

LOCAL NEWS

Longmont stores refer shoplifters to new restorative justice program

By **AMELIA ARVESEN** |

August 19, 2016 at 5:42 p.m.

When Lonnie Hernandez nabs a shoplifter at Longmont's Kohl's, he doesn't yell, he doesn't use handcuffs and he doesn't drag them out the door by their ears like they might expect.

Instead, he sits them down in a single plastic chair in his hall-length office and, hoping for a candid answer, asks them why they're stealing from his store.

For those who seem to already be taking responsibility and feeling the weight of guilt, he introduces them to a jail and court alternative that he believes results in sincere reflection and apology.

"They're already feeling like the bottom of the bottom, so why would you want to make them feel even worse?" Hernandez said. "It could be a turning point."

As of Friday, a stack of 55 handwritten and typed letters hung from his wall by a binder clip. They were signed by former shoplifters who completed the program after they were caught. A whiteboard on the same wall showed a tally of shoplifting cases by month, marking 60 so far

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent.

[Data Storage Policy](#)

Hernandez, a Kohl's loss-prevention supervisor for more than seven years — three in Longmont — has been referring shoplifters to [Longmont Community Justice Partnership's restorative justice programs](#) for the last two years. He referred more than 50 of 129 shoplifting cases in 2015.

This July, to tackle the community's misdemeanor theft epidemic in a new way, the LCJP piloted a program called "Restore," which brings first-time shoplifters together in a circle with other shoplifters as well as police, store representatives, community leaders and even family members.

"For so many people, it's like, 'We don't know how to talk about what happened' and then it creates this rift in the family and that only leads to more social isolation potentially," LCJP Executive Director Kathleen McGoey said.

So far, seven shoplifters ages 15 to 38 have participated in two classes. In place of Hernandez next month, a Target representative is expected to attend the confessional discussion.

"Representatives from merchants and police report that their message about the impacts on the community become more real — and their input more credible — when they are given the opportunity to impart their message to a wider audience," McGoey said.

Last year, there were 71 misdemeanor theft cases — the most in history — out of 129 LCJP total cases (55 percent). In 2014, there were 46 of 126 total cases (36.5 percent) and in 2013, there were 33 of 137 (24 percent) total cases.

The organization's previous method paired one shoplifter with one business in a conference setting, though McGoey said it didn't accurately reflect the scope of theft's direct and indirect impact on the community.

"One of the main hardships for the community and for merchants is that it's not an isolated incident, but it's happening frequently at multiple businesses throughout the city throughout the country every day," McGoey said.

The Longmont Police Department acknowledges the problem with the group "Theft Watch," which is comprised of detectives, officers and stores' loss-prevention officers. Monthly meetings allow them to share trends and familiar faces.

Longmont Police Services Technician Alison Goodard said within 15 minutes Friday, there were two shoplift reports, including one for a repeat offender.

"Target just called saying he was here again and we finally caught him," Goodard said on the phone.

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Data Storage Policy](#)

[According to the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention](#), one in 11 people shoplift across the country and less than half of 27 million shoplifters have been caught in the last five years.

Retailers nationally in 2014 lost \$44 billion in revenue in inventory shrink — 38 percent from shoplifting and 34.5 percent from employee/internal theft, [according to the National Retail Security Survey](#).

“If somebody walks out of here with that medium-sized black tank top and somebody comes in here looking for it, they’ll go to JCPenney or Target,” Hernandez said. “That’s a harm that people don’t think of ... We’re not selling that merchandise.”

Abby Whipple, an LCJP senior case coordinator, said tax revenue to fund road improvements and other county projects also is lost. She said shoplifters don’t think about that drawback.

“While shoplifting is never going to go away entirely, hopefully we see a reduction,” Whipple said about the “Restore” program [first implemented in Fort Collins](#).

A Longmont father who accompanied his teenage daughter through the voluntary program two years ago — even before it became “Restore” — said it afforded them the chance to have productive discussions and find common ground.

“I told her and her brother, ‘I wasn’t perfect either and some of the things that you got caught for, I didn’t,’” he said. “ ... I think every adult thinks that, but you hate it when your kid goes through it.”

He said his daughter was involved in extracurricular activities and with a blemish on her record, she could have been banned from a highly-anticipated event. The specifics and the father and daughter’s names are not being mentioned to protect his daughter’s identity.

“I would occasionally say, ‘You know, you almost blew your opportunity to do this,’” he said. “Isn’t it really cool you did the program instead?”

Officer James Brown said he believes paying a fine through court is much more of a slap on the wrist than going through the program, where offenders have to talk about an event that led to shame and embarrassment.

“It’s a good way for them to atone for their mistakes and they can restore the harms without having to go through the criminal justice system,” Brown said.

Hernandez said he wasn’t always convinced the program worked. He said he used to see it was the “easy way out” of punishment. But as more and more handwritten letters addressed to the Kohl’s loss-prevention supervisor were slipped underneath his office door, he couldn’t ignore how it healed his own faith in humanity.

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Data Storage Policy](#)

He said he appreciates the letters’ grammar and spelling mistakes because he’s left with a little piece of them.

“I’m not looking for an apology,” Hernandez said. “What I’m looking for is the reflection letter. What would have happened to you if there wasn’t a program like this in Longmont?”

The letters, coupled with community service and activities to repair harmed familial relationships — such as helping a sibling or parent — often make up the three-month contract. In the end, the hope is that the offender feels like a productive member of society as opposed to a thief.

Eventually, McGoey said, they want offenders from the past to come back and speak as mentors.

“Your voice is important that we see you as a valued member of our community,” she said. “We don’t see you as bad.”

With Kohl’s, Safeway, Walmart, King Soopers and Target already referring cases to LCJP, McGoey said she hopes to see the smaller, local stores to tap into the resource as well, especially [now that the office is centrally-located downtown.](#)

“They may hesitate in feeling like just sending someone to court is the right option for all people,” McGoey said. “But for others, they might be looking for some opportunity for that individual to learn from what they did, to be less likely to re-offend and shoplift in the future.”

Amelia Arvesen: 303-684-5212, arvesena@times-call.com or twitter.com/ameliaarvesen



Amelia Arvesen



SPONSORED CONTENT

The Penny Hoarder Issues “Urgent” Alert: 6 Companies Are

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent.

[Data Storage Policy](#)

How many times have we fallen for this?

Join the Conversation

We invite you to use our commenting platform to engage in insightful conversations about issues in our community. We reserve the right at all times to remove any information or materials that are unlawful, threatening, abusive, libelous, defamatory, obscene, vulgar, pornographic, profane, indecent or otherwise objectionable to us, and to disclose any information necessary to satisfy the law, regulation, or government request. We might permanently block any user who abuses these conditions.

Brought to you by Prairie Mountain Publishing

Fred Smith Knows Real Estate

Owning a home can improve your quality of life, provide stability and give you a sense of control you just...

Trusted In-Home Care In Greeley

Cozy Country Care works with families who need trusted in-home care in Greeley. The qualified vocational nurses, CNAs and personal...

Now That's A Sandwich

When your sandwich is this good, you want a big one! Your Butcher, Frank is locally famous for their deli...

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent.

[Data Storage Policy](#)

Is Your Bank A Problem Solver?

Is your bank a problem solver? Banking can be simple. But sometimes it takes a personal approach. At High Plains...

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent.

[Data Storage Policy](#)

This website stores data such as cookies to enable essential site functionality, as well as marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website you indicate your consent. [Data Storage Policy](#)