Circles of volunteers and professionals reduce recidivism among sex offenders

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Sex offenders who have served their sentence but live in social isolation show a higher risk of reoffending. Forming Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) reduces this risk and contributes to successful reintegration.

In CoSA, an initiative developed in Canada, a group of volunteers support convicted sex offenders as they reintegrate into their local communities. The volunteers are supervised by professionals of the Dutch Probation Service. Mechtild Höing, who has conducted PhD research into the effects of CoSA, will defend her thesis at Tilburg University on October 26.

An exploratory and qualitative study as well as longitudinal research into reoffending has shown that CoSA is a worthwhile addition to sex offender treatment which mainly helps offenders improve such general skills necessary for successful reintegration as problem solving, social skills, and self-management. A well-functioning circle is crucial in this process.

Höing also studied the effects anticipated and experienced by the volunteers. Her conclusion is that CoSA volunteers can be safely deployed after proper screening and training. They find their work very rewarding and experience strong support from among their fellow volunteers.

Public support for the resocialization of sex offenders is low, especially

among the low-skilled. However, the opinions on CoSA are more positive. One in eight interviewees indicated they considered becoming volunteers themselves.