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## Family Group Decision Making Helps Prison Inmates Reintegrate into Society

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Family group decision making (FGDM), known in New Zealand, the UK and Europe as family group conferencing or FGC, is proving to be a beneficial restorative practice to help reintegrate prison inmates back into society. This article addresses restorative FGDM/FGC programs in prisons in Adams County, Pennsylvania, USA, and in Hungary.

Beginning in New Zealand in 1989 in the youth justice and child welfare systems, FGDM/FGC operates according to the premise that the direct involvement of a family group works better to solve a family's issues than the efforts of professionals alone to solve those issues for people. A key ingredient of an FGDM meeting is "Family Alone Time," when the family group is left alone, without professionals in the room, to devise plans to solve their own issues. These plans are then evaluated by professionals for legal and safety concerns.

Community Service Foundation, a model program of the IIRP, provides FGDM conferences for youth and families in Pennsylvania. (Please see [www.familypower.org](http://www.familypower.org) for links to articles about FGDM/FGC.)

It Takes a Village, a private service provider based in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, provides FGDM for youth and families. Agency program manager Dewaine Finkenbinder began using FGDM with adjudicated prisoners in Adams County in 2003. Adams was the first county in the nation to utilize a cross-system approach involving both the department of children and youth services and justice agencies, said Finkenbinder.

In FGDMs at Adams County Prison, family members meet with the prisoner and prison officials. Prison officials have an opportunity to relate the inmate's positive behaviors and accomplishments during his or her incarceration, enabling the family to focus on achievements rather than the behavior leading to imprisonment. Finkenbinder said that this strength-based approach is proving transformational in Adams County's criminal justice system.

Finkenbinder discussed FGDM's impact for a family when the breadwinner goes to prison: FGDM meetings provide a structure for developing a support system to keep the household going. A children and youth (C&Y) caseworker approached Finkenbinder when a mother of three children was about to be re-arrested for driving while intoxicated and was facing 45 days in prison and 45 days' probation. Anticipating the family's needs during the mother's incarceration, an FGDM meeting was held to bring the extended family together to work out a plan, which C&Y accepted. The plan provided a way for the children to stay with family members rather than be dispersed to different foster families. After the mother was released from prison, an adult probation officer found her drinking – a violation of probation. Since a plan was already in place as a result of the FGDM conference whereby family members would care for the children, the probation officer needed only to make a call to redeploy that plan. The family was able to prevent a crisis.

The FGDM process also supports the needs of inmates entering the work

release/reentry phase of their incarceration, allowing them to spend part of their assigned work release time in their homes, so they can pay bills, make meals and otherwise keep their households going. Concluded Finkenbinder: "This is a practice, not a program. This is the way we do business in Adams County."

Community Service Foundation (CSF) and the IIRP have introduced FGDM to prison populations in Hungary, led by Vidia Negrea, director of CSF Hungary. (Negrea's first work with CSF Hungary was a two-year demonstration project with delinquent and at-risk youth [<http://www.iirp.org/library/csfhungary.html>]). She has since provided restorative practices training to thousands of prosecutors, judges, lawyers, probation officers, teachers and administrators throughout Hungary, using IIRP videos and other materials translated into Hungarian, as well as interactive exercises.)

In 2008, supported by the Hungarian Ministry of Justice, Negrea trained 20 prison probation officers (POs) in FGDM, i.e., how to develop a plan with inmates and their extended family for reentry into society.

Negrea said that there was some resistance to the training among the POs, who were used to a more authoritative stance. Of the 20 officers in the initial training, five were ready to try FGDM. Those five are continuing to spread the message of the success of FGDM and build their own network, showing key colleagues how to succeed with the practice and spreading FGDM throughout the prison system.

During the initial project 17 FGDMs were held and 16 plans were completed,

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including concrete postrelease strategies, with family members agreeing to take responsibility. The FGDMs improved relationships and increased communication among family members, between family and professionals and among professionals themselves.

Negrea has since trained 50 more POs in FGDM — at least two POs in each county in Hungary. About half the POs in Hungary are using FGDMs for inmates leaving prison. The referring PO works with a PO who's been trained in FGDM and who facilitates the FGDM.

Most POs are very impressed with how well the process is working with families, said Negrea. Before they used the process, they doubted that families would be able to deal with their issues. Before FGDM, inmates were too fed up with the system to make use of the services available to them. FGDM helped them view the professionals as human beings who might actually be able to help them. Also, since the families come up with the plans themselves, they are more motivated to follow through with them.

The first prison FGDM in Hungary was held April 2008 with a 38-year-old man with substance abuse issues who was being released after five years in prison. (His fiancée had been killed when he was driving under the influence, and he was sentenced for vehicular homicide.)

Negrea and a newly trained PO co-facilitated the FGDM, which went extremely well. "It was very emotional," said Negrea. The man's family was happy to attend, as they had not been allowed to see him since he had been incarcerated. His mother, sister and brother-in-law came, as did four of his childhood friends. Professionals attending included the newly trained PO, the inmate's new PO for home supervision, a prison counselor and Negrea.

The POs had these concerns regarding the inmate: How is his family going to

support him? What will be done about his unresolved issues? How will he avoid further crime and drug use? How will he earn money?

The FGDM began with a "go-around" (where each person in a circle is able to weigh in on a topic, uninterrupted). The group addressed the question: What has happened in the last five years (since the inmate had been in prison)? The group covered both high and low points; everyone related what had been easy or hard for them. The inmate's sister said it had been hard for her to face people in her village and at work because everybody knew that her brother had killed someone who had lived there. The counselor shared how hard the inmate had been on himself, blaming himself for what had happened. She also said that he had been easy to work with, and that he had been kind and helpful to others.

Hearing this, the inmate's mother began to cry. She said she knew that her son wasn't a bad person or a "criminal," and hearing the counselor confirm this gave her renewed hope and trust in him.

The professionals provided information for the family about available services: help for the inmate to find work, get drug treatment and therapy, for example.

His sister asked about services for herself for the trauma she'd been through regarding problems in her workplace. The family agreed to go to therapy together.

Before leaving the room so the family group could have their "Family Alone Time," the professionals suggested a main discussion topic for the family: rebuilding connections. Since the meeting was in prison, they watched through a one-way window.

After coming up with a plan — a long one including psychological services — the family presented it to the professionals. The inmate's friends said they would find

a job for him by the time he left prison, adding that their attitude toward him had changed because of the nice things his counselor had said about him.

The family had also decided to write a letter of apology to the victim's family, and his sister took responsibility to deliver it in person.

The new PO was very satisfied with the plan. The old PO gave all the inmate's data to the new one for the future. It was a very good transition from one to the other, said Negrea. Everyone who attended the conference gave it the highest possible rating.

In May 2009 Negrea held a meeting with about a dozen inmates who were about to be released from prison to tell them about FGDM, facilitating two go-arounds. In the first go-around she asked: "What are your thoughts and feelings about being released?" Some answers included: "I'll finally be free." "I won't have to share a cell or a toilet." "I can be with my children."

The second go-around question was: "Who was most affected by your imprisonment?" In their answers, said Negrea, the inmates showed that this was the first time they weren't thinking of themselves as victims, but rather about how their wives, children and parents had suffered due to their imprisonment. Said one inmate, "My boy is six; he was one when I left. He's in a bigger jail than I am. I know he's scared," and he began to cry. Realizing that he needed to restore his relationship with his son and be a good father, he volunteered to participate in an FGDM.

Concluded Negrea: "For me, all these FGDMs have been learning opportunities showing the huge impact such meetings can have on a family. Many of the families felt united again. At a minimum they realized that they could build a network to support them in solving their conflicts." ☉