

# Police to offer new option to victims, offenders

## Special to the eagle

Westford police will begin referring select criminal cases to Communities for Restorative Justice (C4RJ), a non-profit volunteer organization that partners with area police to bring together victims, offenders, and community members in the aftermath of

criminal wrongdoing.

"Restorative justice gives people in the community a voice when things go wrong," said Sgt. Bill Luppold, who said the department will most likely refer cases involving trespassing, vandalism, and minors in possession of alcohol.

"One of the main reasons the program appealed to us is that it keeps offenders, from having a criminal record that would follow them around, one they would potentially have to explain on a job or loan application, or when applying for financial aid for school."

In C4RJ's restorative "circle" process, offenders and the people they harm meet face to face, along with trained volunteers, community members, and police personnel. Through consensus, these participants come up with a plan of repair, which consists of measures the offender will take to make amends and to learn more about the consequences of

his or her actions. The offender agrees to complete the plan or face having the case returned to the police for possible prosecution. The agreement measures are customized to the needs of the victim and are also tailored to help the offender learn and be accountable.

Officer Michael Croteau, recently appointed community service officer for the police department, will be the point person for the relationship with C4RJ. Croteau is knowledgeable and compassionate, said Luppold. He will work closely with a group of Westford residents who have been exploring the restorative justice option.

Sandra Habe, Assistant

Director of the Recreation Department; the Rev. William Flug of the United Methodist Church, and Tina Grosowsky, the Substance Abuse Prevention Coordinator with the Westford Board of Health are among them. Habe and Flug attended a C4RJ training last fall.

"We have formed a launching committee for C4RJ in Westford and are looking forward to having volunteers attending the training in October in preparation for a first case," said Tina. There is an educational display downstairs in the J.V. Fletcher Library for information about C4RJ, the Westford committee, and how to get involved.

C4RJ, started in Concord

in 2000, works with police in Acton, Carlisle, Concord, and Littleton. Most offenders are teens and young adults. If they complete their restorative agreements, offenders are spared a criminal record. In certain instances, police may require offenders to appear in juvenile court in order to secure referrals to needed services and additional programs.

"A lot of young people are not fazed by going to a judge," Luppold said, noting that a court appearance can be scary, but also impersonal. "We think it will be much harder, and more effective, if they have to face the people in the community, people who might be their neighbors."

Often in criminal cases, the needs of the victim are treated as secondary to the process of bringing the offender to account. Restorative justice puts the victim at the center of its process.

A common worry about restorative justice programs is that they might be "soft on crime," Luppold says he has no such concern. "I'd pick court any day over restorative justice," he said, "because restorative justice is a lot harder." Offenders generally have a period of two to three months to complete agreements, which typically contain requirements for community service, financial restitution or direct service to victims, face-to-face and/or written apologies, as well as oral or written exercises from which they learn about decision making. A trained facilitator works with the offender weekly. The program is confidential for both offenders and victims.

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