

# TEN TIPS FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY VOLUNTEER

**The Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA) model**—described in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>—focuses on the safe reintegration of people returning home from incarceration (usually high-risk, high-need people convicted of a sexual offense). Since CoSA projects are volunteer driven and depend on establishing a relationship with Core Members, the following tips can help volunteers ensure that the relationship is based on mutual respect, includes healthy boundaries, and helps Core Members more effectively adjust to social and professional norms when returning to the community.

Model Figure 1: CoSA Structure



## Be Open

Regardless of background or beliefs, effective CoSA volunteers are people who share of themselves without needing the other person to have the same belief system or to understand the world in exactly the same way. Great opportunities for conversation and enlightenment can stem from finding simple common perspectives, despite potentially differing views, between a volunteer and a Core Member.

## Maintain Healthy Boundaries

This is likely good advice no matter what someone is doing, but it is particularly important when volunteering in a CoSA since Core Members have previously engaged in behavior involving unhealthy transgressions of boundaries. Maintaining healthy boundaries with Core Members will set a good example while ensuring health and safety for all.

## Recognize Your Limitations

Being aware of your personal limitations and owning them can provide a powerful example to the Core Member, who will also be struggling to find his or her strengths. Recognize and state what the limits are to the time you can give, and like boundaries, set those limits for your Core Member and fellow volunteers. Remember that there are other volunteers in the CoSA, and they may bring different strengths and perspectives to the table, as do the many professionals available to assist. Make good use of these varied resources.

## Share

While heeding advice regarding healthy boundaries, it is still important that volunteers share of themselves with Core Members. Many Core Members may have never been part of healthy relationships and may have difficulties adjusting to life after incarceration. Sharing your life experiences, both positive and negative, can help Core Members to navigate difficult and often anxiety-provoking situations.

1. "Circles of Support and Accountability," *Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon*, <http://www.emoregon.org/cosa.php>.

### Guide, Don't Direct

Many Core Members will be returning to the community from environments where everything was determined by someone else (e.g., what to eat, when to eat, where to sleep, and when to sleep). Gaining some measure of self-determination is an important part of the community integration process for all Core Members, but they still may bristle at someone telling them how they should do things and when. Being available to help and provide guidance and feedback while avoiding giving direct mandates will be invaluable to the Core Member's progress.

### Celebrate Milestones

Often, Core Members may view life through a negative outlook or have not received healthy acknowledgements of their accomplishments. Celebrating milestones can help to put a positive spin on the Core Member's efforts to build a balanced and self-determined lifestyle. Birthdays, holidays, and important accomplishments (e.g., sobriety milestones, length of time free in the community) can be celebrated with cards, small parties, or other tokens. The important part is to let your Core Member know that he or she matters, and that there are people who genuinely care about his or her progress and success.

### Model Appropriate Behavior

Be mindful that Core Members will often look to the volunteers' behavior to determine how they should behave, particularly as they are returning to the community and attempting to adjust to new social and professional environments. Set a good example by keeping messages and behavior positive and interpersonally appropriate. Great CoSA volunteers are those who can model warmth, tolerance, flexibility, respect, and sensitivity towards others and to conventional rules.

### Collaborate

There is a lot of truth to the saying, "Two heads are better than one," or as John Haywood said, "Many hands make light work." In a CoSA, there will be many "heads" and many hands available to provide support and to promote accountability. The CoSA will need to take every opportunity available to ensure that the Core Member doesn't fall into an isolated, secretive lifestyle. There must be no secrets in a CoSA. When issues arise, the first step is to make sure all CoSA members have the same information. There will also be times when the CoSA needs to reach out to others externally in order to get assistance with specific issues. In either instance, working together as a team has proven to be a particular strength of the CoSA model.

### Debrief

Many Core Members enter CoSAs with needs that require significant attention and effort to promote prosocial change. This can be difficult work. Sometimes, Core Members will slip back into old ways and experience problems, both small and big. When something troubling happens, it's important for the CoSA to debrief the experience, just like health care professionals often do when unexpected outcomes occur. Understanding what went wrong is the first step in learning to avoid similar situations in the future. Every CoSA volunteer needs to know that there are others with whom they can share their experience to promote self-care and to combat burnout. Remember, no one does this alone.

### Believe in Possibilities

The popular media is full of messages of anger, fear, and risk when it comes to people with sexual offense convictions and their behavior. It would be easy to expect that all Core Members will fail in their efforts to successfully integrate with society. However, this prevailing idea makes the role and message of the CoSA that much more important. Volunteers need to see the glass as half full (or more!) when everyone else is seeing it as half empty. The power of positive thinking is not just a cliché; working together to set a good example, support Core Member efforts, and provide meaningful opportunities for growth in exchange for accountability brings positive outcomes. People can change, and given the right circumstances, positive support, and encouragement, they can certainly change for the better.