

ROCHESTER SAFE AND SOUND (RSS)

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RSS Call - in Focus Group Report

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2/4/2010 – MONROE COUNTY OFFICE OF PROBATION

Introduction

The Rochester criminal justice community has been conducting “call-in” meetings since 1994. The original call-ins were organized under the Ceasefire Initiative. Within the past two years there have been an additional three call-ins organized under the Rochester Safe and Sound Comprehensive Anti-Gang Initiative. The call-in model attempts to balance a strong deterrence-based message delivered by criminal justice practitioners and a strong support message provided by community-based service providers. Individuals selected for the call-ins met a number of criteria. First, they were individuals that were currently under probation or parole supervision and had been nominated by their probation or parole officer. Second, they were individuals that were at risk of violent victimization and offending as measured by their previous arrest and victimization histories. Current active offenses for selected participants included Criminal

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Possession of a Weapon in the 2nd degree, 1st and 2nd degree Robbery, and Criminal Possession of a Controlled Substance with Intent to Sell. Finally, all individuals had been identified as actively affiliated in local gangs according to the Rochester Police Department's (RPD) gang database.

Background

On September 9th, 2009, 18 probationers and 2 parolees were required to attend the call-in which was held in Judge Patricia Marks' courtroom. As with previous call-ins, not every invitee was in attendance but 13 of the 18 probationers and 1 of the 2 parolees did show up. Judge Marks ordered warrants on the six individuals who had failed to show up. Criminal justice practitioners discussed their collaboration with fellow agencies and their dedication to stop violence in the community. These individuals included the District Attorney, representatives from the U.S. Attorney's Office, the RPD, County Probation, and Parole. They expressed their willingness and duty to use their law enforcement powers to violate offenders and disrupt violence. This was the second call-in where the service component and intensive case-management was provided through the Catholic Family Center (CFC). The presentation from the CFC case managers emphasized the availability of educational and employment opportunities and reiterated the close working relationship that they had with individual probation officers. Approximately five months passed between the initial call-in and the focus group conducted on February 4th, 2010. During this five month period, two of the call-in participants were arrested on drug charges and are currently incarcerated. During this same period an additional four individuals had their probation violated for non-compliance with probation requirements. Currently five of the original 14 call-in attendees are incarcerated in the Monroe County Jail for a new offense or violation.

RSS – Call-in Number 4

Participants:

John M. Klofas, Ph.D. – Rochester Institute of Technology

Daria S. Bour – Probation Supervisor, Monroe County Office of Probation

Jason D. Scott, Ph.D. – Assistant Professor, Rochester Institute of Technology

Janelle Duda – Research Associate, Rochester Institute of Technology

Six call-in participants were selected to attend the focus group meeting. Five of these individuals attended. These five individuals were selected based on the positive progress they have demonstrated since the September call-in. Participation in the focus group was entirely voluntary. Attendance at the call-in did satisfy a monthly reporting requirement for probation. Those who decided not to participate were not sanctioned in any way. Our interest was to consult with these individuals and discuss the call-in process and outcomes as well as receive input on how to improve the program. We were interested in what went well and what elements of the call-ins were ineffective.

The focus group was held in a conference room at the Monroe County Office of Probation. The Rochester Institute of Technology provided lunch for each of the participants. Participants also received \$10 at the end of the session as a good-faith incentive to complete the process.

Dr. Klofas from the Rochester Institute of Technology outlined the agenda for the focus group and also ensured that the ethics and responsibilities of the research were understood by all. Participants were not forced to complete the session nor were they pressed to answer any questions they did not want to answer. Participants were given the option to leave at any point without penalty. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept completely anonymous and confidential.

The following report will present the discussion which emerged from our focus group and roughly corresponds to the main questions covered by the group. The report concludes with some recommendations for future call-ins.

Discussion Point #1 – Had you heard of Ceasefire of “call-ins” prior to your participation and attendance at September’s event?

There was an overall consensus that no one had heard of ceasefire or a call-in prior to their event. One participant explained that when he first received the letter he had no idea what the meeting was going to be about.

Discussion Point #2 – What were the memorable parts of the call-in?

Overwhelmingly the participants remembered the trauma surgeon, Dr. Sangosanya. Two participants talked specifically about the information Dr. Sangosanya shared about the increased probability of being a homicide victim if they had been previously shot. They mentioned that the graphic pictures in the doctor's presentation got their attention and made an impact. One participant said that he recalled the doctor discussing the much higher probability of death due to homicide among young African-American men. This individual mentioned that he didn't want to be part of that statistic. One of the focus group participants commented that the doctor seemed to want to present them with facts and appeared to want the youth to change for the better.

The participants also said they remembered District Attorney Mike Green. The message that they took from the D.A. was that he is not "playing around" anymore. There was a clear understanding that punishments for firearm related crime had increased and the D.A.'s office had adopted a zero tolerance stance. One participant mentioned that if you are caught with a gun you will get 5 years and one year for every bullet. Several of the participants commented that they listened to D.A. Green and didn't tune him out because he seemed to be able to relate to them and seemed interested in their future. One individual mentioned that the D.A. would be someone he could sit down and talk with over lunch.

Two additional things stood out in the memories of these young men. First, they remembered the warrants that the judge issued for the few call-in participants that did not attend. This action seemed to convey the message that the event was serious. Several of them mentioned that after they heard the judge issue the warrants that they were glad they had decided to attend. Second, there were some negative reactions to the practice of some presenters to single out individuals by name and discuss where and with whom they hung out or to show the pictures and case specific information of local gang members who had been convicted and incarcerated. There was agreement that this made them aware that the various elements of the criminal justice community (e.g., local police, federal agents, probation, etc.) were working together and watching what they were doing. While none of the focus group participants were singled out themselves, this tactic clearly got their attention and they all stated that during this exchange they hoped they would not be called out. However, some of the participants stated that this aggressive approach caused them to "tune out" the presenter and made it difficult for them to believe the presenter was interested in seeing them succeed. One participant said that he does not like being doubted and he felt that some of the criminal justice system presenters were doubting him. In addition, a number of the focus group participants mentioned that the family members they had brought to the call-in reacted negatively to this approach.

Discussion Point #3 – Who was the support person that attended the call-in with you and what did they think of the call-in?

All five of the focus group participants brought someone with them to the call-in. One participant brought his father, two brought their grandmother, and two brought their mother.

One participant said that his mom liked it. One said that his mom did not like it because she did not appreciate the pictures of people arrested on the screen and that she did not like the message that they were just waiting for one of the current call-in participants to mess up.

Discussion Point #4 – Has the criminal justice response to crime and violence changed and what impact has this had on the community?

Again, there was a consensus that things have absolutely changed. Over time things have changed. For example, one participant talked about how in the past a first offense was not taken as seriously as it is now.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was a consensus that the streets are safer than they were three years ago. The participants talked about fewer people standing on the corners, friends and family feeling safer going outside, and more children playing outside of their homes. In describing the change, several participants talked about seeing more police on the street and felt technologies like closed-circuit cameras and “shot spotter” could be contributing to the improvements.

The participants did not have many positive things to say about law enforcement or their perceptions about how they were treated by law enforcement. Overall, the participants felt that the police make it worse. They feel that the police stop them for no reason. One participant pointed out that he is not doing anything wrong now yet he still gets stopped. The participants made it very clear that since three police officers have been shot recently, there is a different sentiment amongst the officers toward the community. One youth talked about how they travel six deep now and that they are not out there being friendly; they look at everybody as a suspect.

Discussion Point #5 – What impact did the call-in have on you and have you shared this experience with anyone?

A number of the participants stated, “You won’t catch me on the street anymore.” The participants talked about how they spend much more time at home now and that if they are out of the home they are doing something productive.

One of the participants said that he had not planned to make a change necessarily except his best friend was killed in November and that is when he decided to make a change. Many of the participants said that they had been thinking about making changes for some time. One participant said that he did it for himself and for his mom. He said that his mom continued to fight for him and support him throughout his bad behavior and he finally decided that he wanted to change. All of the participants stated that it was easier to make the change because of their

case manager. The opportunities that were provided to them provided incentive for them to stay on track. One focus group participant stated, “I’ve come a long way, why would I waste that?”

Four youth said that they did not talk about the call-in with anyone other than who they brought with them. One youth said that he did talk to his mom (who was not at the call-in) about it. All the participants said that they did not tell any of the information to their friends. A few of the youth said that it is their business and not their friend’s business. The youth had a general agreement that they had no control over their friends and that their friends will do what they want to do. Some of the focus group participants said that they would be likely to talk to younger family members like siblings or cousins about the call-in. Several of them shared that they felt they had a responsibility to be a more positive example to the younger members of their family.

Several of the participants mentioned that people around them had noticed that they had made a change. One talked about how proud his PO is of him. A few talked about how their POs noticed how well they are doing. In addition, several of the young men mentioned that family members like their mothers had noticed that they were doing better and were proud of them.

Discussion Point #6 – When did you meet Alex Acosta (case manager from CFC) and what impressions do you have of the assistance Alex has offered you?

One of the participants met him prior to the call-in because they shared a personal contact. The other four participants met Alex the very next day or within a few days after the call-in. Several of them stated that they believed they wouldn’t have taken the initiative to contact Alex but that he was persistent in making contact with them and that helped start the relationship.

The consensus was that Alex is well liked among the participants. Alex is seen as someone who knows the streets and successfully overcame some of the same obstacles and challenges that they face. The participants enjoy working with someone who understands what their lives are like. Every participant sees Alex at least one time a week. Some of the participants reported that Alex had regularly been to their homes and is well known by the members of their family (e.g., mother, father, grandmother).

Several participants said that he helped pay for their drivers permit and another said that Alex helped pay for his 5 hour driving course that he needed for the job he was getting. Another participant said that Alex helped him get his GED results released from New York State. Alex helped to get some of the participants in school and attended an early morning GED program with one of them because they needed an adult present and no one in his family was available during that time of the day.

One participant said that if it were not for Alex he would be in jail because he would have been arrested or had their probation violated for non-compliance. Three other participants said that they would not be doing as well as they are now or would just be hanging out on the street like they were doing prior to the call-in. There was discussion about how Alex helped to jumpstart them onto the right path and that he really did a lot for them. It was very clear that this particular group sees Alex as extremely helpful in the services that he provides for them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The individuals that attended the focus group clearly demonstrated the positive impact that the call-in and follow-up has had on their lives. The participants reported both positive and negative impressions of the call-in itself. The focus group did not like the practice of singling out individual participants by name at the call-in, but they did talk about how it did get their attention. Even though this approach caused a negative reaction not only among the participants but also among the family members that were there to support them, it did do the purpose expected, which was to get the participants' attention. The presentations by Dr. Sangosanya and District Attorney Mike Green produced the most positive reactions and participants reported that these two presentations made them realize the negative consequences that they could expect to face if they continued to engage in criminal activity.

The focus group participants had nothing but positive things to say about the help they had received from Alex Acosta and the CFC. It is recommended that this intensive case management and follow-up aspect of the call-in be continued. In addition, it appears important that Alex make an attempt to contact the call-in participants prior to the actual call-in and make a follow-up contact with them shortly after the meeting. If these early meetings take place with the probation officer present it can help reinforce the close working relationship that Alex has with their individual P.O.s.

One additional recommendation that came directly from the focus group participants themselves was the possibility of including a former and successful participant at the next call-in meeting. These young men felt that it is important to hear from someone that has gone through the process and could talk about the positive impact the program had on their life.

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