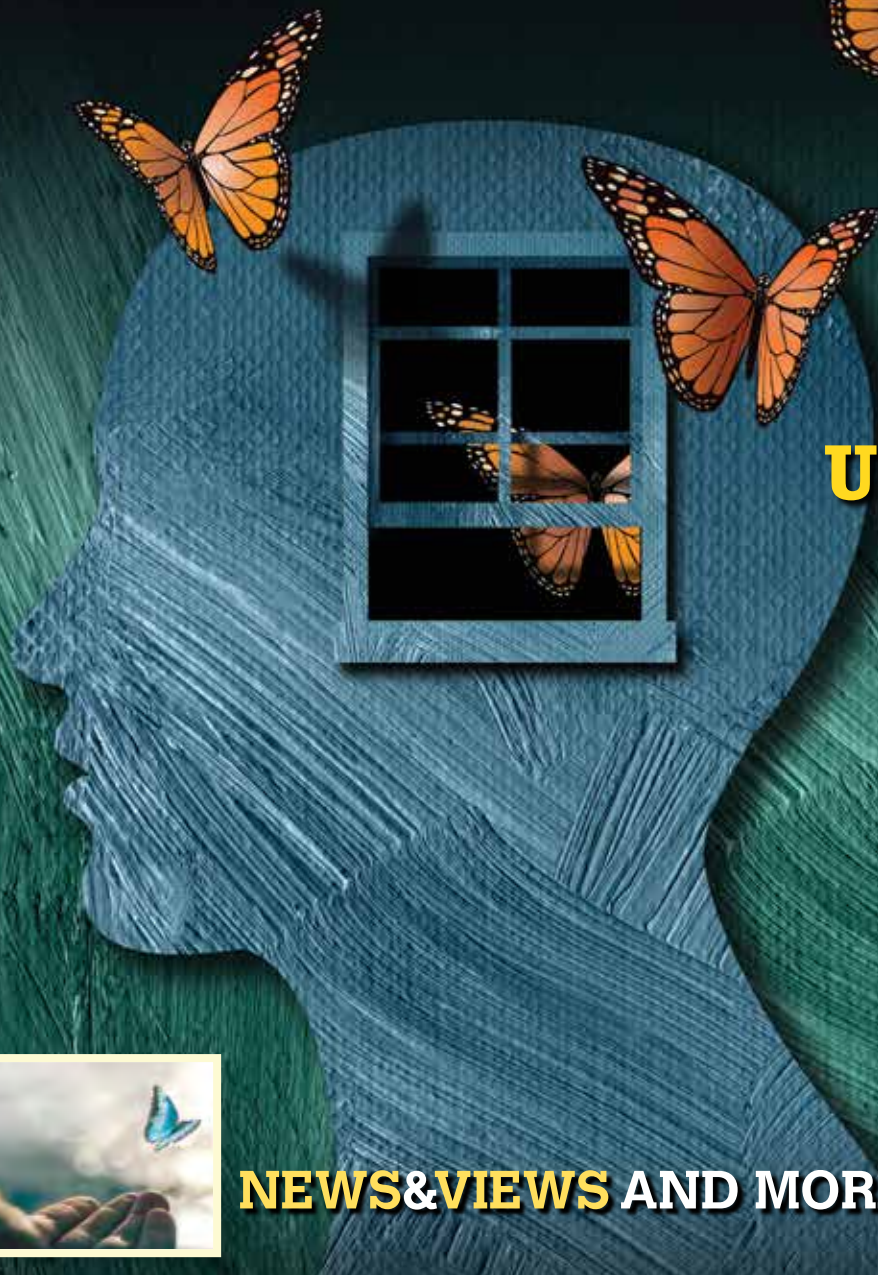


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NEWS&VIEWS AND MORE



Council in Session

How the Center for
Council teaches inmates
empathy, authenticity
and accountability

BY ALEXANDER CARRIGAN

On Jan. 14, 2020, at the ACA 2020 Winter Conference in San Diego, the ACA Annual Luncheon awarded several awards to individuals and programs that helped improve the lives of those incarcerated or demonstrated heroism in and outside their facilities. One such organization, Center for Council, received the 2020 Innovations in Corrections Award for their Inmate Council Program (ICP). As Victoria Meyers, chair of ACA's Correctional Awards Committee, said at the award ceremony, "council is important to assist in becoming rehabilitated," before presenting the award to Center for Council's executive director, Jared Seide, and outreach associate, Samuel Escobar Jr. The program, which is now based in more than 20 California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

sites, aims to rehabilitate inmates by engaging them in insightful council settings, where they seek to examine their past behaviors and develop skills that will support behaviors that are both healthy and pro-social, as well as can aid in their reentry once their sentences end.

Building the council

The origins of the work of Center for Council came about in the 90's when Seide was living in Los Angeles. While serving as president of the governing board of his daughter's school, Seide noticed the increased racial tensions that followed the Rodney King Riots in the school. It was also in this time that he learned of the concept of a "council," where community members come together to speak authentically and listen



Background image: istock/clu; all other photos in this article courtesy Jared Seide

respectfully to one another, free of opinions and judgement. After seeing how much a council program helped the school, Seide began to look for ways to bring the council program to other schools and educators. He soon became the director of the “Council Training Initiative” for The Ojai Foundation. Having left his work in film and television for this opportunity, Seide called this program and the work “a more direct version of storytelling as a vehicle for bringing communities together than movies or television could be.”



Center for Council Executive Director Jared Seide.

According to Center for Council’s website, council “represents an amalgam of teachings, wisdom traditions and schools of thought from around the globe, blended with science-based mindfulness practices and modern communication techniques developed over several decades. Council offers skillful means for building bridges and developing connection in an increasingly divided world, a tool that can and should be available to all people of all walks of life.” It also says that the program seeks to honor ancient and modern traditions that influence the practice of council, recognizing that many people and communities suffer and continue to suffer because of colonization, violence and exploitation. The work of the organization looks to “honor the experiences of marginalized people, and work to hold space for all people to be empowered and connected in community.”

In 2013, Seide would branch off and form his own non-profit, Center for Council. According to Seide, the organization “works in education, healthcare, organizational development and the criminal justice arena delivering programs and trainings that promote communication,

Inmate Council Program Testimonials:

Randy Grounds, former Warden, Salinas Valley State Prison:



“I think any time you talk in such a manner where you can listen and know that you’re listened to, and appreciate and understand each other a little more, I think your chances for resolve are much higher. And I think that’s what council does. ... If you can impact a level four maximum security prison, you have no excuse, you can impact a city or a county, or if you want to go on a macro level, you know, a world ...”

Theresa Cisneros, Chief Deputy Warden, Avenal State Prison



“The inmates are now looking at each other as individuals, they’re able to meet themselves and understand that we all are human, we all have issues, and that’s made for a lot safer environment both for our inmates and our staff. They’re learning to listen without judgment, they’re learning empathy, and that’s huge.”

Carey Ochs, Community Resource Manager, Ironwood State Prison



“Literally, within the first day, four of these big old tough guys were in tears, sharing their heart ... it was an amazing thing to see ... I track their ‘disciplinaries’ and ... I’ve seen a huge transformation and I can truly tell you that these guys, they have been successful, they are staying out of trouble and they are opening their eyes to new ways of thinking ... I’ve been very impressed. I’m so happy the program is here and we’re proud to have it.”

Mitch, Inmate Council Program Participant at Ironwood State Prison



"I've been in pretty much every group in this prison and this one is different. Being in this group, I learned how to feel someone's story, someone's pain. It's broken stereotypes and the usual way inmates view people who look

different. This has almost re-sensitized me to be more human again. I used to have a lot of false strength, I was very selfish before and ... it's humanized me. I truly, genuinely care about the next man. Council helped me develop a sense of trust and has helped me empathize and gain insight into my childhood. It put me in a place where I could be vulnerable inside a place you're not supposed to be. I'm forever thankful for it. It's truly helped me on my path."

James, Inmate Council Program Participant at Ironwood State Prison



"I think it's great, it's one of the best programs that anybody could participate in. I was hooked the first time. I'm a lifer and I continue to get a lot of growth out of Center for Council. Council is all about developing skills sets to live

an ethical life and to express humility and kindness to other people as well as being able to work on self-esteem and self-dignity. Council allows us to go deep into areas of our life that we never thought would be possible; it's a way to heal the shame that has bound us up and kept us from being our true self. Center for Council allows us to feel like we're human beings, not just inmates ... Center for Council creates a ripple effect of personal growth."

enhance well-being, build community, and foster compassion." While the organization's work began in training schools from pre-K to university level, it soon expanded to community development and engagement. This involved teaching various local organizations the method through their Organizational Wellness Program, which has now expanded to over 75 organizations.

"I became increasingly aware that the work we were doing had as much value to the wellbeing of the 'individuals' involved as it did for the organizations that we were training," Seide said.

The work of the organization looks to "honor the experiences of marginalized people, and work to hold space for all people to be empowered and connected in community."

Center for Council's website also states that the programming is designed to "cultivate positive interaction in a variety of professional, business and organizational settings." This has included working with other local wellness groups and non-profit organizations. The program has even extended to working with people tied to the genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia and Auschwitz. These programs bring together survivors and perpetrators, as well as the descendants of survivors and perpetrators in some cases, to engage in council sessions. Escobar said that these programs that show "how people that were once considered enemies are now using this process to come to terms and get along. [Seide] talked about how they're working toward healing and forgiveness for acts of horror and terror committed against one another."

It was also in 2013 that Seide and Center for Council began to expand its reach. A report, called "The Blueprint," was issued by the state of California to respond to the U.S. Supreme Court's mandate to reduce the



Inmate Council Program at Salinas Valley State Prison.

overcrowding issue in California prisons. By implementing “Public Safety Realignment” (AB 109), this would shift the inmate population to communities, leading to a renewed focus on rehabilitative programming. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) tried to implement several programs, both directly and by reaching out to community-based organizations. To aid in this, the Innovative Program Grant fund was created. This has led to hundreds of new rehabilitative programs designed and led by organizations like Center for Council.

Center for Council first began its inmate rehabilitative programs when Randy Grounds, the former warden of the Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP), sought to offer the organization’s ICP to a group of inmates at the facility. At the time they were contacted, SVSP was considered “one of the most violent and challenging to manage prisons in the state,” according to Seide. This was where Seide and the rest of Center for Council brought the inmate version of the council program to life, starting the ICP in 2013.

The Inmate Council Program

According to Center for Council’s website, “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

Joseph, Inmate Council Program Participant at Avenal State Prison



“What I found with Center for Council was something totally unexpected. I started to recognize a need for a change in me, a need to give back. I wasn’t seeing people as who they were, I was only thinking of me, what can they do for me... and that way of thinking got me to prison. I thought, ‘What can I do to change that?’ I’ve been taking, taking, taking ... how do I flip that? What Center for Council has helped me to see is that I can give back, that I have something valuable to offer that I didn’t realize I had.”

Edward, Inmate Council Program Participant at Ironwood State Prison



“Council has pushed me. It’s been healing for me. It actually got me to communicate, it actually helped me to open up more, it actually helped me learn how to empathize with other people and see things from other points of view ... When you’re opening up to other people, and they’re listening to you, and you have the opportunity to express yourself without being judged and criticized, you hear the commonality and it helps you. Council helps you learn to discover the true you, that part of you that God created, who you really are: someone who is loving, caring, compassionate, that’s what the human spirit is and that’s what Council has helped me bring out.”

**Sam Escobar Jr., Outreach Associate,
Center for Council**



“Participating in ICP brought me to a place in my life where I was able to explore my crime and the impact that my actions had on my victims, my community, and my family. And as I put myself in the shoes of all the people that my choices had affected, I began to change my attitude and the trajectory of my life ... moving away from the destruction and violence and toward peace and healing. The more we can get Council to the prison population, the more we can decrease violence and racial tensions on the prison yards. Council is about building community and working toward healing, as we come to understand each other and see that we all have similar stories.”

“I learned about Council programs in Rwanda, Auschwitz, and Bosnia and about how people that were once considered enemies are now using this process to come to terms and get along. Jared talked about how they’re working toward healing and forgiveness for acts of horror and terror committed against one another. He spoke about empathy, compassion, and listening and how that connects with tolerance, acceptance, and peace. I started to understand what was happening in this group. If perpetrators of genocide can be forgiven by their victims and sit at the same table together, why can’t we? I no longer saw other inmates through the lens of the gang, as the enemy; I see them as someone waiting to be heard, listened to, understood with compassion and empathy, potential links in this chain of peace and human-kindness.”

skills in communication and contemplative practices like Council.” Because of that, Seide and the rest of the organization found it easy to apply their programs to places like SVSP. The program is described as a six-month intervention where participants are encouraged and trained to facilitate council sessions for their peers. This is to empower them to become “positive agents of change, on the prison yard, and in their lives.”

Seide states that the program uses four of what Edward J. Latessa, a professor at the University of Cincinnati’s School of Criminal Justice, calls “the five dynamic criminogenic factors.” According to an overview of the ICP, Latessa states that the most effective rehabilitative programs target at least four of the five. While the ICP doesn’t target substance abuse, it targets the other four 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.

The overview also provides an understanding of the Council's methodology and core values of the ICP. According to the overview, these are six of the most important core values and understandings for those in the Council program:

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 30 years, growth in the American penal system turned prison and jail time into common life events for low-skill and minority men."

As of 2019, the Center has launched programs in 22 CDCR facilities with the aid of grant funds provided by the CDCR and private funders.

Since Center for Council believes change begins at various levels, including individual, family, institutional, community and society, program participants need to build the education, confidence and advocacy skills needed for reentry. The focus on self-advocacy can cause a reduction in the participants' civil disabilities and personal disabilities and lead to personal growth. The overview states that council allows them to "go deep" in treating



From the Documentary “Cops & Communities: Circling Up,” featuring Sam Escobar and Jared Seide.

the trauma, particularly through their focus on restorative justice and trauma-informed care methodologies. This involves informing, teaching and practicing self-regulation skills, recognizing harm done, making amends and the act of giving back over “curing the problem.”

One of the first people in SVSP to truly accept and improve thanks to the ICP was Escobar, who, at the time, was serving a 25-year sentence for multiple armed robberies he committed in his teens. In an article he wrote for ATTN.com, Escobar spoke about how he was convinced to participate after an opening for the group developed when a prisoner was granted parole. While he was taken by the group’s focus on compassion, empathy and listening, he admitted it was a challenge to speak up.

“Talking about personal issues like anger, sadness, joy, love, and family in front of ‘the enemy’ is something I had learned to avoid so that it couldn’t be used against me here,” Escobar wrote. “Talking about feelings and emotions was considered a weakness, and showing weakness is something you just don’t do in prison, regardless of what group you’re in.”

Despite this, Escobar stuck with the group and began to see how it was changing the inmates for the better.

“I watched the guys in this group, and I saw inmates of different ethnicities and backgrounds sitting down and playing cards together, sharing food and drink, playing sports, even greeting each other with a hug, as one would

a member of his family,” Escobar said. “I saw them asking advice of one another. I watched conflicts resolved without a hint of violence.”

Escobar then began to “expand [his] perspective” and began to make more of an effort. He spoke with more people outside of the council setting, opened up more in sessions and shed a lot of the learned behavior and attitudes that he previously held.

Through his efforts in improving himself in the council setting, Escobar was able to obtain parole in 2018. He then moved back to Los Angeles and was hired by Seide as the outreach associate for the organization. Since then, he has helped to expand Center for Council’s programs, as well as improved his relationships with his family and friends.

“Council taught me to have patience and see each of those problems as learning opportunities — growth opportunities. I want people to learn these things, to use these tools, out there, as well as behind these walls,” Escobar wrote for ATTN.com. “I am a better husband, father, and leader now. I am happier, stronger, and, most of all, wiser.”

Future councils

Because of the work in SVSP, Center for Council has been able to expand its ICP to numerous California facilities. As of 2019, the Center has launched programs in 22 CDCR facilities with the aid of grant funds provided by the CDCR and private funders. Some initial programs have been able to continue operating for more than five years following the end of formal program support and funding. Seide says the Council has proven “sustainable and self-perpetuating in facilities that have chosen to continue it.”

The program has also received independent program evaluation from both the University of California and the Rand Corporation. According to the study, the ICP has revealed “significant positive outcomes” in the following areas:

- Reductions in physical and verbal aggression
- Reductions in anger
- Reductions in hostility



Los Angeles Police Department “POWER Training.”

- Reductions in PTSD symptoms
- Improvements in mindfulness
- Increases in empathy
- Increases in resilience
- Increases in sense of connectedness with others
- Improvements in mental health

**Seide says the Council
has proven “sustainable and
self-perpetuating in facilities that
have chosen to continue it.”**

It was also in their time spent in correctional facilities that Seide and the rest of Center for Council recognized the impact the council program could have for correctional officers and employees. Seide said he and his team were repeatedly asked “Why isn’t there something like this for COs?” Having reviewed studies about correctional officer and employee physical, emotional and mental health, Center for Council developed the Peace Officer Wellness, Empathy & Resilience (POWER) Training program. POWER Training focuses on officer wellness, stress-management and self-regulation and seeks to support de-escalation and improve interpersonal communication and community engagement for correctional and law enforcement personnel.

At this time, the program is under way for 175 Los Angeles Police Department officers. The participants attend a two-day workshop, receive weekly email assignments and activities over a six-month period, and practice self-facilitated “council huddles” with their peers weekly. Like with inmates, officers tend to fall into the same maladaptive coping behaviors and benefit from a supportive peer community and stress-management training.

Center for Council has also begun to branch out to other first responders. Another of the organization’s programs is the Compassion, Attunement & Resilience Education (CARE) Program. This is a training program offered to healthcare providers like physicians, nurses, firefighters and EMTs to address stressors in their professional environment and help them resist burnout, improve their health and their relationships with others.

“As we expand the scope of our work and make these skills and ‘council huddles’ available across diverse groups, telling and listening to stories of our shared human journey reminds us of how much we have in common,” Seide said. “And, more often than not, after developing greater self-awareness, self-regulation and communication skills, program participants who might otherwise consider themselves to be adversarial are compelled to reach out to those from whom they have felt alienated — officers, activists, educators, formerly incarcerated individuals — to find common ground and shared purpose.”

For more information about Center for Council and the ICP, please visit centerforcouncil.org.

Alexander Carrigan is an associate editor at the American Correctional Association.

Award Winners

Recognizing excellence

In accordance with annual tradition, the last day of our conference was reserved, in part, for the awarding of various honors. This is an opportunity to celebrate some of the corrections

professionals who have demonstrated distinguished accomplishment over the course of their career. These individuals and organizations were honored at the ACA Annual Luncheon on Jan. 14.



The Community Service Award

The Community Service Award was awarded to the DEFY (Drug Education for Youth) Program of the Naval Consolidated Brig in Charleston, SC. The program helps military youth learn how to avoid at-risk behaviors such as drug addiction, bullying, gang involvement, and more by teaching them social skills such as leadership, team building, self-management, etc. Dr. Crystal Brown-Voeltz, director of clinical services, accepted the award alongside MSgt. Kristi Nelson (nee Lapeyrouse), senior non-commissioned officer in charge, on behalf of their organization.



The Innovation in Corrections Award

The Innovation in Corrections Award was first established at the 126th Congress of Correction in Nashville, Tennessee to be given to a commendable program serving adult or juvenile offenders. The purpose of this award is to broaden the knowledge of successful program interventions throughout ACA and to recognize an outstanding correctional program. This year's award went to Center for Council's Inmate Council Program. The award was accepted by Jared Seide and Samuel Escobar Jr., the executive director and outreach associate, respectively, of Center for Council. Seide spoke on behalf of the duo when accepting the award and spoke to the mission he and his partner sought to accomplish and their plans for the future.

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