

# Community Reparative Boards

## Background and Concept

The community reparative board is a recent version of a much older and more widespread community sanctioning response to youth crime, generally known by such terms as youth panels, neighborhood boards, or community diversion boards. These panels or boards have been in use in the United States since the 1920's, and their contemporary counterparts, reparative boards, have been in use since the mid-1990's, principally in Vermont. There, the boards are primarily used with adult offenders convicted of nonviolent and minor offenses; more recently, the boards have also been used with juvenile offenders.<sup>5</sup> Reparative boards typically are composed of a small group of citizens, prepared for their function by intensive training, who conduct public, face-to-face meetings with offenders ordered by the court to participate in the process. The boards develop sanction agreements with offenders, monitor compliance, and submit compliance reports to the court.

## Procedures and Goals

During reparative board meetings, board members discuss with the offender the nature of the offense and its negative consequences. Then board members develop a set of proposed sanctions, which they discuss with the offender until an agreement is reached on the specific actions the offender will take within a given time period to make reparation for the crime. Subsequently, the offender must document his or her progress in fulfilling the terms of the agreement. After the stipulated period of time has passed, the board submits a report to the court on the offender's compliance with the agreed-upon sanctions. At this point, the board's involvement with the offender ends.

The goals of community reparative boards include the following:

- Promoting citizens' ownership of the criminal and juvenile justice systems by involving them directly in the justice process.
- Providing an opportunity for victims and community members to confront offenders in a constructive manner about their behavior.
- Providing opportunities for offenders to take personal responsibility and be held directly accountable for the harm they caused to victims and communities.
- Generating meaningful community-driven consequences for criminal and delinquent actions, thereby reducing costly reliance on formal justice system processing.

## Considerations in Implementation

The Vermont Department of Corrections implemented its Reparative Probation Program in 1995, in response to a 1994 public opinion survey (conducted by John Doble and Associates) in which citizens indicated broad support for programs with a reparative emphasis and active community

involvement. The program's reparative boards are part of a mandated separation of probation into community corrections service units (designed to provide supervision for more serious cases) and court and reparative service units (which coordinate and provide administrative support to reparative boards).

### **An Example of a Community Reparative Board Session**

The reparative board convened to consider the case of a 17-year-old who had been caught driving with an open can of beer in his father's pickup truck. The youth had been sentenced by a judge to reparative probation, and it was the board's responsibility to decide what form the probation should take. For about 30 minutes, the citizen members of the board asked the youth several simple, straightforward questions. The board members then went to another room to deliberate on an appropriate sanction for the youth. The youth awaited the board's decision nervously, because he did not know whether to expect something tougher or much easier than regular probation.

When the board returned, the chairperson explained the four conditions of the offender's probation contract: (1) begin work to pay off his traffic tickets, (2) complete a State police defensive driving course, (3) undergo an alcohol assessment, and (4) write a three-page paper on how alcohol had negatively affected his life. The youth signed the contract, and the chairperson adjourned the meeting.

Based on Vermont's experience, the following factors have been identified by the Vermont Department of Corrections as important in implementing community-driven reparative board programs:

- Marketing the program effectively to the justice system (to judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys).
- Having a committed, well-trained staff.
- Working with victim organizations and ensuring that victims are represented and provided adequate opportunity to participate.<sup>6</sup>
- Processing cases expeditiously and in a manner that is easy for community members to understand.
- Facilitating a positive experience for the board members.
- Providing quality training for the boards.
- Supporting the program with adequate resources (e.g., space, time, and staff).
- Striving for successful outcomes for offenders, victims, and community participants in the board's initial cases.

- Getting support from judges in limiting the time the offender is in the program and on probation.

## **Lessons Learned**

Only limited quantitative data have been collected on the effectiveness of community reparative boards. There is growing concern that evaluations of reparative board programs should consider measures beyond the standard offender-focused measure of recidivism. Additional measures should include responsiveness to victim and community needs, victim and community satisfaction, and impact on the community (including physical improvements resulting from board-imposed community work sanctions and indicators of healthy relationships among citizens). At this point, experiential and anecdotal information indicates that reparative boards show much promise as an effective response to nonviolent crime.

## **For More Information**

For more information on reparative boards, contact:

- David Peebles, Director of Restorative Services, Vermont Department of Corrections, 103 South Main Street, Waterbury, VT 05671, 802-241-2261 (phone).
- The National Institute of Corrections Information Center, 1860 Industrial Circle, Suite A, Longmont, CO 80501, 800-877-1461 (phone).

Also, see *Restoring Hope Through Community Partnerships* (American Probation and Parole Association, 1996), available from the American Probation and Parole Association, c/o Council of State Governments, P.O. Box 11910, Lexington, KY 40578-1910, 859-244-8203 (phone); and *Community Reparative Boards: Theory and Practice* (Karp and Walther, 2001).

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