

GUEST OPINION

Restorative justice holds wrongdoers accountable

By Deb Witzel

I read with interest the editorial "Growing youth violence is disturbing" in the Times-Call. Youth and adult violence are perpetuated by "a culture that accepts and even encourages violence as a solution to disagreement and that views revenge as a natural response to injury." With the barrage of violence condoned on television, movies, games and even political issues, can we expect anything different?

We as a society have some responsibility to shift this norm. When we perpetuate the "eye for an eye" philosophy and believe punishment is the only response to wrongdoing, we get more wrongdoing. When we hold people accountable for their actions and guide them to make things right and make better choices in the future, we see a shift in behavior. This is what we see regularly in restorative justice.

In Longmont, we are fortunate to have restorative justice as a response to crime and conflict. Instead of responding to injury with more of the same, restorative justice holds people accountable for their actions. They take responsibility for repairing the harm they have done. A young man who recently completed a restorative process after a fight at his school said, "That was way harder than getting suspended, but I am glad I did it." He worked to make things right for himself, the community and others involved in the fight. Although it was harder than the standard punishment, he was glad to have restored the victims' as well as his self-esteem.

The Longmont City Council and police have provided the wisdom and courage to be leaders in supporting restorative justice for many years. Our local restorative justice nonprofit, Teaching Peace, brings people involved in crime and conflict together to make agreements about how the offending party will repair the harm they have caused. These peaceful, albeit intense, processes are based on respect, relationship, responsibility, repair and reintegration. More than 95 percent of those who participate are satisfied with their experience.

But does it work?

Yes. Ninety percent of the time, the offenders do what they agree to do to repair the harm not only for the victim but also for the community. Those who complete their agreements reoffend 10 percent of the time within one year. In the traditional criminal justice system, recidivism ranges from 50 percent to 70 percent. We must ask ourselves why we continue to support a system with such weak outcomes when a better way exists, especially when we continue to spend more money on that system than we do on our schools. Did you know it costs more to incarcerate a juvenile for a year than it does to send him or her to Harvard?

Restorative justice is largely facilitated by trained volunteers from our community, men and women who exemplify a peaceful response to crime and conflict. They are a dedicated group committed to shifting the norms of violence with a civil, restorative solution. Teaching Peace is a leader in the field of restorative justice and trains people regularly.

If you have an interest in being part of the solution in our community, you can find more information on the program and on the upcoming March 13 orientation at www.teachingpeace.org or by calling 303-776-1527.

Deb Witzel is executive director for Teaching Peace/Longmont Community Justice Partnership.