

REVIEW REPORT ON AVP WORKSHOPS

BY

ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT, NEVADA  
A PROGRAM OF AVP NATIONAL, INC.

AT

NEVADA STATE PRISON (NSP)

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Finally, the AVP Nevada team wishes to thank Rev. Jane Foraker-Thompson, Chaplain at the Nevada Department of Corrections, for her help in getting the AVP program started at NSP.

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## AVP REVIEW REPORT SUMMARY

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is an all-volunteer, community-based program offering experiential workshops that empower individuals to liberate themselves and others from violence. AVP is a national and international multicultural, non-profit, educational program with local programs in prisons (and communities) in more than 40 states, and in more than 20 countries.

AVP offers three intensive 3-day workshops. The Basic (Level I) workshop focuses on respect for oneself and others, communication skills, building trust and community, and cooperation. The second workshop, the Advance (Level II) workshop, goes deeper into issues of conflict by following a theme, such as communication, anger, or forgiveness. AVP sponsors further personal development by training inmate participants as facilitators in a third workshop, the T4F workshop. Here inmates gain a deeper level of learning by being part of a facilitating team, managing and modeling the complexities of the AVP workshop process.

The purposes of this four-year review are to: (1) assess the effectiveness of the AVP program at Nevada State Prison (NSP); and (2) make recommendations for expanding the AVP program within the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) prison system.

Since October 2002, an AVP Nevada team has facilitated AVP workshops at NSP. Through January 2007, AVP has trained 197 inmates in AVP's Basic (Level I) workshop, 92 inmates in Advance (Level II) workshops, and 26 inmates as AVP facilitators.

In interacting with inmate participants, our AVP team is seeing inmates integrate the AVP experience into their lives across several recognizable outcomes. Inmates report to us that they are using AVP practices to: gain greater self-respect, trust others, recognize others' viewpoints, have an enhanced understanding of their feelings and actions, perceive more choices, take greater responsibility, and resolve difficult issues by seeking positive outcomes.

The type of personal changes we are seeing are consistent with other AVP prison programs where objective studies have shown that AVP experienced changes persist in the AVP group, reducing prison rule violations and reducing recidivism following prison release.

Based on this program review, the AVP team makes the following recommendations:

(1) Seek the cooperation and help of the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) to make AVP a regular monthly volunteer program at the Nevada State Prison (NSP).

(2) Seek the cooperation and help of the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) to develop a plan to make AVP a statewide prison program.

(3) Seek to secure funding, with the cooperation of NDOC, to conduct an objective study of the AVP program's effectiveness in changing inmate behavior within the prison system.

From a program standpoint, we believe that the AVP Nevada team has successfully implemented an effective AVP conflict resolution workshop program in the Nevada state prison system.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is an all-volunteer, community-based program offering experiential workshops that empower individuals to liberate themselves and others from violence. AVP began as a prison program in 1975 in Greenhaven Prison, New York. A group of inmates asked a local Quaker group for training in non-violence to use in their roles as counselors in an under-age offenders program.<sup>1</sup>

In the last thirty years AVP has grown into a national and international multicultural, non-profit, educational program with local programs in prisons (and communities) in more than 40 states, and in more than 20 countries. AVP remains an all-volunteer program, and offers three levels of workshops: (1) a Basic (Level I) introductory workshop; (2) an Advance (Level II) workshop; and (3) a Training for Facilitators (T4F) workshop.

The AVP Nevada team formed in October 2000 when five volunteer facilitators trained in a community AVP Training for Facilitators (T4F) workshop in Reno, NV. In October 2002, the AVP Nevada team gave the first AVP Basic (Level I) workshop training at Nevada State Prison (NSP), a medium security men's prison in Carson City, NV. In August 2004, the AVP Nevada team trained a first group of 11 inmate facilitators in a T4F workshop at NSP.

### PURPOSES OF THIS REVIEW

Currently the AVP program offers six AVP volunteer workshops per year at the Nevada State Prison (NSP).

The purposes of this four-year program review are to:

- (1) Assess the effectiveness of the AVP program at NSP; and
- (2) Make recommendations for expanding the AVP program within the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) prison system.

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<sup>1</sup> The AVP Basic (Level I) Manual, 2002 Revision, gives the history of AVP on pp. A-2 & A-3. The Manual is available from AVP/USA. See [www.avpusa.org](http://www.avpusa.org).

## 2. BACKGROUND

In order to assess the effectiveness of AVP workshops at NSP, the AVP team thought it was important to undertake an assessment process that is consistent with the philosophy, goals and objectives of AVP. As an AVP workshop team, we want to be clear about our process and the outcomes we are seeking in our workshops.

In order to explain how AVP works, the AVP team also thought it was important to clear up a common misperception about AVP.

### A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT AVP

Since many prison programs center around treatment, it is natural to view AVP as another treatment program where “experts” impart some knowledge or instructions about non-violence to inmates in a classroom setting.

However, we in AVP do not view violence as a disease, and AVP is not a treatment program. AVP is about personal growth, change and transformation. AVP creates a community environment where personal change can take place. AVP’s learning mode is personal experience.

In order to understand AVP, and more importantly “where AVP is coming from” in its strategy to reduce violence, we think it helps to review AVP’s philosophy, goals, and workshop objectives.

### AVP PHILOSOPHY AND GOALS<sup>2</sup>

AVP is an organization of volunteers offering experiential workshops that empower individuals to liberate themselves and others from the burden of violence. Our fundamental belief is that there is a power for peace and good in everyone, and that this power has the ability to transform people and situations.

AVP is working towards the creation of a non-violent civil society. Our goal is to reduce the level of violence by reducing the need to resort to violence as a solution to conflict situations. Our AVP process uses the life experiences of workshop participants as our main learning resource, drawing on that experience to deal constructively with the violence in our lives.

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<sup>2</sup> The AVP Basic Manual, 2002 Revision, gives AVP’s Mission and Workshop Model on pp. A-4 & A-5. The Manual is available from AVP/USA. See [www.avpusa.org](http://www.avpusa.org).

## AVP WORKSHOPS<sup>3</sup>

AVP workshops have been developed through the contributions of numerous facilitators over the last 30 years. This wisdom is captured in the AVP workshop manuals. AVP manuals stress that AVP is concerned with process rather than content. AVP manuals provide a mix of group exercises and games designed to create an environment of community and trust that allows participants to experience the ways of non-violence. This AVP structure and process provides for experiential learning. An essential ingredient to this process is that participation is voluntary, both for workshop participants and facilitators. AVP facilitators take part in the workshop's activities and exercises, so that everyone present is both teacher and learner. Matters shared in AVP workshops are confidential.

Each AVP workshop is an intensive 3-day (21-hour) workshop and has four main goals:

(1) To cultivate a climate of affirmation and openness and a sense of self-worth and the worth of others among the participants;

(2) To build a community among its participants, one in which mutual trust and sharing is possible;

(3) To facilitate overcoming those communication barriers which lead to thoughtlessness and intolerance;

(4) To facilitate some basic approaches toward resolving conflicts so that the needs and interests of all conflicting parties are accommodated.

There is a progressive nature to the three main workshops. The Basic (Level I) workshop focuses on respect for oneself and others, communication skills, building trust and community, and co-operation. It lets participants begin to practice specific conflict resolution skills through role-plays. The second workshop, the Advance (Level II) workshop, provides an opportunity to go deeper into issues of conflict by following a theme. Typically, this theme might be communication, anger, stereotyping, power, or forgiveness.

AVP sponsors further personal development by offering the opportunity to train as a facilitator in the third workshop, the T4F workshop. Here participants can experience a deeper level of learning by being part of a facilitating team and learning to manage and model the complexities of the AVP workshop process. On average it takes apprenticing in about six workshops before a new facilitator becomes confident and competent in working with and leading the AVP process.

## MODEL FOR CHANGE IN AVP

In order to measure AVP's effectiveness in the complex learning environment that AVP creates, the AVP team felt that we needed some model of the AVP workshop process. Given AVP's process, what outcomes do we look to observe?

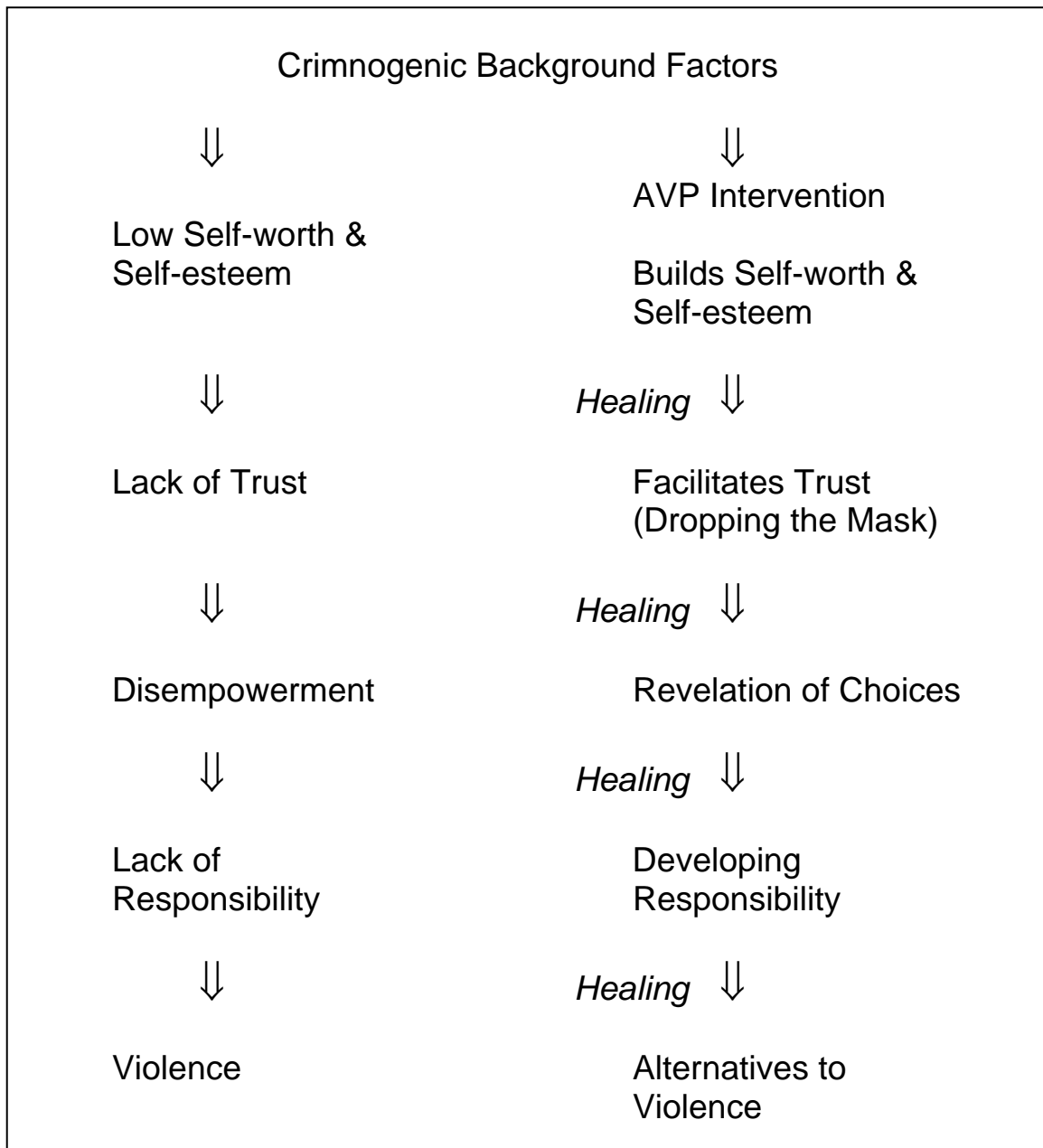
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<sup>3</sup> This AVP workshop description is taken from B. Phillips. (2002). *An Evaluation of AVP Workshops in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, pp. 5-7.

The AVP team is using a pilot research study of AVP participants done by M. Bitel in three British prisons to organize our observations on the effectiveness of our AVP workshops.

The figure below shows Bitel's model for change generated by the AVP workshop process. Based on this model, Bitel measured ten outcomes arising from the AVP Basic (I) workshop process. These outcomes were broadly grouped into four themes: self-esteem; communication and relating to people; choice and change; and problem solving.

MODEL FOR CHANGE IN AVP<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> M. Bitel. (1999). The Alternatives to Violence Project: a path to restoration. *Prison Service Journal*. (123), pp. 9-12. Quoted in B. Phillips. (2002), Op. cit., p. 11.

## WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

The AVP workshop process provides for feedback on participant changes in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. These are changes experienced by the participants during the workshop itself, and changes experienced over time between workshops.

At the end of each workshop the facilitating team debriefs the workshop and makes note of changes they have observed in participants, or that participants reported during the workshop. The team does not retain any notes on individual inmate participants.

## EMERGING THEMES

What we are reporting in this AVP program review are general themes, what we are calling “emerging themes” of personal growth and change, which we have observed and which inmates have reported about their experience of the AVP program. We have organized these themes along the lines suggested by Bitel’s model (above) of the AVP process.

### 3. WORKSHOP REVIEW & EMERGING THEMES

Since its start with a Basic (I) workshop in October 2002, the AVP program has given a total of 17 volunteer workshops through January 2007 at NSP. The table below lists the workshops by type and number of inmate participants. A total of 197 inmates have completed the Basic (I) workshop; 92 (47%) have gone on to complete an Advance (II) workshop and 26 (13%) have gone on to complete a Training for Facilitators (T4F) workshop.

The current AVP program at NSP offers six workshops per year at NSP in a cycle of two Basic workshops followed by one Advance workshop. The scheduling and the number of participants in a T4F workshop depends on how many inmate facilitators we can accommodate in the program. Each Basic and Advance workshop has 20 volunteer inmate participants. Each workshop facilitating team is usually made up of three outside volunteers and three inmate volunteers.

In its current program form, the movement of inmate participants through the AVP program is set more by our program schedule and cycle than any other factor. At present, the demand (inmate volunteer requests) for our workshops exceeds our supply of workshops. For example, the fact that roughly 50% of the inmates move on from a Basic (I) to an Advance (II) workshop simply reflects the limits set by our program workshop cycle. In the same way, our training of inmate facilitators is limited to maintaining an active group of about 20 inmate facilitators.

#### NUMBER OF INMATE PARTICIPANTS BY AVP WORKSHOP TYPE AT NSP 2002 - 2007

	Basic (I)	Advance (II)	T4F
Number of Workshops	10	5	2
Number of Inmates	197	92 (47%)	26 (13%)

Outside volunteers, who train in the AVP program at NSP, take and are participants in the same workshops as volunteer inmate participants.

## EMERGING THEMES

Our AVP team knows that inmate participants find the AVP workshops helpful because of the high demand and the positive attitude that they have towards the workshops. Inmates receive no merit credit for the workshops.

The question we are asking in this review is: In what ways are AVP workshops helpful to inmates?

### SELF-ESTEEM

The first and most noticeable effect of an AVP workshop is an increased sense of self-esteem in the inmate participants. The first exercise in the Basic workshop starts a process of affirmation and self-respect that continues throughout the AVP workshops. The changes we observe are changes in self-perception where the participants see their own self-worth as a human worth separate from their own bad choices and actions. More often than not, this change in perception is expressed as a form of knowing “that I am not a bad person”, and “that I have made some bad choices”. An understanding of a direction or a next step, of “a need to grow”, often follows such expressions. Forming a sense of self-respect is the first step in an empowerment process generated within the AVP workshop.

### COMMUNICATION AND RELATING TO PEOPLE

AVP facilitates developing communication skills, particularly listening skills. As a team, we are able to observe changes in participants as they develop these skills. These changes are part of a complex process. We can, however, see three clusters of changes: (1) developing trust; (2) seeing other’s viewpoints; and (3) gaining an understanding of feelings and actions.

Trust is the most difficult issue faced by inmate participants in changing how they communicate. The AVP workshops generate a sufficient sense of community and safety so that the participants can, in their words “open up”, and talk about themselves. We can observe this change directly by the energy level and intensity of conversations in the workshop, but more importantly by changes in perception of what it means to risk trusting – “like me, people need a chance to be trusted.”

With opening up and trusting comes the ability to understand another person’s viewpoint. Our team often hears comments like “I can open up and listen to what other people have to say”; “I can walk in another person’s shoes, if only for a day”; and importantly, “I can truly listen to the other person and understand how they feel”.

With a shift to talking about their own and other’s feelings, we see a qualitative change in how the participants are communicating. This change is essential in dealing with the more difficult issues of remorse and forgiveness that each inmate faces. We hear comments like “I’m better able to define and identify my feelings”; and comments on understanding “how our feelings cause our actions”.

In our Advance workshops, our AVP team has a chance to observe that inmates are carrying over AVP workshop experiences into their daily lives. Inmates report that AVP has “helped change personal relationships”, and “helped strengthen my love for family”. For many inmates, AVP starts a healing process – “healing rather than playing the blame game” in their personal relationships.

## CHOICE AND CHANGE

With the ability and confidence to communicate more effectively, our AVP team sees changes in how workshop participants approach situational conflicts. The first change that we observe is an understanding that each situation provides choices and consequences arising from choices. Inmates report that they are better able to “stay open minded in a conflict”; “come at it from another angle, seeing the other side”; and realize that “the consequences of my actions today” will lead to “my tomorrow”.

Understanding that each situation provides for choices goes hand in hand with an understanding that “we all must accept responsibility for our actions”. Again, the team often hears that it is time “to stop blaming and start working on a solution. “

## PROBLEM SOLVING

Realizing that there are choices and consequences to our actions leads to seeking alternatives when faced with difficult issues and situations. In a sense, this is the end outcome sought in AVP. AVP encompasses this idea of alternatives with the phrase “think before reacting”. When inmates describe how they have dealt with a difficult situation, we often hear them refer to this AVP phrase usually in form indicating that they have integrated it into their own thinking: “It is better to stop, look, listen, and understand that it is just to react”; or, “I’m thinking before reacting and making decisions”.

To stop violence in any conflict situation, particularly in an escalating situation, a person must pause or hold the situation in order to create alternatives. This understanding and the ability to act on this understanding are absolutely critical to finding non-violent solutions to real life conflict situations. Pausing and stopping a situation is the first AVP intervention point in changing existing patterns and cycles of violence. The type of feedback that we are receiving from workshop participants shows quite clearly that they understand this point.

When our AVP team asks workshop participants what they find most helpful about AVP workshops, we often are surprised at the depth of the feedback that we receive. Among the most telling comments are those that reflect an understanding that the participant has experienced change and expects further change. We often hear comments like “the experience was life-changing”, or more simply “that I can change”. Our team takes these types of comments as an indication that the participant has an understanding that he can change both his life and how he deals with conflict situations to seek more positive outcomes.

## 4. AVP'S LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Our AVP team understands the limitations on the type of qualitative observations, which we are making in this review. Our program at NSP is a relatively young program. However, the types of changes we are observing are consistent with those seen in other more established AVP programs where objective studies have shown long-term changes arising from AVP experienced workshops.

The questions we might ask then are: do AVP experienced changes persist? And, more importantly, do they carry over when an inmate is released?

Here we would like to cite two studies on AVP's long-term effects in the Delaware prison system. These studies were done on an AVP program at the Delaware Correctional Center (DCC). This is a medium security prison with 1,000 inmates. Its profile is similar to NSP with regards to violent crimes and lengths of sentences. The AVP program at DCC was at least 10 years old at the time of the studies.

### EFFECTS ON WRITE-UPS

The first study by Stanton Sloane looked at the effect of AVP on behavioral infractions (write-ups) before and after taking AVP workshops in the DCC.<sup>5</sup> The control group was taken from a list of more than 400 inmates who had volunteered for AVP. The sample size for the control group was 37. The sample size was 31 for the experimental group, the group who had taken an AVP workshop. Half of the AVP group had only a Basic (I) workshop, and the other half had Advance (II) workshops. All the inmates were sentenced for violent crimes and most had multiple offenses. Most had sentences over 15 years.

Sloane's study results (below) show a 60% drop in write-ups for the AVP group, after completing an AVP workshop, compared with the control group.

### Behavioral Infractions (Write-Ups) in Previous Year<sup>6</sup>

Control Group	N	37
Mean		4.35
Median		3.00
Completed AVP	N	31
Mean		1.81
Median		1.00

<sup>5</sup> S. Sloane, (2002), *A Study of the Effectiveness of Alternatives to Violence Workshops in a Prison System*. This study is available from AVP/USA. See [www.avpusa.org](http://www.avpusa.org).

<sup>6</sup> S. Sloane, p. 10. The results are valid at a 95% confidence level ( $p < 0.05$ ).

As Sloane suggests in discussing these results, behavioral infractions (write-ups) are a good, robust measure of behavioral changes. Write-ups represent a broad spectrum of misbehavior ranging from relatively minor rule infractions, like possessing contraband, to violent interactions with other inmates or correctional officers.<sup>7</sup>

If you look at the type changes our team is reporting qualitatively in this review, particularly changes in attitude and confidence in communicating with others, these are just the set of social skills that allow an inmate to successfully change his behavior across the range of situations he encounters in the prison environment. In a series of interviews with inmates after the study, Sloane reported that inmates had: developed self-respect and respect for others; developed communication skills; had expressed undertaking alternative approaches to conflict situations; and that AVP had established a reinforcing social community within the institution.<sup>8</sup>

### EFFECTS ON RECIDIVISM

In 2005, Marsha Miller and John Shuford reported on the effects of AVP workshops on the recidivism rate at the Delaware Correctional Center (DCC).<sup>9</sup> Miller and Shuford studied the one-, two-, and three-year post-release conviction rates and parole and probation violations of 175 men who had taken AVP workshops in the Correctional Center in the ten years prior to the study. They measured both the total return rate and the recidivism rate. As a control group, Miller and Shuford used a DCC Life Skills program group with a sample of 34 men. Like AVP, the DCC Life Skills program was a volunteer program

Miller and Shuford's study results for total return rates are given below. In their study measure, the total return rate includes both re-offending convictions and all rule violations of parole or probation. The AVP group showed a cumulative three-year total return rate of 46.9%, a decrease of 44% measured against a DCC Like Skills group total return rate of 70.8%.

#### Comparative Cumulative Back to Prison Rates <sup>10</sup>

Control Group	45.8%	62.5%	70.8%
AVP Group	28.0%	40.1%	46.9%
	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year

<sup>7</sup> S. Sloane, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> M. Miller and J. Shuford. (2005). *The Alternatives to Violence Project in Delaware: A Three-year Cumulative Recidivism Study*. Available from the national AVP website [www.avpusa.org](http://www.avpusa.org).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 8

Separating out the technical violations from re-offending, Miller and Shuford reported the recidivism (re-offending) rate for the two groups. Their results are shown in the next table.

Roughly the same relation held for the recidivism rates between the AVP group and the control group. The AVP group showed a three-year recidivism rate of 31.3%, a drop of 47% compared to the control group rate of 58.3 %.

### Comparative Cumulative Recidivism Rates <sup>11</sup>

Control Group	20.8%	37.5%	58.3%
AVP Group	10.3%	24.7%	31.1%
	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year

Miller and Shuford also reported on the violent felony recidivism rate for the AVP group. Since AVP attempts to effect changes in violent behavior, we have an interest in looking at the violent re-offending rate. The table below shows the violent re-offending rate for the AVP group after three years is 5.7%, indicating a large majority of the re-offenses were non-violent.

### Cumulative Violent Felony Recidivism Rate <sup>12</sup>

AVP Group	2.9%	4.3%	5.7%
	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year

Miller and Shuford comment on both the low 3-year violent recidivism rate and the lowering of the 3-year recidivism rate in the AVP group by summarizing:

“These striking results suggest that AVP is effective in reducing the likelihood of recidivism.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. ii.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### DISCUSSION

The major finding of this program review is that our AVP team is observing, and inmates are reporting, that their AVP workshop experience is helping them to take steps towards living in more peaceful ways.

In interacting with inmate participants, our AVP team is seeing inmates integrate the AVP experience into their lives across several recognizable outcomes. Inmates report to us that they are using AVP practices to: gain greater self-respect, trust others, recognize others' viewpoints, have an enhanced understanding of their feelings and actions, perceive more choices, take greater responsibility, and resolve difficult issues by seeking positive outcomes.

While the changes we are observing are highly individualistic, we see the collective responses as validating AVP's experiential learning mode. The basic idea underlying AVP's learning mode is that experience is a way of understanding how to respond to and act in life situations. Our AVP team sees inmate participants integrating and generalizing AVP ideas in a way that allows them to change patterns of attitudes and behaviors. The participants' self-reporting in our workshops' feedback shows that they are gaining some understanding of: community, communication and sharing, self-confidence and self-worth, and responsibility for actions.

### LIMITS ON THIS REVIEW

The AVP team fully recognizes the limits on the qualitative nature of the information, which we are reporting in this review. We are encouraged, however, that the type of changes in attitudes and behaviors we observe are consistent with both a model of the AVP process, and other objective studies of AVP-effects on in prison behavior (write-ups), and in lowering recidivism rates following release into the community.<sup>14</sup> For our AVP program, this type of qualitative review will have to serve until we can establish procedures and funding for more quantitative and more objective studies.

### CHANGE PERSISTENCE

How can our AVP team expect that the types of changes we are reporting will persist among workshop participants? We believe three factors contribute to AVP's long-term effects. First, AVP's learning mode is based on sharing life experiences. Once started, this process

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in section 4. AVP's Long-Term Effects, pp. 13-15.

continues outside the workshops. Second, the AVP program works with inmate facilitators. These inmate facilitators model and mentor the AVP process and create a self-reinforcing community supporting further personal growth and change. Finally, AVP is highly efficient at what it does. From a program point of view, AVP is a low-tech volunteer shareware operation.

Each AVP exercise has undergone hundreds of hours and, in the cases of older exercises, thousands of hours of inmate participation and feedback. Outside facilitators now share their team experiences on a national and international basis, creating new exercises, and revising AVP manuals and workshop agendas. This sharing of experience is a continuing developmental process, improving the effectiveness of the AVP program in empowering personal growth and change.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our AVP team believes this program review achieves the objective set out in initiating the review to: Assess the effectiveness of the AVP program at NSP.

Our qualitative reporting shows that our workshops are fulfilling the AVP goals of: (1) creating a climate of affirmation, openness and sense of self-worth; (2) building a sense of community among the participants; (3) breaking down communication barriers and improving communication skills; and (4) facilitating basic approaches to conflict resolution.

Based on this program review, the AVP team makes the following recommendations:

(1) Seek the cooperation and help of the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) to make AVP a regular monthly volunteer program at the Nevada State Prison (NSP).

(2) Seek the cooperation and help of the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) to develop a plan to make AVP a statewide prison program.

(3) Seek to secure funding, with the cooperation of NDOC, to conduct an objective study of the AVP program's effectiveness in changing inmate behavior within the prison system.

From a program standpoint, we believe that the AVP Nevada team has successfully implemented an effective AVP conflict resolution workshop program in the Nevada state prison system.