do this work fully understand that there are many challenges in effectively integrating restorative justice approaches into our current justice system. We must remain mindful that by institutionalizing restorative justice, there is always the risk that it would lose its victim-centered nature. Bringing together all the stakeholders in the justice system to begin a dialogue and planning strategy on how best to create and implement useful restorative justice projects is a good starting point. All the various disciplines need to be involved.

Although there are some excellent research projects that have been conducted by a number of American scholars including Professors Mark Umbreit, Marilyn Armour and Gordon Bazemore, I believe that we really do continue to lack the substantial empirical data that is needed to convince politicians and other decision-makers of the transformational benefits of restorative justice. We all know, anecdotally, of many projects that had great successful outcomes and then were shut down because of lack of funds. Much of the historical data from that work is lost forever. I want to encourage organizations such as the WRJC and others to work with academic researchers so that, at the minimum, ongoing restorative justice projects can utilize evaluation forms, questionnaires, interviews, etc. that can be used to gather information that can later be analyzed. It is through the substantial research done at Leuven and other academic and professional institutions that restorative justice has gained the creditability and stature it has in public policy and legislative debates in many European countries. We ought to be doing likewise in our professional organization.

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