

# Restoring hope -- Justice programs address offenders' problems

by Doug Smeath Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City), Jan 14, 2007

Three years ago, Richard Lyon was convinced he was on a mission from God, blessed with super powers that enabled him to perform miracles in the service of others.

The former Brighton High School student-body president would wander the streets of Salt Lake City, often in bare feet and a bathrobe. He thought he was saving people: giving dogs "telepathic" orders to protect children in a park, maxing out his credit cards to buy vegetable juice for homeless people and giving away many of his most precious possessions.

He didn't know it at the time, but he was suffering severe bipolar disorder, at the height of a two-month manic period that led to his arrest after he broke into a woman's house to set up "magical booby traps" to protect her from an abusive husband.

Now, Lyon, 25, lives in Eden with his wife and 2-year-old son, driving and maintaining trucks for a landscaping company and rebuilding his life.

He gives much of the credit to a group of Salt Lake City criminal-justice programs known collectively as restorative justice. They include special courts to deal with drug users, drunken drivers and domestic abusers, programs for overcoming prostitution or homelessness, and treatment for the mentally ill.

Restorative justice focuses on making amends to victims and rehabilitating offenders. The concept has been gaining popularity since the 1970s, and criminal-justice theorists are still weighing its effectiveness. Proponents see it as a more holistic way to fight crime, while detractors see more benefit in the deterrent nature of traditional justice's focus on punishment.

Salt Lake City's restorative-justice system was one of three finalists for a World Leadership Award in London last month, competing in the law-and-order category. The award went to Stuttgart, Germany, but local advocates see the Salt Lake program as a distinction the city can be proud of.

Drug courts, of course, exist across the United States, and many justice systems have specialized ways of dealing with homeless or mentally ill offenders. What makes Salt Lake unique is the breadth of its restorative-justice programs, said John Baxter, a judge in Salt Lake City's domestic-violence and homeless courts.

For many who have gone through the Salt Lake program, it has saved their lives.

Lyon went through Mental Health Court, and officers with the Salt Lake Police Department's Crisis Intervention Team were trained to recognize the signs of his mental illness and ensure he was treated not as a dangerous criminal but as someone in need of help.

"This program was my parents' lifeline to helping me," Lyon said. Without it, he added, "I'm sure the outcome would have been drastically different."

Saving lives, money

Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson, a former attorney who saw flaws in purely punitive law enforcement, championed the restorative- justice model immediately after taking office. In 2001, he and city prosecutor Sim Gill began devising programs that had at their cores the driving principle behind restorative justice: that many kinds of criminal activity have their roots not in a bad soul but in a curable problem.

Criminal justice, Anderson said, too often focuses on "tremendous humiliation and punishment," resulting in shame but no healing for crimes ranging from sex solicitation to drug addiction to domestic violence.

Through a network of law enforcement programs, special courts and social services, restorative justice aims to address the root causes of these crimes -- without ignoring the personal responsibility offenders bear.

It's difficult to measure just how well Salt Lake's restorative- justice model is working. Statistics on recidivism and the costs associated with the programs are hard to come by because many of the programs are only two or three years old and have relatively few participants.

But in theory at least, the program saves taxpayers money -- sometimes a lot.

For example, 331 people have gone through the Mental Health Court, with 55 people having graduated from the programs the court prescribes. Gill said the outpatient care typically required for program graduates is significantly cheaper than the in-patient care often used by other mentally ill offenders -- \$1,500 vs. \$13,000.

Drug courts often result in treatments that cost \$10-\$15 daily, as opposed to the \$68-\$72 it costs for a day of incarceration.

And there's the long-run money saved by cutting down on recidivism and curing the core problem, which reduces future law enforcement, court and social-services costs.

"We're finding out that the more continuity of care we can get you, once we get you on the right track, will save money and resources," Gill said.

A support system

Getting offenders back on track, so the theory goes, is a lot easier once you understand how they got off track in the first place.

Gary Goddard, 42, was on the path to trouble years before his life fell apart. He had been an alcoholic since he was 13 years old, he said, but he was a functioning alcoholic.

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