

Extending the Circle:
Exploring the Feasibility of the Circles of Support and Accountability Model

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Circles of Support and Accountability are a unique approach to managing sex offenders deemed “high risk” to reoffend. This model has shown considerable improvement in the outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals. Begun in Canada in the 1990’s, this approach has been adopted by jurisdictions in the UK and the Netherlands, however it has received tepid support in the United States.

The approach works with the formerly incarcerated individual (the “core member”) and two circles—an inner circle, made up of community volunteers, and an outer circle comprised of criminal justice professionals, therapists and social workers that guide and support the workings of the volunteers. The ultimate goal of the process is enshrined in the twin motto of the Circle approach: No one is disposable; and No more victims.

Practitioners have experimented with applying this restorative justice approach to individuals who have not been convicted of sexually based offenses. The goal of this paper is to reflect on the viability of extending this model in New Haven, Connecticut. In my role as a volunteer member of the New Haven Women’s Reintegration Advisory Board, I am conducting a series of interviews with formerly incarcerated women and other community stakeholders to identify potential successes and pitfalls in the application of this model to replace a circle of arrest, incarceration, release and reoffending with a circle that interrupts recidivism through the work of individuals and other stake holders to ensure that post-incarceration, women stand a realistic chance at successful community reintegration.