Harm Free Zone Project
General Framework

Community accountability refers to the ability and desire of community members to adopt a harm-free way of thinking. This includes developing the mechanisms to prevent harm, to intervene directly when harm occurs, to repair harm amongst community members, and to transform individual and collective relationships.

Autonomous communities deal with intra-social/intra-communal/inter-personal harm[1] as communities and without the intervention of representatives of the state. Their way of dealing with social harm does not mimic but disrupts the manner in which the state deals with us and our communities. Community health and strength guide the processes of handling social harm.

The Prison Industrial Complex refers to the combination of prisons, police, companies building and servicing prisons and the aspects of the legal system that have created the biggest population of prisoners than at any time in history.

The creation of Harm Free Zones is the historical process of building community autonomy and self-determination in the struggle to abolish the prison industrial complex, and to transform our ways of treating each other, and is inseparable from the process of community building.

It is clear that this process cannot be accomplished by individuals in isolation. That is the most important difference between a Harm Free Zone and attempts to deal with social harm by holding individuals accountable in isolation from community.

To abolish the prison industrial complex is to end the violent power relations making up the society in which we live. The struggle against the prison industrial complex is thus also a struggle to transform the relations among those most harshly affected by it: those who make up communities of the oppressed.

To achieve community autonomy is to create communities that are independent of the oppressive state and have the ability to determine their own direction. As autonomous communities we stand in a greatly improved position to abolish the prison industrial complex in our society. That is because, as autonomous communities we are not ruled in our relations to each other by racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other oppressive aspects of society. Thus our vision is clearer and we are stronger as collectives. To the

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1 By "inter-personal harm" we mean a harm done to a person by another (for example someone beating someone else). By "intra-communal harm" we mean harms done to community members that a community condones by doing nothing about it (for example, the communal silence that surrounds incest), or harms that are perpetrated by the community on its members often with the backup of the state (for example ostracizing members of gangs). Intra-social harms refers to harms perpetrated by the larger society either directly or through condoning harms perpetrated by individuals, groups, communities, or the state (for example: creating health risks through pollution; massive sterilization of people of color; or racism, which is a harm that is done person to person, by the state, by groups, and in the organization of the economy). Often inter-personal harm is possible because it occurs within a communal and social environment that backs up, or calls forth, or even rewards it. It is important that as we intervene in particular cases of harm, we do not focus solely on the inter-personal, but also on the intra-communal, and intra-social factors.

extent that racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression are internalized by the community members and organize our relations to each other, community autonomy has not been achieved.

Achieving community autonomy requires that we transform our selves, our relations to each other, and our communities. Thus it requires that we deal day to day and in the long range with the internalization of oppression: of the ways of seeing and treating each other that the state has devised for us. It also requires that we move from internalizing oppression to positive visions of each other as those who make possible and benefit from an autonomous community.

What is Community?

By "communities" of the oppressed we mean communities of shared daily living, or of shared history, or of shared identity, or of shared struggle or of shared resistance, or of shared visions. We often begin with communities that are at present not united or in solidarity, but fragmented, dispersed, and often not self-aware as communities. Solidarity is born of community investment. Community members experience degrees and forms of investment in a community: they experience a sense of place, of belonging, of support, of companionship, of shared strategies for survival, and, not infrequently, of shared identity.

When we think of particular communities as we are in the process of creating Harm Free Zones we ask:

How large is the community? Does it have more or less clear boundaries? If someone is mistreated by someone, how easy will it be to determine whether that person is a community member? How easy will it be to get some of the portions of the community together for discussion? Are there places for such gatherings? When was the last time that portions of the community got together for discussion? What is the relation between the community and particular community organizations? Do members of the community form part of the organizations? Do the organizations intervene in community conflicts? Do organizations have their own places for gatherings? Are community members invested in the community? In which ways? Do they rely on each other for help and advice? For childcare? To get things changed in the school, the health care they receive, etc.? Do people have a sense of the economics of the community? Do people know who are the people who hire people for particular kinds of jobs? How is money and other forms of support made? Where do people talk to each other? About what? What concerns them? What do they care about? Do they know that about themselves? To what extent do they think of each other as people they could rely on? What are the present roles of women in the community? Are women more active in community issues than men? How do the different groups making up a community get along? How do people get along with other communities?

In building Harm Free Zones we need to begin the process with some conversation like the one these questions suggest. The formulation of the questions needs to be an important initial step. These questions are not a measure of community, but rather of what would the process of building a Harm Free Zone be like or require given the answers to these questions. We can make this list a lot more complex and useful together as we attempt to identify communities that may want to become Harm Free Zones.

Creating Harm Free Zones

1. Community accountability conditions

The possibility of community members understanding themselves as accountable for social harms inflicted within the community depends on some degree of fulfillment of certain community accountability conditions:

> ➢ Community investment
> ➢ Ongoing dialogue
> ➢ Vision and Hope

The more autonomous, the more independent and self-directing the community becomes, the greater the degree to which these conditions will be fulfilled. The achievement of these conditions is itself a very significant good to any community of the oppressed.

It is very important to the Harm Free Zone Project that one see both that

> ➢ communities cannot be accountable if these conditions are completely absent. They cannot intervene, repair, prevent harm and engage in self-transformation unless there is some degree of investment, dialogue, vision, and hope; and that,
> ➢ the conditions are fully achievable *only* as communities engage in the processes that constitute them as accountable.

Thus, there is an important reciprocal relation between the processes through which a community is accountable and the conditions that make accountability possible. The more entrenched the processes become in the social fabric of the community, the more the conditions are realized, and vice versa.

Why are these conditions necessary for communities to understand themselves as accountable for social harms inflicted within the community?

Why would people who did not feel or have any investment in the community listen to and abide by interventions in their lives in the name of the community? They could well ignore the interventions as harassment or leave the community without loss precisely because they did not have any investment in the community. So, because one has a sense of belonging or a history with people or a network with people in satisfying important needs, one would be able to accept community intervention in stopping harm that one is doing to others in the community. One would be able also to see that something good can come out of the process, a good that is tied to changes in one self and one's relations to others. Further, engaging in processes of self-change that begin with recognition of harm is hardly imaginable without a sense of vision for the community and oneself as a member. But vision by itself does not motivate us to seek change without hope of achieving that vision. All of this is impossible in the total absence of dialogue.

2. General Agreement[2] and Boundaries

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2 By seeking "agreement" we do not mean reaching a contract, but rather to come to a sense of accord, of communal understanding and concert, to be in agreement.

The conditions of accountability are necessary because people need to be in agreement as to whether to intervene in the name of the community when inter-personal conflict or violence among community members happens. But coming to any such sense of agreement would not be possible without dialogue, investment in the community, and some sense of vision and hope. Unless people are in agreement as to how to handle this kind of situation, why would any one in the community, let other people meddle in one's affairs? Why would one put oneself in the hands of other people? The conditions of community accountability are necessary precisely toward the building of communal agreements that would make the community autonomous. Unless oneself and the people involved in the process of intervention had both an investment in this community and were in agreement as to principles for handling harm, the process could not even start.

We can see then, that beginning with an initial sense of community membership and investment, significant and ongoing dialogue needs to be initiated towards the possibility of communities taking this task on with seriousness. The coming to initial principles of agreement or accord is a necessity that requires community organizing, and the creation of opportunities for dialogue and grassroots education. The development of such principles needs to be tied to the development of an initial sense of vision and hope.

Once the group has worked on the conditions for community accountability to the extent sufficient for democratically reached agreements among community members to be possible, the group will work on the agreements necessary to create a Harm Free Zone.

The most General Agreement will begin with

> ➢ *an understanding of the harms that community members inflict on themselves and each other as a consequence of the social conditions that structure their lives;*
> ➢ *an understanding of the benefits to the community and its members from intervening, preventing, repairing these harms, and transforming the community and its members through these processes;*
> ➢ *a general and concrete understanding of processes of intervention, reparation, prevention, and transformation and their interrelations.*

Once the community democratically comes to be in agreement as to holding itself and its members accountable for these harms through the use of these processes, it makes decisions as to:

> ➢ which particular harms will be taken up by the community through these processes and which ones will not be: that is, the community will decide on the boundaries of accountability,
> ➢ how and by whom will the processes be instituted within the community and by community members for each kind of harm.

The Harm Free Zone Project is prepared to bring people familiar with the project and who are popular educators, know how to do participatory research, can reproduce booklets, questionnaires or other materials the community members and the organizations involved decide to use in reaching these agreements. We envision the use of small group dialogues, one-on-ones, forums, popular education workshops, participatory research, festive occasions to get people together, newsletters or bulletins with information, etc. None of these tools will be used without extensive discussion. At this point, what is

important to convey is that the members of the Harm Free Zone project are both committed for the long haul and that we count with a number of people already who are also committed to the project and are committed to contribute their work to it. Respect for communities, their members, their opinions, their contributions is a crucial attitude motivating this project.

3. Processes of community accountability

It is important to underscore the visionary step in these processes. We make that clear when we remind ourselves that the larger oppressive society inflicts constant, pervasive, and systematic harm on our people and communities without ever acknowledging its responsibility.

A community is accountable to its members through four processes:

- ➢ Processes of intervention
- ➢ Processes of reparation
- ➢ Processes of prevention
- ➢ Processes of transformation

These processes are to be understood as linked with each other in such a way that **separating one from the others changes its meaning and force**. It is crucial to emphasize that the spirit animating intervention and reparation is not a punishing but a transformative spirit, a spirit that both requires and creates vision and hope.

Because acts of harm can be ones that are repeated over and over by different people in the community – for example rape, beatings, theft – the processes of intervention can take the form of public communal denouncing of the harmful acts. In these cases, clearly, intervention and prevention are linked. Public communal denouncing done in connection with rethinking and changing how we treat each other is not the same as public shaming.

Let's take an inter-personal situation in which one person has harmed another, that is has acted in a harmful or violent manner towards another person. The actor needs to be thought by the community

> as inseparable from the community,
> as affected by a history and present of oppression that affect the person's beliefs, character, desires, sense of self and of relation,
> as not passive with respect to oppression, as capable of acting, desiring, believing differently and thus as capable of resisting oppression,
> as a mirror for the community,
> as holding promise for the community.

Because the actor is not just a passive receptor of oppression, we can hold the actor accountable for the harmful act. We can also hold ourselves, in community, accountable for the community's part in creating an alternative set of social practices, relations and institutions to the oppressive ones.

Both the actor, the community member harmed, and the community are taken seriously in these processes of community accountability. As the community intervenes to stop, repair the harm, transform each person, and prevent further harm, the particular people involved and the community itself go through a transformation.

The community's intervention *stops the harm*. It also *enables the actor to acknowledge the act as harmful* or violent, to *take responsibility for the act* in the face of oppressive conditions, and to *understand the relation between this act and the oppressive social context*. Going through this intervention process is itself one of the most vivid forms of community education available to us. The education involved in calling and stopping the harm is key in preventing more harm.

The interconnection between intervention and reparation also must be understood. Intervention without reparation leaves the actor without a deep understanding of the act of harm. To repair the harm means that the person affected by the harm must be placed in a position with a set of possibilities that go beyond than what s/he had before the harm. It is not just a question of going back to their previous condition. In reparation, the person harmed must be viewed by the community also as a mirror for itself, as a member of the community inseparable from it, as holding promise for the community, as someone who can be made whole, who can be placed in a healthier inter-personal, communal, condition. The work of recovery is a communal process of change, of coming to be a different place that takes up the wellbeing of each member. We can see then, the deep link between intervention and reparation on the one hand, and transformation on the other. But we can also see how the work of prevention is done too. Community members come to understand the long consequences of harming others; the significant work involved in intervention, reparation, and transformation; and they come to have a different perception of the harm itself. Semi-public communication and dialogue can reaffirm the work of prevention.

Community accountability cannot stop at intervention and reparation without transformation. Or, may be, better put, intervention does not make full sense without transformation since the capacity to harm and the harm done cannot be left untouched. Further, because In the process of reparation the actor needs to come to see him- or her-self as an active participant in this rebuilding of community for the person harmed, a deep transformation of the actor accompanies the transformation of the community. This does not entail that the person harmed needs to engage the actor, particularly in the early stages of this process, as the harm may have made that extremely difficult and psychologically dangerous. Finally, as reparation is done, transformation of the situation of the person harmed needs to go deeper than compensation since the life conditions and possibilities of the person harmed need to be altered in community.

We can see how these processes reaffirm ongoing dialogue, community investment, vision and hope. Thus we see how the conditions of community accountability enable us in community to initiate processes that strengthen these conditions which are, in themselves, indicators of community strength.