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Road to Redemption
Federal Bureau of Prisons inmates use CDL program to drive their success

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It's been a big year of change and transformation for Kim Book, founder and executive director of Victims’ Voices Heard (VVH) Inc., a nonprofit agency that provides a victim/offender dialogue program and related services. In recent months, Book has received notification of a major grant award to expand the organization's programming. The nonprofit’s third annual fundraiser, a 5k run, was the best yet, and she was also a guest at the U.S. Naval Consolidated Brig in Chesapeake, Virginia, to discuss her work. That invitation came as a result of a program evaluation performed this past fall by Janette Baird, Ph.D., of the Alpert School of Medicine at Brown University. This evaluation showed that VVH's victim impact program, delivered in five Delaware correctional facilities, reduced the recidivism rate among participants by up to 50 percent.

Book is no stranger to change. Her entire life was turned upside down more than 20 years ago when her 17-year-old daughter, Nicole Mosley, was murdered by a 16-year-old boy she knew. Her daughter's tragic death is the "driving force" that fuels Book's work. She will be the first to tell you she, and others like her, are not merely victims, but survivors. VVH is committed to assisting "other victims/survivors of crime in their need to meet with their offender and hear them take responsibility for their crime and express remorse."

Succeeding in Delaware corrections

Nicknamed the "Small Wonder," Delaware doesn't take up much space on a U.S. map. Located between the District of Columbia and New York City, this state shares the struggles of its larger city neighbors in having to deal with violent crime and repeat offenders. The Delaware Department of Correction (DDOC) estimates up to 67 percent of offenders released from its correctional facilities return within three years. Book believes her programs provide one important element of an overall effort to reduce this rate. "Restorative justice gives victims an opportunity to have some say in what happens to the offender," Book has said. "It also holds the offender accountable in a way that helps them see what they've done."

The keys to VVH's success in Delaware are three-fold. First, this agency is independent, working as a contractor to DDOC; this allows it to keep tight control over the quality and integrity of the programs offered. Second, the facilitators are hand-picked not only for their ability to implement the curriculum in the facilities, but also for their personal commitment to the program. And finally, VVH supplements its written curriculum with guest speakers and additional activities and materials to ensure the participants are impacted on multiple levels.
As a contractor to DDOC, VVH is able to focus on each program it offers. Although there are victim impact programs located in other states, some do not have the same level of control and commitment as in Delaware. For example, the task of running these programs is given to prison counselors, who may be overcome already with staggering caseloads they are trying to manage, or even to the inmates because the staff can’t. “While well-intentioned people are doing the best they can, in these situations, the program is not being delivered in a consistent manner,” Book said. “Our programs are flexible enough to adjust to group needs, while still providing a high level of consistency from institution to institution.”

Facilitators leading the groups make consistency possible. As a contract agency, facilitators are not allowed to work in other DDOC programs. This allows facilitators to bring an outsider’s perspective to each class, free of the history, drama and biases that may exist within an institution. VVH also selected facilitators based upon their qualifications to deliver the programming and their commitment to the organization’s mission. It is not enough to teach the material and lead discussions and exercises outlined in a manual. Program facilitators must be able to connect and build trust with inmates and encourage self-reflection and personal sharing in a prison setting. In short, they must be able to facilitate transformation.

Regardless of experience, facilitators are fully trained to teach independently and are monitored for effectiveness. Professional development is provided semi-annually to enhance skills and knowledge. These sessions also provide facilitators the opportunity to discuss the challenges they face, as well as practices they find successful. Employees who work only a few hours each week find that this investment helps them feel more connected to VVH while maintaining the standards of the program delivered in the facilities.

Operating as an independent nonprofit agency may be an advantage to providing quality programs, but it has its challenges. To date, the victim impact program has been supported primarily through private and federal grants. The program evaluation provided evidence that VVH is making an impact on Delaware recidivism. With this back-up, Book is working with state legislators and DDOC to increase state funding support for the program. By investing the funds necessary to offer this program in its correctional facilities, the state can realize significant cost avoidance in having fewer offenders coming back to prison post-release.

Working as a contractor and having effective facilitators are two components of the VVH model. A third critical aspect is the use of supplemental learning opportunities to wrap around and build upon the curriculum. At the time of the Brown University evaluation, VVH used the “Victim Impact: Listen and Learn” curriculum. Created by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime, it is highly regarded by professionals who use it. It has not, however, received the academic testing required to be considered an evidence-based model. At the request of DDOC, in 2016, VVH transitioned to a similar curriculum published by the Change Companies (a mental health care consulting company), titled, “Impact of Crime on Victims.” This model, utilizing cognitive behavioral therapy-based interactive journaling, is included in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

Neither curriculum addressed the impact of dealing drugs on victims and communities and only briefly discussed drunk and impaired driving. VVH recognized the need for these two topics to be more fully addressed, as these charges represent a significant number of offenders in the programs, so VVH created supplemental participant worksheets and group activities, which they used with every class. These were shared with the Change Companies to ensure the supplements added to the integrity of the curriculum.

Another aspect of the victim impact program had the participants exposed to stories from real crime victims as a means to internalize the material presented in the curriculum. VVH provides this exposure by utilizing video clips of victims talking about their experiences, selected victim impact

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statements and guest speakers. Ask any of the program participants what was the most helpful part of the victim impact class and the answer will most likely be “the guest speakers.” In a 13-week class, there would typically be three guest speakers sharing their experiences as survivors of crime. Prior to guests coming into the program, facilitators prepare participant groups on what is appropriate behavior and respectful discussion. Guests have the opportunity to tell their story to the group with time for questions and answers. VVH is fortunate to have volunteers willing to come into prisons and speak about their experiences as victims of sexual assault, attempted homicide, kidnapping and domestic violence, as well as survivors of homicide (where someone close to the person was killed) or drunk-driving crashes. The stories shared by the guest speakers caused the program participants to feel, firsthand, the resulting pain of their types of crimes. For some, this is a first step toward feeling empathy for the plight of others.

**Program evaluation**

Book and the VVH board of directors believed the victim impact program worked in reducing recidivism. But believing something works and having proof it works are not the same. In 2015, VVH undertook the task of obtaining evidence as to whether or not the program made any difference. DDOC and the Delaware Criminal Justice Information System supplied data on prior program participants, while Baird provided an evaluation of the program’s efficacy. With this data, the evaluation was able to focus on 333 program participants who had been released from incarceration and could be tracked over a three-year period. The evaluation focused on two questions: What was the recidivism of participants relative to the state rate of recidivism in the same time period, and what additional benefits may be derived from program participation?

The Delaware Criminal Justice Council reported in September 2015 that approximately 67 percent of offenders released from Delaware correctional facilities would recidivate and be re-committed within a three-year period. The study group, made up of victim impact program participants, saw a 35-percent recidivism rate, just over half the expected rate. Participant behavior while imprisoned before and after taking the class was also evaluated. To measure this, the average number of institution disciplinary charges the individuals received prior to the program was compared to the average number of charges received after the program’s completion. In each case, the average was obtained by dividing the total number of charges by the number of months of incarceration. The data showed that among all program participants, the average number of charges per month decreased by 33 percent upon completion of the program. Female offenders, as a group, had the highest initial average, with 0.81 violations a month. They also had the most significant drop in charges, going down to 0.46 violations a month.

“I knew we were making a difference,” Book said. “But even I was surprised and pleased with the results.” A copy of the full evaluation can be downloaded at www.victimsvoicesheard.org/images/pdf/delaware-evaluation-report-2015.pdf.

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VVH conducts a victim impact class. These classes aim to bring offenders and crime victims together to facilitate rehabilitation.

Book founded VVH in 2002, seven years after her 17-year-old daughter was murdered in Delaware.
Next steps

Book is not known to stop if she has proof she is making a difference, and to her core, she is an advocate for victims of crime. VHV provides programs and support for victims of crime, as well as its work in the prisons. The programming in the correctional facilities is part of an effort to end repeated violence and thereby reduce the number of future victims. Violent crime impacts not only direct victims, their families and their communities, but it also impacts the families and communities of offenders. By targeting people who have participated in criminal activities in the past, i.e., those incarcerated, VHV is actively involved in ending repeated violence.

With the support of DDIC and grant sources, VHV is implementing a plan to increase the number of offenders served by its programming and increase the exposure participants have to the material. The increased exposure will be achieved by coupling the Impact of Crime on Victims curriculum with another program based in cognitive behavioral therapy: “Courage to Change.” This program targets key criminal thinking errors. VHV already provides the Courage to Change as a stand-alone program in one correctional facility, where it targets those most likely to re-offend; males aged 18-25.

The victim impact program builds a capacity for empathy and an impetus for behavior change. It will continue to be offered as a 13-week module. The Courage to Change provides tools for making behavior changes, addressing key areas such as social values, responsible thinking, self-control, peer relationships, family ties, substance abuse and skills for successful living. This program will also be delivered over a 13-week period. In the prison, participants will complete the victim impact program before taking the Courage to Change course for a total of six months. At work-release and treatment centers, the two programs will run concurrently on different days so that participants may complete both in the relatively short time span at these facilities.

“Kim Book and Victim Voices Heard Inc. are valued community partners with DOC. We are grateful for the respected programming that VHV brings to the offenders in the custody of DOC. By integrating a strong victim impact program with the Courage to Change program, we believe VHV will make the programs more effective than they otherwise would be alone,” remarked Robert Coupe, commissioner of DDIC.

Doubling the program requires additional resources and facilitators so the expansion will be phased in over three years. The new model was implemented at one men’s facility and one women’s facility during the summer of 2016. New facilities will be added each year as funding permits. To ensure the programs are remaining effective, another evaluation will be performed at the end of three years.

The importance of partnership

The motto for VHV is, “We work to restore victims’ lives and end repeated violence.” The largest piece of the organization’s budget is for the programs in the correctional facilities to reduce recidivism (or “repeated violence”). In addition to specific requests to support individual victims of crime, the nonprofit also offers the state’s only victim-offender dialogue program, as well as maintaining an apology letter bank. VHV has proven itself a resource for restorative justice in Delaware.

However, the organization cannot operate in a vacuum. An effective partnership is critical for the success of any program, and Book is quick to credit DDIC for their support of the VHV programs. It is not just access to the facilities that DDIC provides. Offenders must learn about the programs themselves and sign up via their counselors. Effective teaching space must be available, and data for tracking purposes is provided, so that VHV knows how many of its graduates are released and if they are re-committed. Most recently, DDIC has taken another step to support the VHV programming by granting good-time credits to participants who successfully complete the Impact of Crime on Victims program.

Book is one survivor of crime who transformed some of her pain into a burning desire to make a difference. Her work with victims and the victim-offender dialogue program was the subject of a book, “After the Crime,” by Susan L. Miller, a professor in the Sociology and Criminal Justice Department at the University of Delaware. The organization Book founded has provided programming for over 700 incarcerated individuals in Delaware over the last five years in an effort to reduce recidivism. Is there any lingering doubt that one person, leading one small nonprofit, can continue to make a big difference in this small state?

ENDNOTES


Ariana Langford is executive assistant and program facilitator for Victims’ Voices Heard Inc.