

# COMMUNITY CONFERENCING PROGRAM

Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office

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## What is Community Conferencing?

Community Conferencing is a process in which the victim, offender and affected community members come together in a safe setting with an impartial facilitator to discuss the facts and impact of a particular crime. During this process the victim can ask questions and express directly to the offender how the crime has impacted his or her life.

Conferencing provides a victim greater access to and voice in the criminal justice process. Conferencing also humanizes the incident more directly for the offender so that he or she may better understand the real human consequences of his or her wrongdoing.

## How Does Community Conferencing Work?

Referrals to the Community Conferencing Program (CCP) may come from prosecutors, defense attorneys, victim-witness advocates, judges, law enforcement, probation officers, or from victims who wish to speak directly with the offenders. Violent crimes and cases involving drugs or guns will not be accepted.

After a referral is received, the offender is contacted through his/her attorney or, directly, if he or she has no attorney, to determine whether the offender is appropriate for the program. Factors to be considered when making this decision include: acceptance of responsibility for the act, the type of crime, degree of remorse, prior record and the offender's general attitude about meeting with the victim.

If the offender is appropriate, the victim will be contacted to see whether he or she would consider participating. If the victim does not wish to participate in the community conferencing program, the case is processed through other criminal justice procedures.

## Three Stages of a Community Conference:

1. Discussion of the facts, from the victim and offender's point of view.
2. Exploration of the impact on affected parties.
3. Decision on how to hold the offender accountable for the harm he or she has caused the victim and the community.

## Why Would a Victim Choose to Participate?

Through Community Conferencing victims participate *directly* in the justice process. The process is dignified and respectful. Important points about conferencing are:

- Victims have an opportunity to pose questions about the crime directly to the offender.
- Victims can openly express to the offender how the crime has affected them and their families.
- The process facilitates real and agreed upon steps the offender can take to help restore the harm caused to the victim and the community.
- The offender is made more aware just how his or her actions have impacted the victim specifically and, if appropriate, the community generally.

## Key Principles of Conferencing

1. The victim's perspective is *essential* to the conferencing process.
2. Participation by a victim is entirely voluntary.
3. The participants, consistent with the program process and guidelines, help determine what needs to happen to repair the harm.



Community Conferencing is based upon the principles of Restorative Justice. Restorative Justice engages the victim and affected community members as active and meaningful participants in the justice process.

Restorative Justice seeks to assess the harm done by a criminal act and then determines what can be done to repair the harm while holding the offender accountable for his or her actions.



*“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”*

*Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

**Milwaukee County Partners for Restorative Justice**

Numerous individuals and community-based agencies have helped with the development and growth of the Community Conferencing Program and other Restorative Justice programming.

A partial listing of the agencies includes: Benedict Center, Community Partners, Community Care for the Elderly, Council for the Spanish Speaking, Department of Corrections, Interfaith Conference of Milwaukee, MICAH, Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department, Milwaukee Police Department, Milwaukee Public Schools, MU Law School-RJ Initiative, Running Rebels, Sherman Park Res. Ass'n, Social Development Commission, State Public Defender's Office, Urban Underground, WI Community Service, & 3<sup>rd</sup> District Community Justice Center.

\* Since May 2000, the CCP has held over 350 Conferences. What are participants saying?:

Victims' Responses:

- “It was the perfect answer – I wanted to have the young (offender) meet me – see that I was real and how this impacted my life.”*
- “Defendant was made more aware of importance such behavior has on victim, community and self.”*
- “My feeling upon leaving conference was that defendant has a better understanding of her actions, may be less inclined to repeat.”*
- “It’s a meeting where people can discuss what happened and its repercussions.”*
- “The benefit was the door of communication. The strength - I was truly a part of the conference.”*
- “Benefit: to face the offender, and make her face the crime and victim.”*
- “I never would have had this satisfaction by attending a court proceeding.”*

Offenders' Responses:

- “It shows offenders how much they hurt their victim and gives offenders a chance to apologize to their victims.”*
- “I came out of the conference a better human being because I don’t ever want to do this again.”*
- “It allows for fair discussion instead of falling through the system.”*
- “I thought that I should give back to the community what I took.”*
- “I get to know how the crime affects everybody else in the community and what they think of it.”*
- “I am much more aware of their {victims} point of view and how much it hurt them.”*
- “I learned a lot from this whole experience and certainly have grown as an individual.”*

\*Responses taken from anonymous CCP evaluations

**For More Information about the Community Conferencing Program or becoming a trained Volunteer Community Facilitator, please contact the following:**

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