

The Challenge of Changing and Thinking Big  
(and how it relates to the following):

“This is a three day conference for all levels of professionals who work with adult sex offenders and juveniles who have committed sexual offenses”

Susan Walker, M.A.  
Director, CSOR (Coalition for Sexual Offense Restoration)

Following a Joint Budget Committee mandated review of the Sex Offender Treatment and Monitoring Program (SOTMP) inside the Colorado Department of Corrections, and a similar review a year later of the Sex Offender Management Board (SOMB), it was clear that changes needed to be made in the way that those with sexual offense convictions were treated and monitored in Colorado!

Despite 168 pages that made the case for major change, the SOMB's initial reactions to the report went something like this (I was there and heard them)!: “This is just one opinion and we don't have to follow it”; “There are all kinds of grammatical errors in the paper – they can't be world-class researchers and produce something with that many errors”; “Victims and prosecutors were not included in the focus groups held by Dr. D'Orazio, thus the report is biased”.

As time passed, and the initial pain caused by the stinging criticisms of the Board's policies, Standards and Guidelines and operations hurt a little less, the strategic planning began. Each sentence of the plan started by saying “whether or how to implement...” a variety of evaluation suggestions. The Board did allow some guest/audience input before they voted on what the strategic plan should include.

One of the big areas of discussion and outside testimony before the Board had to do with what people who had committed a sexual offense should be called. In an attempt to move away from labeling, Colorado advocacy groups for those who had offended sexually had adopted the phrase “a person who has committed a sexual offense”, while the national group Reform Sex Offender Laws (RSOL) chose to call people “registrants”. Victims advocates, a District Attorney and the t.v. media folks showed up to state to the Board that adults who committed these egregious sexual offenses must be called “sex offenders”. Juveniles however, because their brains had not yet reached maturity, could be called “juveniles who committed sexual offenses”.

It seems ironic that the title of this year's SOMB Conference should be: “The Challenge of Changing and Thinking Big”, when right underneath that title the same crippling designation, adult sex offenders, is used to identify who among professionals are likely to benefit from the conference. It stands out so clearly because of the distinction between juveniles who commit sexual offenses and adult sex offenders. While applause is due the Board for its willingness to give juveniles another chance, it is clear that correcting the language for adults would greatly enhance their ability to successfully re-enter society after incarceration. The procurement of housing, jobs and individual and community support would be simplified and vastly improved if the label sex offender, which indicates an ongoing condition, was not used!

The Challenge of Changing should perhaps be changed to “The Challenge of Thinking”, for clear thinking on this subject would point to significant research that supports doing everything possible to ensure the

success of re-entering society, because that success predicts extremely low sexual recidivism. Low sexual recidivism means reduced victimization and enhanced safety of all of us.

THINKING SMALL keeps us tied to old belief systems and closes our minds to the change that could truly transform our society from one that perpetuates recidivism to one that honors all people and assists them in being all that they can be!