



Funding Community Restorative Justice and Transforming City Government's Relationship with Communities

Executive Summary

In April of 2021, The Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) selected Restorative Justice Initiative (RJI) to make recommendations for an upcoming investment in "community based restorative justice" stemming from the city's plan to close the Rikers Island jail complex and fund alternatives to incarceration. We were tasked with creating a shared language and developing a process by which to decide where restorative justice practices could be implemented and how the funding should be invested.

During the consultancy, we assembled an advisory committee of twenty-two New Yorkers, most of whom are directly engaged in restorative practice, program design, policy advocacy, training and teaching in a range of settings within the five boroughs. RJI facilitated ten virtual sessions with the Advisory Committee, MOCJ staff and Council Member Stephen Levin. We also spoke with a number of additional community stakeholders.

Throughout the sessions, committee members stressed that community based restorative justice programs should center community needs as defined by community members; promote healing from harm (regardless of whether that harm fits within a legal definition of crime) and seek to address root causes; be grounded in the cultural practices and values of communities that have suffered historic and generational trauma from state-sanctioned violence; and seek to reduce and respond to violence at the community level in order to minimize contact with law enforcement. RJI therefore recommended that this investment prioritize community-led innovation, rather than supporting court-based "diversion" programs.

In addition, we recommended that an advisory committee oversee funding allocation decisions related to the community restorative justice investment, that both the application and reporting process should be substantially simplified, that MOCJ enlist a fiscal conduit to serve as an intermediary between the city and community grantees, and that a participatory grantmaking process should be utilized. Above all, directly impacted people should be involved in every stage of the process.

Finally, there was widespread agreement that the community restorative justice investment should include two broadly defined tracks of funding: one for organizations/programs currently doing restorative and transformative work, and the other for organizations and individuals with deep community relationships that can incorporate restorative approaches into the work they're already doing.

We recommended that the investment should support the wellbeing of practitioners, and that BIPOC-led organizations and programs should be prioritized. RJI further outlined a number of organizations that require funds to expand their reach, as well as a list of organizations that could benefit from training/technical assistance, in addition to an overview of next steps.

To conclude, we called on city government to engage in truth-telling and reparative action to end systemic racism and inequality by 1) acknowledging the harm caused by austerity measures coupled with punitive policies and institutions, and 2) taking immediate steps to divest from these systems and invest in programs and policies that repair. For far too long, city government has taken a deficit-based approach to BIPOC communities. It is time to adopt a strengths-based approach that recognizes and resources the wisdom, creativity and resilience of New York City's communities of color. For the collective benefit of all New Yorkers and the long-term sustainability of our city, we must embrace a broad cultural shift away from surveillance, policing and punishment to communal values of care, healing and repair.