

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) is a way of thinking about harm and responding to crime that emphasizes accountability and repair. It is based in cultural practices that have existed around the world for centuries. RJ expert Howard Zehr says an ideal RJ process does these things: it names details of harm; addresses the needs of harm survivors; provides opportunities for people who caused harm to understand and repair it; includes people who have been indirectly harmed; and shows concern for everyone involved.

Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) RJ processes can be specific to victims or incarcerated people or include both parties. They are always voluntary. They never require victims to interact with incarcerated people, and they are not appropriate for every person or situation. Every victim's needs (for acknowledgment, healing, participation, information, or just being left alone) are different. Some victims need things no MN DOC RJ process can provide. Incarcerated people's needs also vary, and some are unwilling or unable to take accountability for harm they have caused.

Purpose

DOC RJ programming gives incarcerated people chances to show they understand, regret, and take responsibility for harm their violence has caused. It provides opportunities for victims to have their experiences and needs acknowledged, get their needs met, and participate in criminal-legal processes. It includes chances for community members to work with incarcerated people and crime victims in accountability and repair processes.

Programming

Most DOC RJ programming is either organized by staff and incarcerated people in facilities or initiated by victims through Victim Services and Restorative Justice (VSRJ) unit staff who work out of Central Office.

Facility-Based

Every DOC facility operates an RJ council — comprised of staff and incarcerated people — that offers opportunities including classes and speakers about victim experiences, trauma, healthy relationships, conflict transformation, and other topics relevant to RJ. Councils also participate in community service projects, organize fundraising drives to benefit community-based victim-service organizations such as domestic violence shelters, and donate handmade goods such as hats and scarves to the same groups. Some council members mentor incarcerated people in restorative work such as writing apology letters (a process that also includes facility caseworkers and VSRJ Central Office staff).

Victim-Initiated

DOC victim-initiated RJ processes include victim-offender or surrogate dialogues (face-to-face or written), apology letters, victim-impact statements, and other processes. They are all intended to meet needs of victims who are seeking information, contact with an incarcerated person, acknowledgment, interaction with DOC staff or community members, healing, or something else. DOC RJ staff and trained community members who co-facilitate victim-initiated processes start by carefully preparing everyone involved. Preparation can take months, and when victims want contact with incarcerated people it includes ensuring, as much as possible, that victims are not seeking vengeance and incarcerated people are willing and able to show accountability for using violence and causing harm.