

# **Reflections from the Field: Hampden County Community Accountability Board Program**

By Mary Quinn, SSJ

“I am writing this letter so that you will understand how both the physical and emotional abuse that you put me through has affected me and how it will continue for the rest of my life.”

These words were taken from a letter written by “Cindy” to her boyfriend “Joe” as part of the Hampden County Community Accountability Board Program. This restorative justice program has offenders who are in the pre-release stage of their incarceration meet in this small groups of community volunteers on a monthly basis. The volunteers work with the offenders on four goals: 1) begin to repair the damage done to the crime victim; 2) make amends to the community; 3) learn about the impact of crime on victims and the community; and 4) learn ways to avoid reoffense in the future.

As an assignment related to the first goal, Joe asked his girlfriend to write him a letter, telling him how his drug addiction and violent behavior have affected her and their two children. The above excerpt is from a nine-page letter she wrote describing in great detail the fear and pain that his behavior caused. Other work that Joe was given included speaking to a local youth group about the dangers of heroin; writing what he learned from participating in the victim-impact, anger management and domestic violence programs; and detailing a specific plan about what needs to be different in his life when he returns to the community.

Since its inception in January of 2000, the Community Accountability Board Program has grown from three boards meeting in Springfield to nine boards that represent the major neighborhoods in Springfield and Holyoke. These neighborhoods are those in which the volunteers live, and in which victims of crimes are most likely to reside. The offenders’ crimes have occurred in these areas, and they are most often the neighborhoods to which the offenders are returning upon release. Usually, the offender meets on a monthly basis for four months and is given assignments related to each of the goals. 120 offenders have participated in the program, and about 80% have completed it.

As the coordinator of this program, I have felt privileged to work with over 50 volunteers who believe in the power of the human spirit, that change is possible, and that community can be created in the midst of chaos and confusion.

When asked why she continues to be a volunteer, Beth describes