



**Center for Council**  
"Inmate Council Program"  
*Strengthening Communities, Improving Rehabilitative Outcomes*

**About Council**

"Council" is a mindfulness-based practice that involves bringing individuals together in a circle, under the guidance of a trained facilitator, for candid, heartfelt and intentional conversation. Within the circle, participants learn to listen without judgment and to talk, one-at-a-time, with the intent to speak from one's personal experience rather than opinion. This simple shift fosters a safe and intentional container for individuals to give voice to their stories and to discover commonality in the experiences and values they share, supporting community, cooperation and wellbeing. Council provides a compassionate, non-judgmental space for the emergence of empathy, understanding, healing and community.

Council is a modern practice derived from many ancient forms of communicating in a circle. Sometimes referred to as "Listening Circles," Council utilizes a center, a circle and a talking piece to create an intentional space in which to share our stories. The practice of deep listening without judgment fosters an atmosphere of respect for ourselves and for others and promotes empathy, dissolving barriers to cooperation, understanding and community.

The practice of Council acknowledges everyone present and helps focus intention and energy on our common stories, values, aspirations and shared humanity. Council programs have been integrated widely in school-settings, with over 15,000 public school children currently engaged in Council programs in Los Angeles Unified School District, yielding consistently positive outcomes. The use of Council in prisons has resulted in tangible and meaningful shifts in behavior, including deeper collaboration between ethnic groups, inmates taking steps to be accountable and seeking forgiveness and improved regulation of impulsive and reactive communication styles, leading to reduced incidents of violence, according to prison officials. Recent program evaluation conducted by researchers from the RAND Corporation and University of California have demonstrated that participation in prison-based Council programs results in:

- improvements in mindfulness, empathy, resilience, sense of connectedness with others, mental health, and active listening; and
- reductions in physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility, and PTSD symptoms.

Professional organizations and institutions working with Council programs have noted an appreciable deepening of the *culture of listening* and a more cohesive, engaged and mission-focused staff.

**Use of Council in Corrections and Reentry**

While over 95% of prisoners will be eligible at some point for release, the lack of successful rehabilitation programs brings many back. Increasingly, programs incorporating trauma-informed methodologies, as well

and supporting balanced and sustained reentry. Center for Council's programming in the corrections and criminal justice system, building positive cultures both inside and outside of prisons, is supporting successful re-integration of formerly incarcerated individuals into their communities. Utilizing the practice of Council, participants are learning and practicing new skills that support healthy and productive perspectives and behaviors that are critical to balanced, effective and sustainable reentries.

### **Criminogenic Factors Addressed by Council**

According to Professor Edward Latessa's Pennsylvania Parole Study, the **most effective rehabilitative programs** target at least four of the five dynamic *criminogenic factors* (anti-social attitudes, anti-social friends, lack of empathy, impulsive behavior and substance abuse). In "What Are Criminogenic Needs and Why Are They Important," Latessa, writes: "programs that target at least four to six criminogenic needs can reduce recidivism by 30 percent." (Ohio Judicial Conference, Community Corrections: Research and Best Practices.).

Council-based programs directly address the first four of these five factors in the following ways:

- 1) *anti-social attitudes*: Council naturally fosters connection and cooperation. The practice of Council removes any perception of hierarchy, encourages openness without judgment, and dissolves previously held perceptions of others. By entering into shared agreements around the intentions of Council, the individual becomes part of a greater whole and the group process reinforces pro-social, non-delinquent norms.
- 2) *anti-social friends*: One of the greatest barriers to successful rehabilitation is continued association with other individuals with anti-social tendencies. Council offers a mutually supportive environment, engendering community and strengthening bonds between individuals and among the larger group. The process attracts individuals seeking to confirm a common set of values and mutual respect. Having an alternative to previous, potentially criminal or destructive associations is key to increasing the possibility of successful reentry.
- 3) *Lack of empathy*: Forming a circle dramatically changes the dynamics of a group; it puts us all – literally – *on the same level*. Sharing our own experiences and hearing the stories of others reminds us that for all of our differences -- of race, education, socioeconomic background, family dynamics -- we share many commonalities. Stories shared in Council that articulate experiences of loss, hope, love, hardship, triumph and resilience are universal and resonant and engender compassionate responses, dissolving barriers to cooperation and community.
- 4) *Impulsive behavior*: In Council, everyone in the circle has an opportunity to speak, but only when empowered by receiving the talking piece, which is passed in a prescribed pattern. At its core, Council is a practice of deep listening and shared opportunity to express what is alive and true for each participant. Consciously monitoring one's thoughts and responses, while respectfully honoring the intentions of Council (taking turns speaking and being heard) helps instill a new way of relating to others and reinforces new patterns of focusing emotions and expressing oneself in an authentic and contained way.

### **Council in Jails and Prisons**

As early as 2005, Council programs were being piloted in numerous CDCR institutions, including California

and Correctional Training Facility (CTF). In 2012, in partnership with Warden Randolph Grounds, Center for Council initiated the “Inmate Council Program,” or ICP, a Council-based inmate-training program at Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP), which trained a cohort of inmates of different races and ethnicities (mostly “Lifers”) to lead inmate Council-groups on the prison yard. This program proved to be strikingly successful and led to the expansion of ICP programs, funded by CDCR’s Innovative Programming Grants, as well as grants from private foundations. The program has now expanded to include groups at 22 CDCR facilities and has inspired similar programs, in Los Angeles-area youth detention facilities, as well as jails and prisons around the world. Center for Council also collaborates with dozens of community-based organizations and faith-based groups, as well as other service providers, utilizing a Council-based platform to integrate evidence-based modalities such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Mindfulness Based Emotional Intelligence (MBEI), trauma informed care and self-regulation skills into comprehensive rehabilitative strategies. Council may be thought of as a platform or a meta-program, one that supports all other essential program modalities: from therapy to art to athletics to literacy to vocational education -- and much more.

### **About Center for Council**

Center for Council provides programming that promotes communication, enhances wellbeing, builds community and fosters compassion in a variety of venues, including prisons, schools, hospitals, businesses and law enforcement agencies and trains educators, health care professionals, therapists, first responders, business leaders and others. As a project of Community Partners, the LA-based non-profit fiscal sponsor, Center for Council coordinates a network of over seventy Certified Council Trainers, offering training and consultation to clients in Southern California and around the world.

### **Council and Prison/Reentry Work, Some Core Values and Understandings:**

1. The practice of Council has the potential to reframe the way we treat each other—as individuals and as societies—it is an easy-to-understand and learn, contemplative practice that opens the heart to focus on our shared experiences and perspectives and teaches respect and patience; Council creates a common field from which deep communication, understanding and solutions can seed.
2. The experience of incarceration can, and should, be a time of personal transformation where men and women who have been isolated from the social and economic mainstream can learn to assess and reset their perspectives and experiences with the world by learning empowering skills in communication and contemplative practices like Council.
3. Current inmates and the formerly incarcerated who return to our communities, regardless of their crime, represent a dynamic, but often wasted resource that could be supported to step forward as agents of change to alter the culture of violence, crime and poverty that now control many of our cities and rural communities.
4. Those individuals and communities suffering the most from economic and social inequality must be empowered with more empathy for themselves and others, as well as practical skills and tools, to help them access resources and opportunity.
5. Change will only come from individuals who are committed to making things right, and those most likely to carry this commitment are the ones most affected by things not being right.
6. The ethics that drive the Center for Council’s prison project are the deeper problems of inequality, racism and the ravages of poverty that feed the high rates of incarceration in the U.S. As researchers from Princeton University have documented, “...while wages fell over the last thirty years, growth in the American penal system turned prison and jail time into common life events for low-skill and minority men.”

## **About Our Methodology**

Center for Council believes that transformation must occur at the individual level, family level, the institutional level, the community level and the societal level. Our intention is to build the confidence, education, and advocacy skills of our program participants. Our Council-based programming creates a vehicle for participants' self-expression and self-advocacy, so that their engagement with the wider world helps to change prevailing beliefs.

Research has shown that by treating complex traumatic stress in a comprehensive fashion affected individuals can serve as advocates for changing their social image. The collateral consequences of convictions include many civil disabilities, as well as personal disabilities such as those accompanying post-traumatic stress. Self-advocacy can bring about a reduction in program participants' civil disabilities as well as personal growth.

The two key strands of theory around our methodology involve *trauma informed care* and *restorative justice*. Our approach is to be informing, teaching and practicing self-regulation skills, and the intent to rewire the brain through different responses to internal and external pressures. (A critical emphasis in complex trauma work is that therapists are not needed for this work to be successful.) Recognizing harm done, making amends and giving back is emphasized over "curing the problem."

Council allows us to "go deep" in treating the trauma. Such treatment of the trauma means first informing participants of the reality of their traumatization, and of the trauma suffered by those around them, perhaps for generations. The intent is not to blame others for discriminatory misbehaviors or absolve our participants of responsibility for their actions. Rather, the intent is to reduce and eventually remove the tendency to blame. This is done by tracing back the origins of trauma to the beginnings of our society, or even the beginnings of humankind, utilizing the theory of *complex traumatization*. This process is supported through concrete examples of bias and violence in society. Psychological criminological theories around attachment, bonding, defiance, oppositional disorders and posttraumatic stress also support such an approach. All of these are factors contained within the framework of "restorative justice."

Cumulatively, these approaches are held as effective in treating the whole person and transforming that person from outcast to essential contributor. A key component of what is taught in Center for Council's programs is the ability to navigate the emergent, beginning with one's own emotions and one's ability to self regulate. In relation to external occurrences, the emphasis in this program is on promoting choice. What comes up may be perceived as fair and appropriate and legitimate, or not; when unfair, inappropriate, or illegitimate perceptions arise, the training provides skills to transform the situation within and through the regulation of one's own emotions and consequently to affect and transform the situation on the outside through modeling appropriate behavior and co-creating more positive, equal material realities.

Experienced Council Trainers are critical for providing adequate orientation and training. Existing institutional personnel and community-based workers may be brought in to support, as well. Rather than "correcting" criminals, the curriculum of Center for Council's programming supports traumatized individuals in acquiring new skills and understandings and changing their lives. At the institutional level, then, what this change in emphasis means is that support personnel do not go into inmate groups to correct them, but to support them and learn with them.

This transformative process continues as "alumni" of Center for Council's prison-based programs are released and integrated into our community-based Council programs in the areas to which they parole, supporting a continuum of care and the next steps in successful and balanced reintegration into society.