

Restorative justice a less costly, more meaningful response to crime

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The New York Times Magazine ran an extraordinary article Jan. 6 about two families shattered by the murder of one family's daughter, Ann Grosmaire, by the other family's son, Conor McBride.

After Grosmaire's murder, those most directly impacted by this terrible act met, shared and provided input in a restorative justice process to identify what would be, for them, a meaningful criminal justice response. The process of meeting, by all accounts, was profound for those who participated. In this case, as in many others across the country, restorative justice played a pivotal and proper role without impeding the work of the criminal justice system.

As restorative justice practitioners, we were troubled by the article's assertion that there aren't many of these programs and those that do exist are "on the margins of the justice system." In fact, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of restorative justice programs and initiatives across the country, including the grassroots efforts of the Crime Victims Council in Fort Worth to promote community conferencing as a response to crime.

This group is conducting a needs assessment, meeting with community leaders and volunteering with restorative justice-based initiatives like the Neighborhood Conference Committee, a juvenile justice program for first-time youth offenders.

Restorative justice is a philosophy, as well as a set of practices, that maintains any response to harm should also include those most directly affected -- the victim, the offender and the community. It does not suggest that this be done at the exclusion of traditional criminal justice responses but that those responses employ greater reflection and more inclusivity, engage more creativity and maintain a victim focus throughout.

Restorative justice takes many forms -- not just victim /offender dialogue as in the Grosmaire case. And by most measures, restorative justice is successful.

Research summarized in the recent book *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice* cites dozens of programs. Many of the them show higher levels of satisfaction with the process for both victims and offenders; increased trust in the criminal justice process; a greater likelihood that offenders will adhere to the conditions placed on them, including restitution; affirmative mental health outcomes for victim survivors; and decreased recidivism.

And restorative justice usually involves far less expensive options than the traditional criminal justice system. In the Grosmaire case, a trial was avoided, and the killer is serving a somewhat shorter sentence than he probably would have received from a jury. Harder to quantify, but no less valuable, was the opportunity for the victim's family to engage in the process, ask questions directly of the killer and hear his regret and remorse.

The economic reality is that the criminal justice system is costly. Texas is incarcerating about 160,000 offenders for \$51 a day. Tens of thousands more are in local and state jails, on probation or on parole. And that doesn't include policing, courts or the cost to victims.

Many legislative analysts have identified criminal justice spending as one of the most serious issues facing the 83rd Legislature. Never mind the human costs of a punitive, adversarial model of justice, our state and local budgets cannot continue in the current mode. Some criminal cases, maybe a lot of cases, must be handled in less expensive ways.

Can restorative justice play a role in criminal justice? The resounding answer is yes. It can, it does and it must.

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