

# CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

## AN OVERVIEW

### What are Circles of Support and Accountability?

**Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) are groups of volunteers from the community who support people who have sexually offended (usually against children) to reintegrate into the community after they have served time in prison.** CoSA are premised on the idea that helping an ex-prisoner (called a “core member”) to re-enter the community with the support of a group of volunteers will reduce the likelihood that they will commit another offence, thereby reducing risk to the community.



### Who are the volunteers and what do they do?

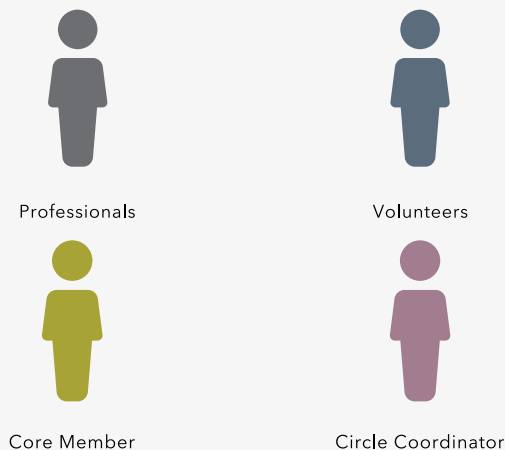
**Volunteers are carefully selected and receive training to help them undertake this role.** Volunteers are supported by, and work in tandem with, professionals (for example probation and parole officers, police, therapists and community support workers). Volunteers assist with a range of practical tasks to help the ex-prisoner readjust to life in the community, such as shopping or finding housing. They also provide expressive support—for example, by being a “sounding board” and giving encouragement—and hold the ex-prisoner accountable by, for example, ensuring they are attending appointments, meeting with their probation and parole officer, and avoiding the “trigger behaviours” (such as drinking alcohol) that could lead to reoffending.

### Who can and who does volunteer?

**Volunteers come from all walks of life.** Some are students of psychology, criminology or social work, seeking experience working with ex-prisoners. Others are motivated by faith and believe that everyone deserves a second chance. Volunteers are committed to contributing to the safety of our communities and want to help those who are extremely marginalised to reduce their risk of reoffending. Many have been the victim of sexual violence themselves, or are close to someone who has, and want to play a role in preventing further sexual violence. Research shows that while volunteering in CoSA can be challenging, volunteers also experience a range of positive outcomes including enhanced self-esteem, feelings of social connectedness and broader social networks (Höing, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2016).

#### Graphic representation of CoSA model

(adapted from Wilson & Picheca, 2005, as cited in Bates, Williams, Wilson, & Wilson, 2014, p. 863).



## Do CoSA work?

**The evidence about whether CoSA can reduce sexual offending is preliminary, but very promising.** The strongest evidence comes from a long-term randomised experiment conducted in Minnesota, in the United States, which compared 50 core members with 50 matched offenders who did not participate in a CoSA. It found that only one core member was rearrested for a new sexual offence (2% of the total) compared with seven in the control group (14% of the total). The rate of rearrest for a new sexual offence was thus 88 percent lower for core members (Duwe, 2018).

Research from the United Kingdom has found that CoSA can play a key role in preventing sexual violence, as volunteers can identify when a core member is engaging in trigger behaviours and report this to a relevant professional. In these cases, the core member is usually returned to prison for breaching the conditions of his/her release.

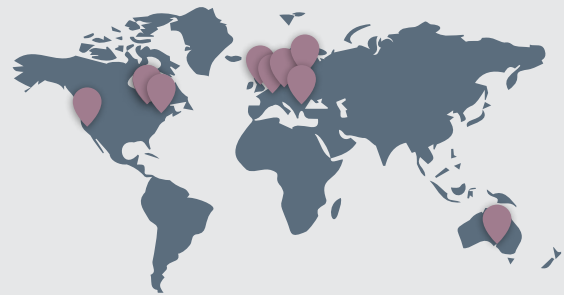
## Wouldn't it be better to spend limited public funds on services to support victims/survivors?

**Support for CoSA does not equate to support for reducing other types of programs such as victim/survivor services, statutory offender management measures and therapeutic programs.** CoSA complement the work achieved in other programs and address previously unmet reintegration needs of offenders that place them at higher risk of reoffending. As the ANROWS report *Community-based approaches to sexual offender reintegration* shows, victims/survivors see community-based integration programs as contributing to their own safety and the safety of the broader community, since someone else is monitoring the behaviour of the perpetrator and acting when needed.

## References

- Bates, A., Williams, D., Wilson, C., & Wilson, R. (2014). Circles South East: The first 10 years 2002-2012. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 58(7), 861-885. doi:10.1177/0306624X13485362
- Duwe, G. (2018). Can Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) significantly reduce sexual recidivism? Results from a randomized controlled trial in Minnesota. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(4), 463-484. doi:10.1007/s11292-018-9325-7
- Höing, M., Bogaerts, S., & Vogelvang, B. (2016). Helping sex offenders to desist offending: The gains and drains for CoSA volunteers—A review of the literature. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 28(5), 364-402. doi:10.1177/1079063214535816
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### Where are CoSA located?



CoSA emerged in Ontario, Canada in the mid-1990s. There are now CoSA programs across Canada, parts of the United States (e.g. California and Vermont), the United Kingdom, parts of western Europe (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, Latvia, Bulgaria), and in Adelaide, Australia.

## Where can I find out more?

'Meeting the Monsters', by David Byrne, is an excellent explainer: <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/2018/08/24/meeting-the-monsters-a-restorative-response-to-the-crisis-of-sexual-abuse-in-the-roman-catholic-church-by-david-byrne/>

Helpful websites:

- CoSA Canada—<http://cosacanada.com/>
- Circles UK—<https://www.circles-uk.org.uk/>
- Circles Europe—<http://www.circleaseurope.eu/>

## ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

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