

INTRODUCING THE VICTIM-OFFENDER DIALOGUE (VOD) PROGRAMME

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CORRECTIONS
IS A SOCIETAL
RESPONSIBILITY
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correctional services

Department:
Correctional Services
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

1. BACKGROUND

The VOD programme is informed by the need to intensify outreach to victims and communities, the need to profile and interact with victims of crime, the need to give offenders a second chance, and the need to form broad partnerships around fighting crime and crime prevention.

2. AIMS AND PHILOSOPHY

The Victim-Offender Dialogues aim to strengthen the current rehabilitation and reintegration programmes of the Department of Correctional Services by placing the victim at the centre of the correctional process. It originates from a culture of human rights which South Africa has inculcated over the past eighteen years, and which is enshrined in the Bill of Rights enjoined in the 1996 Constitution.

The philosophy of the Victim-Offender Dialogues is informed by a constitutional obligation that the offender is a citizen, a human being who has strayed from his or her path and must be assisted by the Corrections system to rehabilitate and return to the path of good citizenship. The philosophy further shows that the offender cannot be the only one who must be helped to become a good citizen. Even society out there must be steered in the direction of good citizenship. We have to do our utmost best to keep our people, young and old, from imprisonment. Crime prevention is the cure for keeping safe and secure living environments.

The community, as the victim of crime, need therefore, to move away from retribution and distrust for the concept of rehabilitation, into a new movement that seeks partnerships to reduce crime by promoting the values of good citizenship, which includes empowering the victim and assisting the offender to regain his or her best self and get reintegrated into society.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of Victim-Offender Dialogues are to:

1. Provide a restorative conflict resolution process that actively involves the victim and the offender in repairing the emotional and material harm caused by a crime
2. Provide an opportunity for a victim and offender to discuss the offense, get answers to their questions, express feelings and gain a greater sense of closure
3. Provide an opportunity for a victim and offender to develop a mutually agreeable plan that addresses the harm caused by the crime
4. Provide an opportunity for broad community participation in the fight against crime through engagement with offenders and empowerment of victims
5. Prevent repeat offending

Recent research conducted in Georgia, in the United States of America, has demonstrated that these types of dialogues, which go by different names, have yielded greater satisfaction for the victim, compared to practices in which victims have not had the opportunity to become involved in this type of process.

Research further shows that offenders who participate in these types of programmes are more likely to be active in rehabilitation programmes, and to work hard to regain the social status they had prior to committing the crimes. A Victim-Offender Dialogue is therefore a character building process.

4. PUBLIC DIALOGUE MEETING

A typical dialogue meeting may last for some time, where, after instructions and explanation of ground rules, the victim is invited to begin with a telling of their experience of the crime. The following then happens:

- Offender will explain the crime s/he committed.
- After both parties have had an opportunity to ask and answer each other's questions, support persons will be allowed to add their experiences and ask questions they may have.
- Members of the community will also ask questions.
- The various segments in DCS and the Criminal Justice cluster will, on a monthly basis, explain their programmes to Victim-Offender Dialogue Forums held at each correctional centre throughout the country.

In their nature Victim-Offender Dialogues are voluntary. To be effective, the Victim-Offender Dialogue programme must happen at the level of the correctional centre. The head of the correctional centre is the Convenor of the VOD programme.

The Victim-Offender Dialogue programme is a performance measurement tool in each of the 243 correctional centres in South Africa. Its success factors should include maximizing stakeholder participation and empowerment of both the victim and the offender to be normal members of society again.

5. SEVEN PILLARS OF THE VOD

A Victim-Offender Dialogue programme has the following seven pillars: their experience of the crime. The following then happens:

- An offender submits to the rehabilitation and human renewal programmes available to them during the correction process.
- The victim expresses voluntary desire to engage the offender and seek answers, with a view to understanding how and why the crime happened.
- Both the offender and victim actively engage separately and together, where the aim is getting the offender to admit that he or she wronged the victim, and to say "I am sorry" - after which, at best, the victim could accept the apology.
- Correctional officials, especially the professionals, are committed to facilitate the programme on a continuous basis.
- Research and marketing resources are available, so that all three segments of the programme (VICTIM - OFFENDER - COMMUNITY) are kept informed through research, communication, marketing and campaigns.
- There is a collective desire among households, communities, society and social institutions to build safe and secure communities.
- There are specific partnerships in crime prevention.

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