

Volume I
Issue I
February 2021

CoSA Vancouver/Fraser Valley

CoSA Connect



CoSA is a unique and innovative community justice initiative for post release support and accountability of offenders in and by the community. CoSA VFV also provides public education programming on how to create safe communities for all.

Welcome everyone to the first edition of CoSA Connect. Our intention is that this will be a semi-annual newsletter to stay connected with you our volunteers, supporters and colleagues.

We would like to say a special thank you to Peter Kingsland for all of his work in interviewing and writing for our newsletter. Peter has been volunteering with CoSA VFV since it started in 2003.



Maureen Donegan, Coordinator of CoSA VFV

Coordinator's Report

Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) Vancouver/Fraser Valley has been active as one of the largest CoSA sites in Canada now for over 18 years. Originally only in the Fraser Valley, but soon after expanding to Vancouver, our work has been supported over the years by the Correctional Service of Canada, Public Safety Canada, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver, CoSA Canada, M2W2 Restorative Christian Ministries, and other organizations.

Recently, we have also integrated public education into our mandate. We believe that the first level of intervention in reducing sexual offences is educating on sexual abuse prevention through webinars and providing resources to the community. We have held three webinars to date that focused on keeping our children safe online.

For more information about our history, please visit vfvcosa.org/our-stor...

CoSA responds to the needs of released offenders and communities that seek greater safety by acknowledging that isolation, stigmatization, and secrecy are not elements that support successful and crime-free reintegration. Originally offered only to those who were leaving prisons as untreated Warrant Expired individuals (with few or no other supports), CoSA

today offers support and accountability to a variety of released sex offenders (those on parole/probation, Long-term Supervision Orders, along with those who have completed their sentences fully.) Differing from many integration-assisting organizations, CoSA seeks to maintain the focus on the specific challenges to released sex offenders, and to the avoidance of sexual offending. CoSA recognizes that for a successful reintegration there is a need to focus on support and accountability around the factors that led a person to offend sexually.

The backbone of CoSA has always been the dedicated and trained volunteers who week in and week out mentor released sex offenders, offering support and accountability. The maintenance and growth of CoSA VFV is currently supported by a registered Society and Board, with a variety of committees including Fundraising and Visioning.

Since the Volunteer Appreciation Gathering (CoSA VFV's largest annual event) on March 10, 2020 – just before Covid restrictions quickly escalated – there have been many challenges but also many successes. By the time the order for no social contacts was strengthened early in November (even though support groups were exempted), many circles had already found creative ways to meet. In the Spring and Summer many groups met in outdoor, open spaces. With the onset of cooler weather many moved to meeting via telephone and video (where allowed). Although remote meetings did pose some communication challenges, our amazing group of volunteers rose to the occasion and used a variety of tools to engage with their core members

Although many of our current activities are curtailed and gatherings were generally unable to happen this past year we are grateful to:

- All those who assisted in preparing Christmas gift packages for each of our Core Members (CM's) to help brighten the season for them. One Core Member responded as follows:

“Everything a person could ask for, warm clothing, incredible Christmas baking, a mug, and more importantly the love behind the choices and care to ensure we were not forgotten during this very weird COVID Christmas season we are entrapped by. A nice surprise and a great reminder of how great of a family I have the privilege of being part of.”

The Correctional Service of Canada in partnership with a team from UBC invited our core members to participate in an art and justice research project. Any core members interested in dabbling in the arts received beautiful art kits.

- All those who worked on our CoSA website which is up and running! Many people have put a lot of work into this. We appreciate all who assisted, especially our website developer, Bill Kingsland. Please check us out at vfvcosa.org/

A quick overview of CoSA VFV shows that 27 circles continue to thrive despite Covid with 10 circles operating in Vancouver, 8 in Surrey, 7 in Abbotsford, 1 in Chilliwack and 1 in Kelowna.

Thanks to YOU our volunteers, funders and supporters. Without you, CoSA VFV and the work of circles could not happen.

Thank you ALL and wishing you a wonderful year ahead.

In gratitude,

Maureen Donegan



Gift bags given to each core member filled with goodies and practical items

Q&A

We are so grateful to our colleagues in Provincial Corrections, Deb Marshall (Probation Officer) and Valerie Mohart (Correctional Supervisor) for answering these questions for us:

1. What are some of the reasons why people being released want a CoSA circle?

Most of the men we work with have either lost their support system due to the nature of their offences, or did not have one to begin with, so they are looking for supportive people to connect with. They want someone that will help them with their transition back into the community and that will help guide them in the right direction. They also seem to really want the accountability piece that is so strong with the COSA mandate; they want someone that they can turn to when they are having thoughts that could lead them back into previous patterns of behaviour and who will respectfully challenge those thought patterns in order to help them realign.

2. What are some of the **inner attitudes/qualities** that those being released display that suggest they are on a good path?

Men that have worked hard in their programming for sexual offences and internalize the teachings are the ones that we see going in the right direction once they are released. The men that are engaged in all the different avenues of support within the institutions: drug & alcohol counselling/programming, mental health supports, other CORE programming for respectful relationships and living without violence also do well once released. The men that are motivated to change and ask for help with their thinking distortions and patterns of behaviour are ones that we both are encouraged by and see the most internal movement from.

3. What are some of the **inner attitudes/qualities** that those being released display that suggest they are **NOT** on a good path?

Men who are not willing to work with anyone on their thought patterns, who are unmotivated to do even the basic of work programs, who challenge every person and topic of discussion, who keep to themselves and do not develop connections with anyone other than those who share the same negative belief system, are the ones that we tend to see coming back through our doors. They are not ones that will seek out new opportunities or programming on their own. They are disengaged with everyone and everything around them.

4. Are there identifiable differences in the attitudes/qualities/behaviours of sex offenders as opposed to general offenders?

Many of men convicted of sex offences that we work with are more willing to comply with supervision and easier to engage in discussions around their thoughts that led them to the behaviours that brought them into our custody. They are generally working and don't engage in the "politics" that often prevail within an institution. Men with other offences tend to be more challenging to work with as most of the ones we see are chronic offenders. There are men with sex offences that are repeat offenders as well and they also tend to be more difficult to reach. There is a lot of shame that typically comes with the sex offences that general offenders don't have.

-Check Out Our New Video- Keeping Our Communities Safer

Our recently completed CoSA Video has been distributed and we are receiving a lot of positive feedback: <https://www.vfvcosa.org/our-story>

It Is critical to be Able to Speak Without Ramifications – Interview with “Eddy”

By: Peter Kingsland

“Eddy’s” circle started in the spring of 2020 and there are four volunteers in his group. Because the weather was warm until the end of summer, the group was able to meet outdoors in a parking lot, following Covid protocols. When it started to get colder, the circle members looked at the different options and unanimously chose to meet indoors. They were fortunate to have a large place where they could meet safely. He is pleased that they are able to meet once every week.

When asked how he happened to become part of a CoSA circle, “Eddy” said that his Probation Officer had recommended it to him, when the S.O.M.P. Program he was taking through the Justice System came to an end last year.

He went on to say that it has been an ongoing positive experience for him. He had felt a sense of trauma when he was out of custody. He trusts the four volunteers in his circle enough that he feels comfortable talking about his family life and his offences. There is no toxicity among the circle members. He believes that the volunteers are there to provide support for him and that they are not afraid to hold him accountable. “They are there to hear about how I feel,” he said. He can tell by their body language and eye contact. He is able to open up and express his feelings, which he used to mask. He feels that he is making progress.

“Eddy” emphasized that because there is no connection with the Justice System, he has felt comfortable to speak out. “It is critical to be able to speak without ramifications” he stated.

When asked if there was any special event or time that stands out, “Eddy” said that around Christmas, the circle members went to White Spot to share a meal together. He said that there were no discussions about his issues that night. It was a pleasant and enjoyable social occasion.

Thank you Eddy for your sharing!*

*Name changed for privacy purposes

Do you have questions or perspectives you would like to hear from? Please send us your ideas for our next edition!



All content suggestions will be put in a draw for a \$25 gift card to Starbucks! Deadline for entries is February 15th, send your thoughts to vfvcosa@gmail.com

A Volunteer's Incredible Journey of Growth

- Interview with Claudia

Interviewed by: Peter Kingsland

I was very thrilled to start volunteering with my first core member about two years ago. I didn't really know what to expect when I first started and then I realized how hard it can be to accompany offenders in their everyday life outside of prison. Despite the struggle though, it has been an incredible journey of growth for myself and of fulfillment for them, in particular in terms of: finding a job, finding a place to stay, reconnecting with their family after many years, and not reoffending. It has been so precious to watch them do all of that.

Regarding challenges:

I found that interacting with core members is different from interacting with the people in my regular life. At the beginning, I was expecting answers or behaviours from them that I would expect from friends and I was getting frustrated when I saw that their behaviour and way of thinking are very different. I learnt how to cope with that, to be open and accept the diversity and their different mindset and ways of navigating life.

I also learned about respecting the boundaries of the relationship with the core member. I am a very open and friendly type of person, but I needed to learn to restrain myself from my usual behaviour because it may not be helpful for them.

Any special event that stands out in your mind or one you might like to share?

I have always found it very special to organize social activities with the core member. I remember going for a walk at Burnaby Lake with them and then for dinner at one of my core member's favourite restaurants. I remember how thrilled they were because they had lived in that area before prison, but they hadn't gone back in so long. It was such a special afternoon for them and they wanted to thank me by paying for my dinner. It was so special to see how much good you can do for them with so little (just a few hours outside and a simple dinner). Some meetings go way deeper than others and it's amazing to see how the core member decides sometimes to share very deeply. They may struggle with that, but then they thank you because they can see the benefit of it. This is truly precious.

Any ways that you have grown by being part of a circle or circles?

I learnt to go out of my way to try and put myself in their shoes and see the world the way they see it. It helped me create more empathy with them. I also definitely learnt how to set better boundaries with them.

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?"

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Support CoSA VFV

CoSA VFV relies on donations to help fund its work. Invest in your community.... financial investments assist CoSA VFV in helping re-integrate released sexual offenders and creating safer communities. Make a one-time gift or a monthly recurring donation. All donations are tax deductible.

TAX #799506514

1. E-TRANSFER A donation from your bank to: vfvcosa@gmail.com
2. BY CHEQUE Make payable to Vancouver Fraser Valley CoSA
Send to: CoSA VFV, 2777 Townline Rd., Abbotsford BC V2T 5E1
3. MONTHLY PRE-AUTHORIZED DEBIT [Download the form here](#): Please note that this form can be completed in browser, printed, signed, and mailed. Alternately, request a regular giving form to be sent to you. Once completed, please send to the address listed above.

CoSA Sponsored Webinar: “Creating Safer Communities Together”

Online grooming exploded in 2015. On January 26th, Merlyn Horton, CEO and Founder of Safe On Line Education Associates explained how electronic devices have had a profound effect on dating and pornography. With a digital camera or cell phone, anyone of any age is able to watch or produce pornography. Once produced, there is no control over who watches it. Sexual abuse of children can happen to children in their own bedrooms. It has become so prevalent that in too many cases, police departments cannot arrest their way out of the problem. Instead, community orders are being utilized in some locations to attempt to modify behaviour.

Merlyn Horton encourages parents and teachers to communicate with the children in their lives and follow practical guidelines to reduce the risks involved.

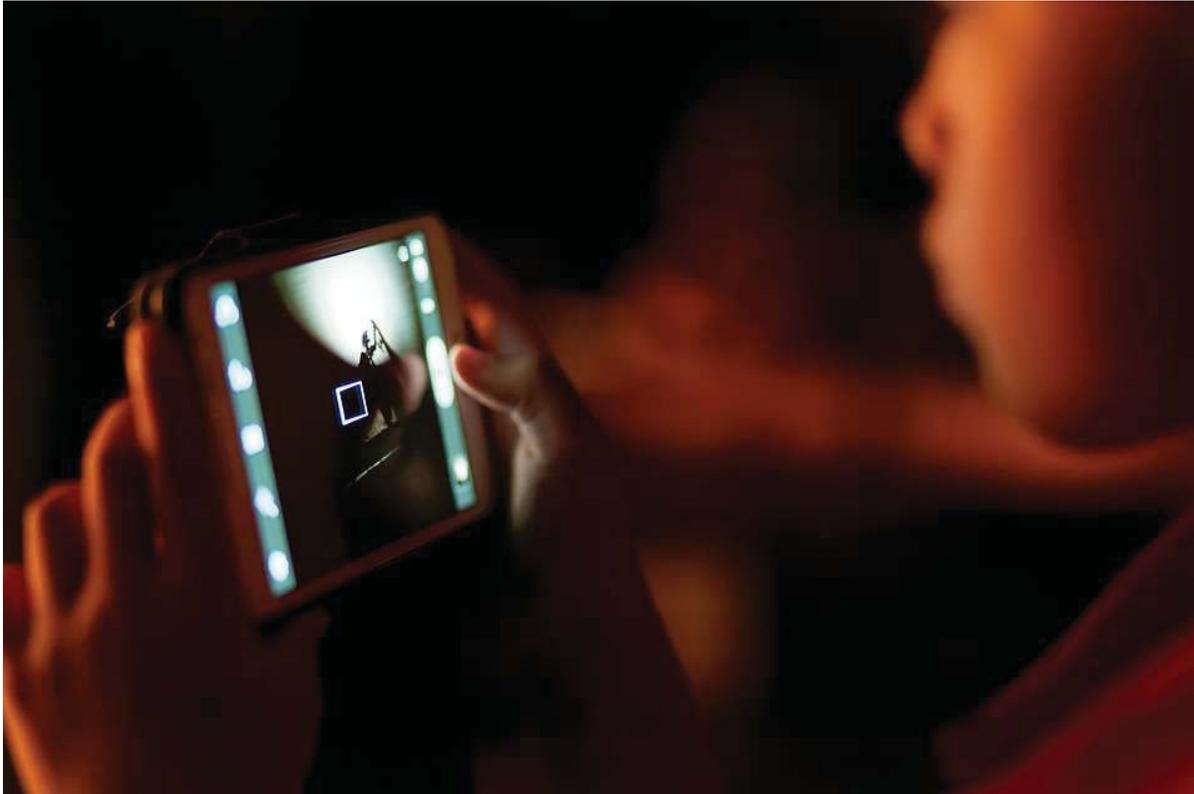
To view the webinar click here:

vfvcosa.org/webinars...

Please mark your calendars for our next webinar:

"Protecting Your Child Against Sexual Abuse"

March 30th @ 7 pm



To Find Out More...

Our goal is to substantially reduce the risk of sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released individuals in his/her task of integrating with the community and leading crime-free, responsible, productive, and accountable lives. We also value helping educate the community on sexual abuse prevention through webinars and other resources.

If you work with inmates or would like to receive the support of a CoSA circle, please visit vfvcosa.org/contact-us...

Or call Maureen Donegan at 604-791-1864 or Angela Veters at 778-982-1353

Mark your calendars for Advanced CoSA Training!

Join us on March 6th from 10:00 am - Noon for an interactive advanced training session over zoom. Details coming soon...

*Thank you to all of our supporters who make our work possible in keeping communities safe!
Especially our partners:*

**Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver
CoSA Canada
Correctional Service Canada**



**Practically Speaking....
Building a CoSA IS to Build Community**

