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Group Conferencing gives victims a voice: Jesuit Social Services

On the six-month anniversary of delivering Youth Justice Group Conferencing in Darwin, Jesuit Social Services says increased satisfaction of victims with the justice process is one of the key outcomes of the restorative justice approach.

Jared Sharp, General Manager in the Northern Territory, will this week present findings from the first six months of the program at the *Victims Voices - Making Stronger Connections Conference* in Sydney.

Group Conferencing sees young people take responsibility and make amends for their offending by coming face-to-face with victims and others impacted by their behaviour.

“Each young person finds their own way of apologising to the victim. Some will apologise verbally during the conference, while others will take the time to write a letter after the conference. One young person was good at art and knew the victim really liked cats, so he did an artwork that featured cats as his way of apologising,” says Mr Sharp.

An outcome plan, which includes an apology, has been developed in all 17 of the successful Group Conferences facilitated by Jesuit Social Services since the program commenced.

Mr Sharp says it is significant that 90 per cent of Group Conferences to date have been attended by a victim or a victim’s representative. In cases where a victim has not been able to attend in person, the Witness Assistance Service (NT) has conveyed the impact of the offending on the victim’s behalf.

“Witness Assistance Service have been phenomenal in supporting victims in the group conferences, helping to make the conferences safe and ensuring the victim’s voice is heard,” says Jared Sharp, General Manager Northern Territory.

Research shows that Group Conferencing is a highly successful way of engaging victims in justice processes, and produces high rates of victim satisfaction.

“Group Conferences challenge a young person to face their victim, something that many young people find harder than going to court,” said Mr Sharp.

Jesuit Social Services also commends the Northern Territory Government and Territory Families for investing in this program - the first court referred group conferencing program in the Northern Territory.

Mr Sharp says there is scope for the program to be expanded across the Territory.

“We would like to see this process become a common justice response for youth offending – to give victims a voice and to help young people understand the impact of their offending. And with programs now up and running in Darwin and Palmerston, we would like to see this expanded across the whole Northern Territory.”

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