

Virginia Conferencing Project: A Four-Site Evaluation

August 24, 1999

By Paul McCold, Ph.D.

Director of Research, Community Service Foundation, Pipersville PA

This is a report presenting the results of a four-site evaluation of Real Justice community conferencing for juveniles in justice and educational settings in during 1998-1999. Organizations in the sites applied for seed grants to establish pilot conferencing projects and receive the necessary training and technical assistance. Additionally, the sites each agreed to participate in this evaluation.

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION

ACTIVITIES

Personnel from Manassas, Martinsville, Richmond, and Warrenton Virginia were trained in community conference facilitation by Real Justice. Each organization determined the best way to implement conferencing within their organizational context. The projects in Manassas and Warrenton are operated by dispute resolution programs, Richmond is operated as a victim service adjunct to the prosecutors office, and the project in Martinsville is based in the local school system. The Manassas and Richmond projects received juvenile criminal cases, Martinsville received only school referrals, and Warrenton received both school and justice cases.

CASES

There were a total of 116 cases referred to the four projects between October 1998 and July 1999. Just over 46% of cases were offenses against the person, 42% offenses against property and 12% offenses against public order. Of these, 11 were pending and 45 resulted in a conference: 23 in Warrenton, 16 in Manassas, 5 in Richmond, and 1 in Martinsville. This represented an overall participation rate of 43%, well above average for similar restorative justice projects. Warrenton achieved a 56% participation rate, higher than any other similar program reporting to date (28% - 44%). Martinsville only conferenced one of five cases referred and represents an outlier among the four projects in this respect.

A total of 61 survey questionnaires were returned by facilitators and participants, representing data on 38% of the 45 conferences. The median number of days from the offense to a conference was just over 3 months. Conferences lasted an average (median) of 90 minutes, with facilitators taking an average of 3.5 hours to prepare the case. The Martinsville project's one conference lasted 80 minutes and the facilitator reported 12 hours of preparation for this conference, again an outlier. Overall, the resources (hours) per case are somewhat higher than reported by police-facilitated conferencing (1.5 hour preparation and 1 hour per conference), but less than reported from victim-offender mediation cases, and much less than youth justice conferencing using the New Zealand model.

PARTICIPANTS PERCEPTIONS

Victims responded that it was their choice to participate in 100% of conferences other than the one in Martinsville. Overall, 80% of offenders responded that it was their choice to participate, with Martinsville's offender reporting that his participation was not voluntary. Other than Martinsville, these results are consistent with results reported by other restorative justice programs.

Among the 8 victims, 15 offenders and 20 parents responding, 100% were satisfied or very satisfied with the way their case was handled. Also, 100% of victims, offenders and parents felt the way their case was handled was fair and 100% reported the conferencing process itself was fair. While 100% of victims and 100% of parents reported the conferencing outcome was fair, 93% of offenders (all but one) felt the outcome was fair. Both participants responding in Martinsville's conference reported the process and outcome was fair, and that they were satisfied with the outcome of the conference (in spite of their reported non-voluntary participation).

Again, 100% of victims, offenders and parents reported that meeting in the conference was helpful, 100% felt their opinion was adequately considered, and 100% would choose conferencing again. All except one offender (in Manassas) reported they would recommend conferencing to others.

These results place the intermediate outcomes from the four Virginia sites among the highest rated of restorative justice projects on record, with participant ratings so high as to leave little room for improvement. Complete survey results are reported in the Appendix.

PROJECT PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

Manassas VA

ACTIVITIES

The program is currently operating the Juvenile Community Accountability Conferencing project. Cases are being referred from the Diversion section of the Juvenile Court Services Unit, both in Manassas and Woodbridge. In May '99, staff met with the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Judges, a representative of the Commonwealth Attorney's Office and a representative of Court Services of the 31st Circuit and they agreed to have the Commonwealth Attorney's Office and law enforcement personnel send appropriate cases also. The project has already received a referral from one of the judges.

The program was operated by the Director of the Office of Dispute Resolution until a coordinator was hired in April. From 12-1-98 through 6-23-99, 45 cases have been referred, all but one from the Diversion staff. The coordinator has been making presentations to Prince William County Police to educate them about our program to get referrals.

CASES

Cases referred 45, conferenced 16, cases pending 10. Of the conferences agreement was reached in all but one. Among the 19 cases closed without a conference, the victim and/or their parent was unwill-

ing in 7, the offender and/or parent unwilling or no confession 3, unable to contact offender 4, unable to contact victim 5.

Currently the project is planning expansion of our referral sources, a victim impact program for juveniles who don't or can't go through a conference (a 4-6 week class on victim sensitivity), more training of volunteers, a community education and development task force, and we will continue to seek out nonprofit or public sector employers who could hire offenders so they can pay restitution and gain skills.

Richmond VA

ACTIVITIES

Richmond: Victim/Witness Services of the Richmond Commonwealth Attorney's Office. Cases referred from Juvenile Court Intake to the Richmond Family Conferencing Unit at Victim/Witness Services who assigns the case to a facilitator. Facilitators are employees of various governmental agencies in Richmond (Public Schools, Office of Dispute Resolution, Public Defender, Juvenile Intake and Virginia Boot Camp.) Cases are tracked by Victim/Witness Services and outcome reports are sent to Juvenile Court Intake.

The project is now seeking funding for training a group of volunteers who would be supervised by the Juvenile Probation Volunteer program.

CASES

received 15 referrals - conferenced 5 (1 open)

reasons for decline 3 -victim declined to participate

6 -unknown

Among the 5 conferences facilitated, all came to agreements

Warrenton VA

ACTIVITIES

Warrenton, VA: The Program is named Youth Accountability Conferencing and is part of the Piedmont Dispute Resolution Center, a community based non-profit organization. Cases are referred from Juvenile Intake or from schools to the Youth Accountability Conferencing program coordinator who assigns the cases to volunteer facilitators, tracks and monitors, cases and reports outcomes back to the referring agency.

The project staff developed a presentation for schools to expand referral sources, and plan to present to middle and high schools next year.

The project has received a grant for \$50,000 per year for up to five years funding of the program, and expect to receive 60 referrals with better than half conferenced in next year.

CASES

received 51 referrals - conferenced 23 (10 pending)

assault 16, shoplifting 8, truancy 5, larceny 6, other

reasons for decline

6 -victim declined to participate

11 -cases closed as inappropriate

Martinsville

ACTIVITIES

Martinsville: The Program is named Project Resolve and is housed in the local school system.

Martinsville is a small town in rural southern Virginia. Facilitators are employees of various agencies in Martinsville (Public Schools, Victim/Witness, Police, Juvenile Probation, and For the Children - Partners in Prevention). Referrals come from any of the 6 school principals to the program coordinator, a school psychologist who refers cases to facilitators and tracks cases until completed.

July 1998 - Real Justice 2 day training

October 1998 - met with facilitators, identified need for consent/referral forms, sample forms received and revised.

November 1998 - first referral received-declined due to in-admission of guilt by offender. Forms and cover letters sent to principals. Prepared progress report.

CASES

received 5 referrals - conferenced 1

reasons for decline

2 emotional disturbance - offender failed to express remorse or responsibility

2 long-term difficulties

1 case accepted - remorseful and had large support group

DATA COLLECTION

A total of 61 survey questions were filled out by facilitators (n=17) and/or participants (n=44), representing 38% of the 45 conferences. A total of 8 victims, 15 offenders and 21 parents of offenders filled out questionnaire, either at the end of the conference or shortly thereafter. Results of these data are presented in the appended tables.

Participants were asked if they wanted to provide comments about the conference. Below are the edited comments.

Victim comments:

- professional, workable & realistic plan
- surprised offender insincere
- valuable for juveniles-set positive result
- very encouraged
- very good-productive
- very productive, helpful, well facilitated

offender comments:

- a good experience I will keep with me
- glad how it was handled
- I learned I should go to parents for help
- I was already stigmatized by this before the conference
- it did not make me feel bad, I attended to feel better
- it was handled very well
- kids may open up better without parents present
- satisfied
- very good program

parent comments:

- helpful to know other parents felt same way
- I learned a lot
- most reasonable
- parent responsibility important
- prior agreement was strengthened by conference
- punishment too lenient
- respectful, fair and competent
- thanks for helping youth become better citizens
- very helpful
- very inspired