

## The Reality of Restorative Justice

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# The Community Restorative Justice Court





**Violence afflicting Chicago neighborhoods as reported in the media has devastated the morale of our city. Chicago is not alone, as the news media has covered similar stories of such violence occurring in other cities across the country. Out of shock or frustration, many have turned to the concept of restorative justice as a way to find solutions.**

## **WHAT IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE? IT IS A PHILOSOPHY.**

It is about building and restoring right relationships in our lives. It is about respectfully seeking to understand our differences so positive relationships can exist. It is about making peace so that we can live productively together. Its practices can be a path toward reducing violence in our communities.

How does this approach work? What does it look like? An example of restorative justice processes in action is seen in the development of the first Restorative Justice Community Court in North Lawndale.

This initiative is about the community of North Lawndale becoming stronger for its youth. It relies on the strengths and hopes of its residents and others who seek to make North Lawndale the best place possible for youth to grow up and become irresistible forces for change in our communities. Residents and others in the community, through the North Lawndale Community Restorative Justice Hub in partnership with the Circuit Court of Cook County, will create the North Lawndale Restorative Justice Community Court. The Court will serve the emerging adult population of ages 18 to 26, and is targeted to open in 2017.

### **North Lawndale Community Restorative Justice Hub**

The North Lawndale Community Restorative Justice Hub focuses the community's efforts to build a safe, healthy and thriving community for all. The Hub is composed of a collaboration of almost 30 organizations in the community. One of the organizations is the Lawndale Christian Legal Center headed by Cliff Nellis. The Hub is driven by the strengths, character, resources and relationships of the members of its community built over the years. The members work together to create opportunities and services for all, particularly youth.

The North Lawndale Hub is one of several other Hubs in the City, including the Back of the Yards and Little Village neighborhoods, and others developing in other Chicago communities. The Hub concept has grown over the years, and is modeled after the work of Father David Kelly of the Precious Blood Ministries in Back of the Yards. The concept is grounded in using restorative practices to develop and nurture the relationships among those using those practices to serve youth and their families.

### **Five Pillars**

The heart of a Community Restorative Justice Hub is its adherence to the five Pillars which guide the implementation of the Hub concept. They are radical hospitality, accompaniment, family relationships, relentless engagement and collaboration among the Hubs.

Radical hospitality involves providing space where youth feel welcome, respected and safe as they navigate the challenges facing them. Accompaniment is the continuing support of the youth by mentors and others as the youth face their challenges. Family relationships, an important part of our lives, is a focus of the relationships built among those served by the Hub.

The fourth Pillar, relentless engagement, is the advocacy by Hub members with systems and stakeholders to obtain the resources and services that are needed to sustain the Hub and those it serves. The fifth Pillar is in the collaboration and relationships among the Hubs allowing them to learn from each other, and to join each other in seeking and guiding monies from the government and profit and not-for-profit organizations to provide services.

These five Pillars focus the path of the Hub participants in building the relationships necessary to be of service to youth and the youth's community. The North Lawndale Community Restorative Justice Hub, already implementing these Pillars, is an effective partner with the Court to create the North Lawndale Restorative Justice Community Court.

### **The Circuit Court of Cook County**

The Circuit Court of Cook County comes to this partnership with a history of restorative justice outreach. Over the past 15 years the Resource Section of the Juvenile Court, presided over by Presiding Judge Sophia H. Hall, has promoted restorative justice throughout the City, County and State. Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans provided a full time Programs Administrator Minister, Attorney Michelle Day, who assists with the Section's work.

The Resource Section's restorative justice work, coincidentally, began in North Lawndale after the passage of the Juvenile Justice Reform Act in 1999. In 2000, the Steans Family Foundation, which was already working in North Lawndale, reached out to Judge Hall to partner in starting a conversation in North Lawndale





about using restorative justice practices. Together, and with the help of the Juvenile Probation Department and the State's Attorneys' Office, they reached out to work with community members and representatives from the schools and police located in North Lawndale.

The Resource Section also established the Citywide Restorative Justice Committee in 2001. The Committee provides a continuing and consistent place for persons interested in restorative justice to learn about restorative practices and how some were already using these practices in Chicago and Cook County. The Committee has been meeting three times a year. The meetings are attended by from 60 to 80 people, representing a wide range of participants including lawyers, judges, probation officers, persons from all levels of government, city, county and state, public and private organizations, faith based organizations, social service agencies and educational institutions.

The Citywide Committee has been, and still is, a learning community for restorative justice proponents. Members have worked together and with others to spread the experience and understanding of restorative justice philosophy and practices. They have created numerous educational conferences.

### Conferences

In September 2003 the first statewide conference, "Statewide Balanced and Restorative Justice Summit," was held in Springfield, Illinois, and funded by the Illi-

nois Criminal Justice Information Authority. In March 2005, another statewide conference was held in Springfield called the "Juvenile Justice Educational Training Conference." It provided deeper information about restorative justice practices such as Restorative Justice Group Conferencing, Peacemaking Circles, Victim Offender Conferencing and Restorative Peer Juries. In November 2007, the "First Annual Collaborative Juvenile Justice Conference: Connecting the Pathways," was also held in Springfield. Around this time the Illinois Balanced and Restorative Justice Initiative was established to focus statewide discussions of restorative justice efforts.

In Chicago, in 2010, the Citywide Committee hosted the "Transforming Justice for Youth, Family and Community" Conference. Inviting several high schools and persons in their neighborhood, the participants at the conference discussed how to improve relationships among them utilizing restorative practices. Thereafter, in June 2014, recognizing the fact that race and trauma are such a major part of serving youth, the "Conference on Race and Trauma," designed by members of the Citywide Committee, was held in Chicago. Other conferences, meetings and trainings on restorative justice have been sponsored by other groups over the years across the city, county and state.

This long history of educational and networking opportunities for restorative justice advocates and practitioners has contributed to the growing interest in and strength of the restorative justice

movement in Chicago, Cook County and Illinois. Many of the attendees at these conferences and the Citywide meetings occupy positions in the administrative structures of our City, County and State. They have used their knowledge of restorative philosophy and practices to advocate for and support expanding the use of restorative practices.

### The Restorative Justice Community Court

With the lengthy history of restorative justice work in North Lawndale and the City and County as a whole, it is no surprise that North Lawndale and the Court are embarking together on the journey to establish a Restorative Justice Community Court in North Lawndale. Other system partners include representatives from the County and the Offices of the States Attorney and Public Defender.

The Restorative Justice Community Court initiative looks beyond punitive processes. It incorporates restorative justice philosophies and practices into every aspect of designing and operating the Court, and serving the citizens who appear. Restorative processes will be used to identify harms done to those involved in the cases referred to the Court. The processes explore the needs of those affected, including offender and victim, and help them appreciate their obligations to each other. Then they work together to repair the harms done to all. This is the restorative way to hold all accountable to each other, and to heal broken relationships, rather than exacerbate the breakdown.

A steering committee has been established to design how the court and community will work together to engage all in these restorative processes. The committee is co-chaired by Judge Colleen Sheehan and Cliff Nellis. The committee and its workgroups include a diversity of life experiences and perspectives of representatives of the North Lawndale community, its elected officials and faith based organizations, school administrators, social service providers, police, and representatives from the court, the county administration, and the Offices of the States Attorney and Public Defender.

This inclusion of a diversity of the perspectives of the members of the Steering Committee and workgroups insures

that the work will be fully informed. This diversity is the strength of the initiative. To effectively engage their strengths, the members of the Steering Committee explicitly use restorative practices to reach an agreement on their values and the guidelines which will govern their conversations. Through the discussions, the members' talents are revealed, appreciated and utilized. Any disagreements are vented through restorative practices which require listening respectfully and speaking without interruption in the safe environment created by the Committee.

The deepening of the Steering Committee and workgroup members' understanding of how restorative justice processes build effective working relationships among them will give them a better understanding of how to serve youth and their families in a restorative way. Through these conversations, the members will be able to do their best work to establish sustainable restorative processes for the North Lawndale Community.

Some of the members of the Steering Committee are already informed about

restorative philosophy and practices from attendance at Citywide Restorative Justice Committee meetings, training and educational conferences. They have learned that the philosophy of restorative justice is both a public and personal path toward peace. They have learned that the restorative path eschews primal reactions of fear of those who are different. Restorative Justice instead embraces the belief that all humans are worthy of respect as members of the human family.

### Conclusion

Reducing violence in our communities by providing effective alternatives for youth and emerging adults at risk is an underlying premise of the partnership between the North Lawndale Community Restorative Justice Hub and the Court in creating the Restorative Justice Community Court in North Lawndale. Using restorative practices will ensure that service to the citizens of the North Lawndale community will be effective and sustainable over time.

A peaceful community is not a static state, but is the result of ongoing efforts

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by all of its members actively engaged in inclusion and restoration for the benefit of all. That is the mission of the collaboration that will support and sustain the Community Restorative Justice Court in North Lawndale. ■

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*Judge Sophia H. Hall is the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Justice and Child Protection Division of Cook County's Circuit Court. She also sits in the General Chancery Division.*



# VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

## Lend-A-Hand Tutoring at the CBA

321 S. Plymouth Court, Chicago || Tuesdays 5:30 to 7:00 p.m.



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