



24th District Senator Julie Lassa; ENC Executive Director Judy Kohel and Founder Robert Kohel; 4th District Senator Lena Taylor, chair, Committee on Judiciary and Corrections

State Senators Invite Eagle's Nest Center Representatives to Capitol

On Wednesday, December 17th, Eagle's Nest Founder Robert Kohel and Executive Director Judy Kohel met with State Senators Julie Lassa (24th Dist., Dem.) and Lena Taylor (4th Dist., Dem.). The ENC representatives were invited to discuss the potential for implementing restorative justice concepts in Wisconsin's criminal justice system through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

The Justice Reinvestment Initiative is a data-driven strategy to assist

policymakers in reducing spending on corrections, increasing public safety, and improving conditions in the neighborhoods to which most people released from prison return. The Pew Charitable Trust Foundation and the Council of State Governments Justice Center have selected Wisconsin to participate in this initiative and are helping fund it and provide assistance. It will also take individuals and communities to make it work.

Senator Lena Taylor chairs the bi-partisan special committee appointed to oversee the Justice Reinvestment Initiative. The Oversight Committee includes six legislative members and ten members of the public; Marquette County District Attorney Richard Dufour has been nominated to participate as a "public" member.

The problem of recidivism has long been a battle for agencies that work to help offenders who have been held accountable (served their sentence) and are now trying to return to a community. High recidivism rates have created an incredible financial burden on the taxpayer and Eagle's Nest Center believes there is a substantial place for restorative concepts in this initiative and bases that information using our neighbor Minnesota as an example. Minnesota has very similar populations; crime rate, number of citizens, etc...and has less than half the individuals incarcerated that Wisconsin has. The bottom line is Wisconsin 2008 Corrections budget was \$1,227,485,400 whereas Minnesota's was \$459,939. Wisconsin also has two new prisons slated to be built.

Robert Kohel has been involved with Restorative Justice Practices for 14 years and is an active Circle Trainer, Program Developer and has been a member of Minnesota's Restorative Justice Coalition. Several years ago, Robert and Judy attended a conference hosted by the Department of Corrections in Minneapolis. A large part of the conference topic was how Restorative Concepts have influenced the Department of Corrections in Minnesota. Tim Hansen, Best Practices Restorative Justice Director at Minnesota's DOC has been a source of help to Eagle's Nest Center over the years.

Considering the success that Minnesota has had with Corrections utilizing Restorative Justice Concepts, Robert recalls wondering why we weren't doing this in Wisconsin. At that time the State was not ready for a paradigm shift in thinking regarding Corrections. Restorative Justice Concepts say that offenders need to be held accountable for their choices and many times prison is the appropriate consequence for much of the behavior we see. However, measures need to be taken to ensure that when offenders are released, that the community remains safe and that these offenders have a chance at becoming productive members of the community.

Robert remembers a professor he met named Kam Wong (China). In China, when an individual returns from prison his community welcomes him back and helps that individual. His observation here (in America) is that everyone gets a life sentence. Accountability never ends in one form or another.

Eagle's Nest Center is taking steps to construct a Transitional Facility in Wisconsin that will redefine what is currently viewed as transitional work. We will be striving to provide all aspects of an individual's needs to be a successful member of their community. ENC is hopeful that our future plans will provide professional services that will reduce the climbing prison population in Wisconsin and is committed to helping those who are willing to help themselves.

It is Eagle's Nest Center's wish that this initiative will be successful and reduce our prison population while keeping our communities safe and saving tax dollars.