

WHAT IS RESTORTIVE JUSTICE?

Restorative Justice is an alternative way of looking at crime that focuses on people rather than laws; obligations or responsibilities rather than proof of guilt, repairing harm rather than punishment. According to Howard Zehr, long considered the “grandfather” of the RJ movement, and a local resident;

“Restorative justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible”. (2002)

RJ is guided by a different set of questions than is the criminal justice system that is a reflection of its people focus:

- Who has been harmed? vs. What law has been broken?
- What are their (victim) needs? vs. Who did it?
- Whose obligation is those needs? vs. What do they deserve?

In the RJ movement, justice begins with a concern for people **harmed** by crime and their resulting **needs**. The legal system tends to overlook the victim’s plight in the pursuit of guilt. The next focus is holding the perpetrator **responsible** in a meaningful, productive way where they can learn the full impact of their actions. **Repairing the harm** done to the extent possible is the overall goal. This is done in a collaborative manner with all major stakeholders participating in the process and making the important decisions. In this way the people most affected by a crime are empowered to take part in the justice process and to assist in putting things right.

Bringing together the stakeholders in a crime for a collaborative process is called **Restorative Community Conferencing**. ([Click here for more information](#))

RESTORATIVE COMMUNITY CONFERENCING

Restorative Community Conferencing is a voluntary, collaborative, dialogue-driven process that allows individuals directly affected by crime to actively participate in deciding and implementing the response. It is similar to Victim Offender Conferencing but involves more people.

The “community” is that which is directly affected by a crime; for instance a school, a neighborhood or a church. Crime rarely affects just one person so the RCC process aims to give voice to all those who are impacted by a wrongdoing and have them decide the outcome.

Thorough preparation is key to a successful conferencing process. To this end each of the affected parties meets individually with the trained facilitator(s) to learn about the process and develop a relationship with him/her. When the facilitators feel confident that the parties are ready, a meeting is arranged in a safe space to discuss:

- what happened and what thoughts or actions led up to the incident
- how the parties felt at the time and how they feel now
- what is needed to repair the harm done (to the extent possible)

Those most impacted by the crime make the important decisions about how to repair the harm and create a mutually acceptable agreement. Possibilities include but are not limited to:

- letters of apology
- offender contracts to replace the victim's out-of-pocket losses
- community or personal service
- personal improvement classes and/or commitment to change future behavior

Evaluations indicate a high level of satisfaction with the process and a sense that justice has been well-served. Statistics show that when offenders meet the people they have harmed and have the opportunity to learn how their actions affect others, they are less likely to reoffend.

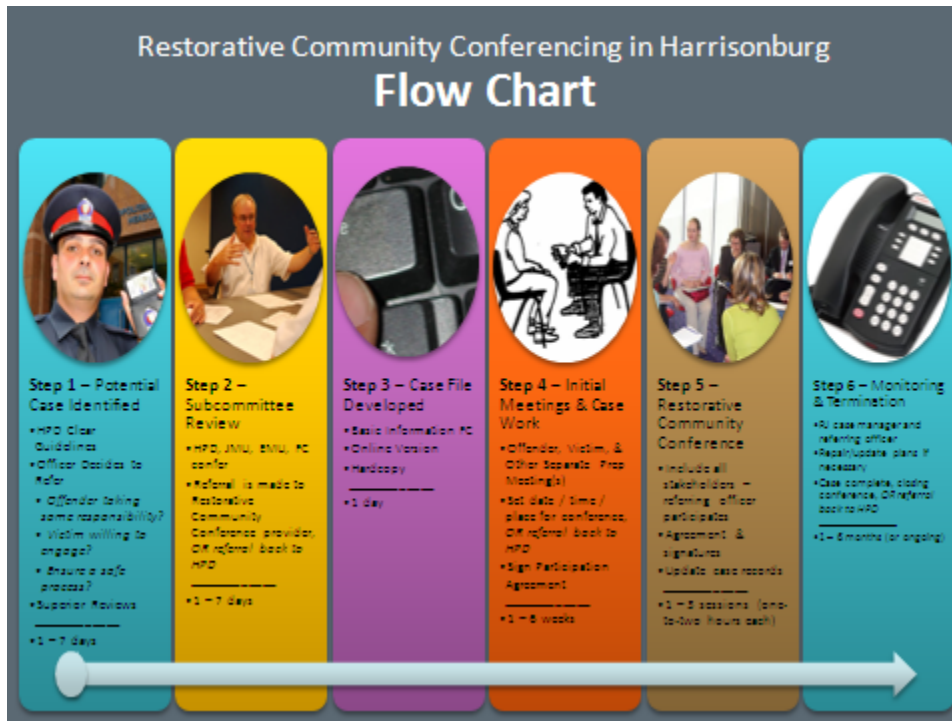
If you have been affected by a crime and would like to take a restorative approach rather than call the police, please contact us at 540-434-0059 ex. 3.

(The Benefits piece should come after RCC.)

COLLABORATION WITH THE HARRISONBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT

The FairField Center and Harrisonburg Police Department joined with personnel from EMU, JMU, the Commonwealth Attorney's office, local defense attorneys and city schools to create a community based Restorative Justice program in the City of Harrisonburg. Cases referred by the police department will be processed through RCC and where successful, no further action will be taken.

A team of experienced trainers from EMU, JMU and FairField Center have trained about thirty police officers and court personnel, and many educators in the basics of restorative justice so that they understand the benefits of utilizing restorative practices in the resolution of crime and wrongdoing.



If you have been involved in a crime and have already called the police but you are interested in pursuing a restorative approach, please inform the reporting police officer.

VICTIM IMPACT

We work with groups of juvenile offenders and prison inmates to help them develop empathy for their victims through understanding the impact of their actions on the lives of victims, family members and communities. This interactive program utilizes personal experiences, video clips, hands on activities, testimony by surrogate victims and self-reflection.

Statistics show that when people understand how their actions affect others they are less likely to commit further crimes. To date eight groups of youth have completed the program as well as inmates at two Virginia correctional facilities.

PEACEMAKING CIRCLES

Circles provide a space for relationship building, exploring difficult issues and problem solving in a safe, egalitarian, non-threatening manner. A Circle **Keeper** creates the safe space for dialogue to occur but does not direct the process. The use of a **Talking Piece** allows just one person to speak without being interrupted and for everyone else to listen in an open and non-judgmental way. All participants help create and agree to a set of behavior **guidelines** that meets their needs for safety and confidentiality.

Circles are an appropriate tool in a number of contexts, including but not limited to: churches, neighborhoods, businesses, non-profit organizations and schools.

The FairField Center provides direct services or training in Circles. If you have any questions please contact us.
