



Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) California

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Overview of the Alternatives to Violence Project/California (AVP/CA) Program

MISSION: Creating a better world for all children

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a multicultural 501(c)3 organization offering experiential workshops that empower individuals to lead peaceful lives through affirmation, respect for all, community building, cooperation, and trust. Our fundamental belief is that there is a power for peace and good in everyone, and that this power has the ability to transform violence. AVP builds on a spiritual base of respect and caring for self and others, working both in prisons and with groups in the community.

ASPECTS:

This statewide program has three primary aspects:

- 1 - Workshops and support groups for prisoners in alternatives to violence, which have proven to decrease write-ups in the prison and reduce recidivism upon release;
- 2 - Community workshops offered to all ages in conflict resolution, cooperation, and communication skills. Local councils of AVP facilitators create support groups that prisoners who have taken AVP inside can join upon release. (See attachment "AVP/CA and Parolees");
- 3- Training in team building and conflict resolution for staff at prisons and other institutions, thus providing the final link of community and prison transformation.

All aspects are facilitated by trained teams—are highly experiential, fun, and transform lives.

Details of these three core aspects of AVP follow the description of Background.

BACKGROUND:

The Alternatives to Violence Project began in 1975. An inmate group at Green Haven Prison in New York was working with youth gangs and teenagers at risk, but they were having difficulty communicating their message about the consequences of violence. They sought help from the Quakers, who have a tradition of working on restorative justice, to create and conduct a workshop with them. Now in forty-four states and twenty-four other countries including Rwanda, this program has manuals for Basic, Advanced, Training for Facilitators, and Youth workshops

AVP/CA was established in June 2005, by a Steering Committee elected by trained California facilitators. This group is still the decision-making and mentoring body for workshops being established in prisons and communities in California. AVP/CA serves to establish independent, local groups. Once a local community group is established, it becomes its own legal entity and becomes responsible for training and supervision of its facilitators. AVP/CA then moves into a support role connecting groups to one another.

All trainer/facilitators of AVP Workshops are trained in a series of three 18-20 hour workshops after which they apprentice for a minimum of three workshops prior to being certified as a facilitator. Evaluation of all facilitators occurs at the end of every workshop. Those facilitators who so wish may choose to be mentored toward being certified as a Lead facilitator of each level of workshop. (See attachment "About AVP Workshops")

All workshops are facilitated by a team of facilitators. These facilitators are always volunteers when working with prisoners. Volunteers may opt to receive payment for their expenses. When working with staff, AVP/California pays these trained teams, which is the contractor for these services.

PRISON WORKSHOPS

Teams of community and prisoner volunteers trained in AVP offer workshops to twenty individuals on a regular (monthly) basis inside the walls of the prison to incarcerated men or women. In an ideal situation, these community volunteers come from the immediate community, but where that town is small and limited in available volunteers, they commute from nearby cities. All participants are volunteers, as well.

Research on AVP workshops has shown a 60% reduction in write-ups among prisoners who have taken a Basic workshop and a 50% reduction in recidivism three years after release.

The value of volunteers in working with prisoners is immeasurable. Repeatedly, the participants in the workshops are moved by the commitment of community people who come into the prison without pay and to dedicate time to offering the workshops. The volunteers' devotion to the work appears to increase the allegiance to the program and its concepts of non-violence by the incarcerated.

The community of AVP'ers inside the prison helps prevent individual violence by supporting one another as they face daily challenges. We hear numerous stories of such help: one AVP graduate sang a song from the workshop and quelled a potential fight in the yard; others have reminded fellow graduates of their chosen affirming names and helped to lighten a potentially hostile situation; some have been empowered to step in to help calm a situation.

❖ Prisoner support groups

A significant part of an AVP workshop is the development of a community within the prison of others who are like-minded in terms of seeking alternatives to violence in daily life. In order to support this community, once several workshops of prisoners are completed, the local group seeks to establish regular (monthly) support groups, led by the prisoner facilitators and a volunteer—either a staff or community facilitator. These groups serve to remind AVP graduates of the skills they learned and to introduce them to others in their communities, who have been trained.

❖ Prisoner training in leadership

The experience of AVP is that anyone can be trained to be a facilitator. By offering Advanced and Training for Facilitators training beyond the Basic workshop, AVP gives incarcerated men and women a chance to develop skills of leadership through team and consensus building education. Once trained, inmates may serve apprenticeships on facilitation teams with community members. These teams evaluate one another's performance during and following each workshop, giving an increased depth to the learning.

COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

All AVP prison workshops are designed to function in collaboration with the local community for several reasons:

❖ Bringing together diverse groups for safer communities

In cooperation with local churches, service clubs, schools, colleges, community centers, parole offices, prison staff, African-American and Latino groups, other agencies, and inmate family groups, a wide range of people with racial, gender, social status and age disparity are enrolled in AVP workshops.

In communities where the prison is the main employer, the workplace stress brought into the community is sometimes reflected in the schools and other institutions by increased violence. By introducing these conflict resolution workshops and training local people to facilitate these workshops, AVP can ameliorate this impact.

Not only are skills introduced to all who attend an AVP workshop, but divergent parts of a community are given the opportunity to listen and learn about one another, thus creating a strong and more viable community overall.

❖ **Developing community facilitators for workshops**

These community workshops are designed to develop facilitators for the prison as well as for schools and other groups in the community. Again, anyone can be trained to be a facilitator. A fee is charged for the workshop, but scholarships are liberally obtainable. The money made from these workshops generally supports the ongoing work in the prison by the local group.

❖ **Building local councils**

Local groups of facilitators function as the keystone of AVP operations. With a minimum of oversight, each local council makes decisions regarding resources and procedures including oversight and orientation of outside facilitators working in prisons in their area to ensure they abide by Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) regulations. Until a sufficiently large number of trained and experienced facilitators can conduct AVP programs on an ongoing basis, AVP/CA Steering committee functions in lieu of a local group.

Local groups also serve as the touchstone for formerly incarcerated AVP facilitators providing opportunities for parolees to facilitate AVP workshops and attend events, as well as are a support group on the outside.

TRAINING FOR PRISON STAFF

To complete the circle, AVP/California also offers workshops to prison staff for a reasonable fee. Working in corrections can be very stressful. Studies by F.E. Cheek indicate the life expectancy of a correctional officer to be only 59 years compared with 74 years for the average American. Correctional staff experiences a high level of alcohol abuse, ulcers, heart attacks, high blood pressure, depression and divorce. Although correctional staff will always experience stress on and off the job, the negative consequences do not need to be so alarmingly high.

Because of the new focus at the state level on rehabilitation, AVP/CA finds many CDCR employees interested in participating in these programs.

The workshops for prison staff use the same model that Conflict Resolution Services, Inc. (CRS) has implemented successfully for the past fifteen years in prisons throughout the U.S. These differ from prison and community workshops, focusing on team building, communication in the workplace, and conflict resolution skills toward improving morale; also, staff learn to take responsibility for their role in the workplace. The reported changes in the workplace culture including reduction in use of force have been astounding.

❖ **At the workplace**

Workshops for employees at all levels may be offered at individual prisons. Staff can be trained to be on teams with AVP/CA experienced facilitators or AVP/CA staff can offer the workshops.

❖ **At the academy**

CRS also successfully trains new recruits at the academy setting the stage for more effective overall learning. Training at this level is now possible with AVP/CA.

❖ **In community workshops**

In locales where community workshops are being offered, prison staffs find value in participating in their local community's AVP workshop. This interaction with the community and participation in the workshop gives employees an idea of what is being presented to prisoners as well as an opportunity for their own growth in dealing with their workplace.

The Alternatives to Violence Project in California is more than a workshop for prisoners, but incorporates in the program a wide range of those whose lives touch and are touched by the incarcerated—including community members, families of those incarcerated, and those working in the prison—the men/women whose lives intersect on the inside. All are transformed.