



Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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2006 Annual Report

***" True peace is not merely the absence of tension;
it is the presence of justice." (Martin Luther King, Jr.)***

Overview: Director's Reflections

Community Recognition - As we enjoyed our annual holiday open house with friends and colleagues, all of us at VORP – board, staff and volunteers - were basking in an added year-end glow. In late November, we were honored with the Henry McAllister Award for Excellence from the El Pomar Foundation. The gala awards event at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs was definitely worth the snowy drive! VORP is not an organization that has sought a high profile in its decade-plus history. Our approach is more grass-roots and much of our work is by nature behind-the-scenes and often confidential. Nonetheless, it was exhilarating and gratifying to share the limelight for an evening with so many dedicated non-profit leaders from throughout Colorado. A month later, we also received a certificate from Sacred Heart Parish in Alamosa, recognizing our work in the San Luis Valley. In return, we say a big “thank you” to the parish for housing our program and hosting many of our community events and trainings over the years.

Program Development - 2006 saw a deepening of our work in several program areas. While program details are described more fully in the reports below, certain aspects bear special comment here. As we entered our third year of Parent-Teen mediation, a decision was made to seek staff and funding dedicated to growing stronger roots for this pilot project. Renee Mackey joined us mid-year, working from home on outreach and development strategies through a community mediation mini-grant from the Colorado Judicial Department. We expect to see the fruit of her work in the coming year.

Year-end brought us to the half-way point in another new focus, a 3-year initiative on bullying prevention funded by The Colorado Trust. As we catch our breath and look back, there is a sense of accomplishment in the strides taken and results gained by this partnership with Tu Casa, Boys & Girls Clubs of the San Luis Valley, Valle del Sol After-school Program and St. Andrew Youth Guild. During this period, relationships with

partners have matured to new levels of respect and just plain fun! With Luke Yoder's departure for graduate school, we welcomed more young energy into this initiative this fall with full-time staffer Erin Kenzie. On the outcomes side, staff at the target sites report growing competency for themselves and their youth in addressing unacceptable behaviors. We at VORP have also had to stretch our understandings and take care not to lump the power dynamics of bullying - even between young children - into our typical rubrics of conflict resolution. It is an important reminder that mediation - like the hammer - is not the only or even best tool for bringing about justice in every situation.

In our victim-offender work, two staff had the privilege for several months of walking with and eventually facilitating a joint meeting between a young offender and a surviving family member of the victim. While we have handled a handful of serious offenses over the years, this was our first case involving the death of a victim. We appreciated the trust of the referring probation officer - and eventually of the two participants - to allow us to undertake a process filled with so much pain. We hope that some further healing on both sides was realized through these additional steps on their journeys.

Financial and Technological Resources - In addition to the funding award and program grants noted earlier, we received support from two long-time state funders, CO Division of Criminal Justice and CO Department of Public Health, for our ongoing core programs. Two other foundations provided operational support as well: Anschutz Family Fund and Frontier Village Foundation. Small technical assistance grants came from two national associations of which we are members: National Association for Community Mediation and Victim-Offender Mediation Association. Finally, we enjoyed the benefit of both public and private local contributions from throughout the San Luis Valley.

At the end of 2006, we are fully (or if truth be told, almost fully!) operational with a new case management database and new accounting software. Whew! We anticipate additional technology upgrades in the coming months, thanks to the knowledge and prodding of younger-generation staff and special one-time Tony Grampsas add-on funds.

Victim-Offender Mediation: We began 2006 with 10 open victim-offender mediation referrals. Overall we received 60 new referrals. This number was up by 13 from last year. We are very pleased with the increase in case referrals. January started off with a "bang" in that with 12 referrals and we stayed fairly steady throughout the year. December was another big month with 9 new referrals to close the year. Our referrals this year came from almost every county in the valley. We had an increase in referrals from Rio Grande County and Saguache County. We also mediated cases in Costilla County and Conejos County, along with our continuing work in Alamosa County. 45 cases this year were mediated with a signed contract or otherwise successfully conciliated. We also completed 14 intakes in which the victim or the offender chose not to mediate, a party was unavailable, or there were special circumstances to prevent the mediation from moving forward. We closed one case which went to mediation but parties were unable to reach an agreement. Altogether we closed 60 cases and will carry over 10 cases into 2007.

The majority of referrals came from the District Attorney's office, the Alamosa Municipal Court, and the Alamosa school system with which we maintain strong relationships. We have worked closely with Deputy District Attorney Greg Weatherford in Rio Grande County and Judge Amanda Pearson at the Alamosa Municipal Court. Other sources included Judge Martin Gonzales, Alamosa County Judge and Juvenile Magistrate, Judge Kim Wood, Costilla County Judge; district and private probation, and area school administrators and counselors. This past year we lost a core group of volunteer mediators due to relocation but still maintain a great group of VORP volunteers. Without their support and dedication we could not serve our community in this capacity.

School Programs:

2006 was a period of growth and change for School Programs. We continued to expand our work and strengthen relationships with schools and after-school sites throughout the San Luis Valley. This year also saw some staff turnover as well – Erin Kenzie came on as the new School Programs Coordinator after Luke Yoder left the position in August.

Bullying Prevention - Our second year as the lead agency in a bullying prevention initiative, supported by the Colorado Trust, was exciting as well as challenging. Kristella Mata-Hartshorn, a member of our bullying prevention coordinating committee, stayed on our team after moving from the Boys and Girls Club to Tu Casa. Sherice Valdez joined the committee after replacing Kristella at the Club. The committee worked throughout the year to provide training and support to the five sites included in the initiative.

John Halligan is a Vermont father who lost his son to suicide in 2003. Mr. Halligan speaks with students at middle schools across the country about the pain his son suffered as a target of severe bullying. In September, we collaborated with the Colorado Trust to bring Mr. Halligan to three Valley middle schools – Ortega, Centennial, and Centauri. His talks were very moving and helped the youth put a face on bullying.

In October, Alice Price attended an Olweus Bullying Prevention Program trainer certification at Clemson University in South Carolina. Because so few trainers reside in the region, her certification will bring lasting value to the organization as well as the community. Later that month, she and Gene Jacquez, an Olweus trainer from Denver, co- led a two-day training for all staff in the Centennial school district. This was done at the request and with the cooperation of the St. Andrew Youth Guild, thus shifting the focus of our bullying prevention efforts in San Luis from their after-school site to the full school community. Since this initial training, we have worked steadily with the district to provide support in the form of surveying and assessment, additional staff training, resource materials, and an awareness-raising event for parents. We will continue to be a regular presence at the school, assisting teachers with classroom activities and problem-solving bullying issues among their students.

Other School Activities - In the fall, we collaborated with Teri Ebel, Tu Casa's Education Specialist, to train 9 middle and high school teams in peer mediation. Participants included teams from the Sanford, Moffat, Creede, Center, Centauri,

Centennial, Sangre de Cristo, and Alamosa districts. Just before school opened, we also conducted a restorative discipline training for all administrative and counseling staff in the Alamosa School District. This was followed by a training session for all staff at Ortega Middle School in the skills and systems for implementing restorative discipline strategies. Bringing everyone – administrative, counseling, teaching, cafeteria, and support staff – together allowed for constructive dialogue on the challenges of implementing restorative discipline principles system-wide at OMS. These workshops were part of a multi-year consultation VORP has been doing with the Alamosa district. In addition to our on-going work with the Alamosa district, other school administrators from around the Valley have increasingly relied on VORP for support related to school-site disciplinary and conflict incidents and related consultation. Although not all referred by school officials, 23 of the 60 new case referrals for 2006 noted in the victim-offender mediation report above involved school or after-school site incidents – making this a key arena for our conflict intervention services also.

Parent-Teen Mediation:

This program has also continued to grow and change in its third full year of operation. Since July, our new coordinator, Renee Mackey, has been focusing on more intentional outreach to referral sources in order to increase community awareness of the program's services. While limited to agency-to-agency referral of families in the past, the idea of opening the program up to family self-referral has also been discussed. In the New Year, we will "test the waters" by including information on self-referral in the newsletters of Alamosa High School, Ortega Middle School, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of the San Luis Valley. Our hope in doing so is to reach families with more typical adolescent conflict who have not necessarily reached out or come to the attention of an outside agency. This may provide balance to the higher-conflict and more complex cases that have tended to be referred thus far through such sources as social services, victims' advocates, judges, probation officers and counselors.

During the first half of the year, we opened seven new referrals. Of these, three proceeded to mediation, two families felt issues were resolved prior to mediation, and two older youth moved out of their homes shortly after the referrals. Since Renee Mackey came on board as program coordinator, we have had an additional eight referrals. Two of these referrals proceeded directly into mediation. Four did not, due to lack of family responsiveness or a preference for counseling for more acute issues in lieu of or prior to mediation. The remaining two referrals are still pending, due to more challenging intake dynamics. Two of these newer referrals came through probation, with the balance from school contacts.

As we continue to expand the program, we are thankful for our talented volunteer mediators. Their expertise is invaluable as we make changes in protocols and expand outreach. We are having quarterly gatherings to help volunteers stay connected and inspired, especially during slower referral times. We plan to provide more extensive training in assessment and screening in the coming year, so that volunteers feel equipped to handle issues that arise at any stage in the mediation process. Our volunteer list has slightly diminished due to busy schedules and relocations during 2006. We look forward

to adding new mediators in coming months, with a special focus on recruiting more men and younger individuals (especially Spanish speakers) to restore demographic balance to our roster. We also hope to see further expansion of our services throughout the Valley.

Other Training, Resourcing and Special Events:

As always, 2006 has found us providing general interest workshops and supporting other community initiatives in a variety of settings throughout the Valley. These have included Adams State College classes and events, presentations for local government, peer agencies and churches, and various non-profit networking efforts. We have also been available to consult and share our library throughout the year with local and regional contacts interested in one or more areas of our programs and expertise. Three more extended commitments during the year included: 1) design and facilitation of special events related to the Dead Man Walking production at ASC; 2) active participation in planning 2007 Philanthropy Days events for Valley non-profits; and 3) consultation on dialogue processes for local groups such as Peace Watch.

--Alice M. Price, Exec. Director
Paula Medina, Program Manager
Erin Kenzie, School Programs Coordinator
Renee Mackey, Parent-Teen Coordinator