

Nonprofit Helps Young Offenders

Teaching Peace program focuses on taking responsibility for actions

By Christine Kortals

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LONGMONT-Community partnerships drive success.

Since 1994 Teaching Peace, a Longmont 501 c (3) nonprofit organization working with the Longmont Community Justice system and the St. Vrain Valley School District, has promoted restorative justice alternatives to the criminal and judicial system.

Working primarily with youth the program receives referrals of victims and offenders from the Longmont Police Department, school administrators, probation officers, churches and businesses.

Teaching Peace's mission is to cultivate attitudes, skills and opportunities for living peacefully with self, others and the world.

Deb Witzel, development director at Teaching Peace, shares the story of an 11 year-old boy who accidentally hit a neighboring house with a rock from his slingshot. The neighbors inside interpreted the noise as a gunshot and called police.

The boy was too frightened to admit his mistake until his mother and a Spanish-speaking caseworker brought him to tell the truth. One of the volunteers at Teaching Peace owned a hardware store and provided the siding to repair the damage. The boy helped to replace it and asked for a photo of himself and his reconciled neighbors at the end of the project.

"Each case is a beautiful story of redemption and of stopping the crisp ripple-effect," said Beverly Title, executive director of Teaching Peace. "I would never consider doing anything (like this) without a partnership."

The Community Justice partnership is the major focus of her work. Having spent 25 years as student assistance services coordinator in the St. Vrain Valley School District, Title has noted parallel increases in school expulsion and prison population.

When entering the program, victims and offenders are engaged in a circle including a support person (peer, parent or guardian) and trained community volunteers with expertise and perspectives related to the given incident. Each of the one full-time and four part-time staff members of Teaching Peace can facilitate such a session, but most work is accomplished by the 50-plus volunteers engaged by the organization.

Offenders can circumvent the criminal justice system by taking responsibility for harmful actions, and agreeing to appropriate reparation to their victims. Offenders completing their commitment within a specified timeframe will not be convicted. Accessibility is key to teaching Peace's structure. Restorative decision-making classes offered on Saturdays provide expanded outreach and income.

Operating on a \$300,000 budget, Teaching Peace boasts a 10 percent recidivism rate, compared with 50 percent in Boulder County and 70 percent nationally. Convictions are avoided by this program in 90 to 95 percent of cases, and offenders are tracked for one year following their incident.

The program enrolled approximately 140 victim/offender teams in 2006 and 165 in 2007. Accelerated growth in 2008 is reflected by the 100 teams already served during the first quarter.

Approximately 50 percent of clients served require Spanish-speaking assistance or translation.

Teaching Peace's primary funding comes from a \$180,000, 3-year grant from the city of Longmont. The State's Tony Grampas Youth Services Fund awards \$40,000 to \$50,000 on a three-year basis.

Leading law enforcement officials have signed off on funding initiatives, and grants, matching funds and seed monies are available from the city of Longmont Police Department, the city of Longmont and the Longmont city council.

Community grants include those by the Community Foundation Serving Boulder County and the Longmont Community Foundation. Private donations and fundraising will be diversified. An endowment fund may be established. Sales of training and implementation materials generate additional revenue, including co-founder Beverly Title's book, "Victim or Hero: Writing Your Own Life Story." The \$50 offender registration fee is often waived based on financial need. No victim or offender is ever disqualified for financial reasons.

Staff salaries comprise the highest percentage of operating expenses. Training and support expenses for program volunteers are essential to maintain and enhance the excellence of services delivery standards.

General administrative and supply costs include food for "breaking of bread" ceremonies at the end of each circle encounter. Numerical detail of operating expenses was unavailable.

Commander Tom Fixmer of the Longmont Police Department is personally positive about Teaching Peace.

"I have been in law enforcement for over 30 years and have come to see the shortcomings of the traditional approach," he said. Having observed Teaching Peace circles, he was struck by the powerful discussions and resulting realizations by offenders for the personal, emotional and financial damage their action caused their victims.

Fixmer mentioned the cost-benefit ratio for this much less expensive alternative for taxpayers compared with traditional criminal justice proceedings. Since 2000, all patrol officers have seen first-hand benefits of the program, and can recommend and enroll offenders at the time of contact.

Title plans to apply Teaching Peace's principles to address and decrease the 70 to 80 percent behavior-based expulsions by school officials in the coming school year. Her work lifts her life experience.

"It deepens our humanity-it takes moral courage to see with compassion and hold the capacity for future benefit."