

Community Group Conferencing Programs

Summary

Organization: Longmont Community Justice Partnership (LCJP)

- Program: **Community Group Conferencing (CGC), RESTORE**
- Location: **Longmont, CO**
- Established: **Community Group Conferencing: 1997, RESTORE: 2015**
- Cases per year: **80-100**
- Average case length: **Under 60 days**
- Average cost: **\$1,125/case**
- Caseload: **7-9% of misdemeanor violations in Boulder County - Longmont, CO**
- Impact: **Over 90% of contracts completed, 10% recidivism rate, and 95% of participants satisfied with the conferencing process**

Operations

- Staff: **3**
- Volunteers: **65**

Support

- Community: **65%**
- Government: **35%**

Impact Story - Welding Justice

“Mike” was an employee of a major corporation with stores in Longmont, CO. He was caught embezzling money from the store he worked at, and was promptly fired. His case was diverted to Longmont Community Justice Partnership’s community group conferencing program.

When he entered the program, LCJP staff used their “strengths-based” approach to learn more about who he was as a person outside of the crime he had committed. It turned out that he was an aspiring welder, and his dream was to weld pipes in Alaska. He told LCJP staff he noticed when he was working at his store that there were several cart corrals that had fallen into disrepair, and there was no one to fix them.

In the conference, Mike and his employer agreed that he could restore them in a way that would use his new skills to help the corporation he harmed.

Instead of being charged with embezzlement, Mike fixed all the cart corrals at the corporation’s stores in the area, restoring some of the money he took and helping him train for the career he wanted.

History of the LCJP’s Community Group Conferencing Programs

The Longmont Community Justice Partnership began as Teaching Peace, a national educational program focused on school bullying and violence prevention. However, after a few years, they felt like they were “expending our energy with this national effort and neglecting our own community,” wrote Beverly Title, Teaching Peace’s founder.¹⁰⁹ In 1997, Teaching Peace received a grant from the Colorado Office of the Governor and formed a partnership with the Longmont, CO police department, probation department, and school system to start implementing restorative conferences.

109 Title, B. B. (2009, March 24). *History: Our Founder’s Story History &; Operational Values Of Teaching Peace*. Longmont Community Justice Partnership. Retrieved May 2022, from https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b43b-22d266c074e470c4796/t/5e93ba3e21219916190b68f9/1586739776906/LCJP_Founder_Beverly+History.pdf

From these humble beginnings, Teaching Peace, now renamed the Longmont Community Justice Partnership (LCJP), has grown their community conferencing program from a small pilot in Colorado to national and international acclaim, presenting their model at international conferences including in the Netherlands, Canada, and Chile. To date, LCJP's programs have diverted 2,600 offenders from Longmont's municipal courts and Boulder County's criminal courts. Today, Longmont Police divert 80-100 offenders per year into LCJP's conferencing programs, just under 10% of Boulder County's misdemeanor criminal caseload.¹¹⁰

How LCJP's Community Group Conferencing Programs Work

LCJP has two community conferencing programs, community group conferencing, which is a facilitated dialogue between victims or victim surrogates and offenders, and RESTORE, a program that focuses specifically on reducing shoplifting. However, offenders for both programs come in about the same way.

Both store owners and the police refer offenders, what LCJP staff calls "responsible

persons," to LCJP through a referral form. If the police are referring the offender, LCJP also receives a copy of the police report. The first thing LCJP staff do is reach out to the victim. "We share with the victim all the options for participating," Dana Henderson, LCJP's Community Programs Director, says. Victims can choose to send the case directly to court, nominate a friend or family member to participate in their stead, or participate in the process themselves.

Then, LCJP staff reach out to the responsible person. "We're listening for what happened, and what responsibility they take," says Dana. Based on the level of offense, they'll determine which of LCJPs programs to send them to.

After LCJP staff screen the case, they hand it off to one of their 38 volunteer facilitators for the pre-conferencing process. The pre-conferencing process involves several separate calls with the victim and offender, and they look different for each.

Calls to the victim are primarily focused around what they need, how the process works, and what they are looking for to restore the harm. Calls to the offender focus on the process, but also who they are outside of just the crime. "During the time that we're

110 Rep. *Colorado Judicial Branch Annual Statistical Report Fiscal Year 2019*. 78. Colorado Courts, 2020. <https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/scserials/sc112internet/sc1122019internet.pdf>.

working with that responsible person, the volunteers in that pre-conference meeting are finding out, like, who are you? Who do you love? What do you think of, you know, what, what are your strengths and skills?” “That’s supporting this idea of ‘hey, we know that you are more than the decision you made.’”

When LCJP’s volunteer facilitators believe both parties are ready to reach an agreement, they will schedule a conference. At this conference, victims and offenders are encouraged to bring support persons, such as a relative or friend. Community members are invited to bring insight and voice impact, and the responding officer is often invited as well. “Most conferences include 2 facilitators, 2 community members, a responsible person, their support person, a police officer and a harmed party (victim) for a total of 8 people,” Jessica Goldberg, LCJP’s Training Institute Manager, says.

During the conference, everyone takes turns exploring what happened, who was affected and how, and what needs to be done to repair the harm. The victim shares how the crime impacted them, and the officers and community members give their perspective on how it affected the larger community. The responsible person answers questions the victim and community members want to ask. “The thing [victims] want most to understand is ‘why did this happen?’, ‘what did I do to cause harm to come my way?’ ‘Why did the

person decide to do this?’” Jessica says.

At this point in the process, the responsible person will take responsibility for the harm they’ve caused, and often offer an apology to the victim. Then, the victim and responsible person work together to create a “restorative contract,” an agreement on what the responsible person will do to repair the harm. This typically includes an apology letter, educating others on the harm they’ve caused, and may include some kind of restitution. At the end of the conference, they set a contract deadline, typically under 6 months, by which that harm will be repaired. “And then hopefully, there’s some work that follows and a celebration at the completion of that process.” says Dana.

Impact

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| \$1,125 Per Case | Under 60 Days to disposition | 10% Recidivism Rate |
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LCJP offers more than hope, however, that offenders will complete the process. Since 2007, LCJP has partnered with PenLink - a Colorado-based data analysis company - to track the completion rates of their contracts. Both youth and adults complete over 80% of their contracts, and their completion rate in the past 5 years is even higher, hovering at between 90% and 95%, Jessica says.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ 82 *Restorative Justice: An Evidence Based Approach*. LCJP, Penlink, 2020. <https://www.lcjp.org/data-penlink>.

More importantly, LCJP's responsible persons are less likely to reoffend after the contract is completed. According to an independent study by the National Research Center of LCJP's programs from 2007-2009, only 10% percent of responsible persons reoffended within one year, over three times less than that of the Colorado Division of Youth Services' 32% average recidivism rate in the same period.¹¹²

Satisfaction rates with the process for victims, responsible persons, and even community members hover around 95% as well. "I was afraid we were all going to be like holding hands and, you know, hitting the tambourine and singing and, and stuff," one of LCJP's police liaisons, Commander James Brown, says. "I can tell you, from a firsthand account, that the accountability that comes out of these conferences, especially for lower level offenses, is often much greater than what comes out of the criminal justice system. It would be much easier just to pay a fine than it would be to take the steps that often come out of these contracts in order to actually repair that harm and make a meaningful impact."

Another specific impact for victims, and even the responding officers who participate, is that they get to hear the responsible person actually take responsibility for their actions.

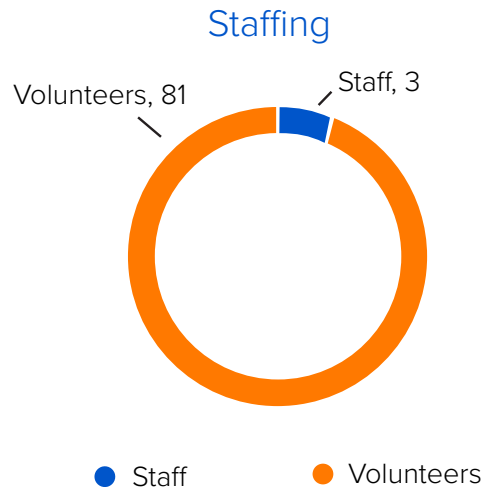
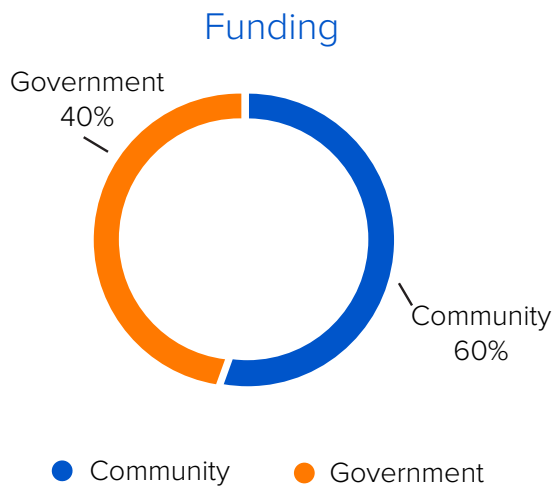
"One of the reasons why police officers have bought into restorative justice and have agreed to participate is because they go to trial often as witnesses, and they don't hear anyone taking responsibility. But when they come to restorative justice, they hear it," Jessica says.

Finally, Jessica says, their program helps preserve future agency for the responsible person. "If the responsible person gained a criminal record, they "wouldn't be able to choose the job they want, get the loan for school that they need, or be seen by their family in the same way. By having an alternative process, we've preserved that agency in their life for them." LCJP charges the responsible person a \$125 fee to participate in their conferencing programs, and the average cost of each case to LCJP is \$1,125.

Why They Work

Dana says the most important thing that makes LCJP's programs work is their relationship with the Longmont Police Department (LPD). LCJP trains each of LPD's incoming officers in restorative justice principles. "They're the ones out there doing the screening," she says, referring to the two criteria officers use to evaluate for potential diversion to LCJP's programs. LCJP has a

112 Rep. *Colorado Judicial Branch Annual Statistical Report Fiscal Year 2019*. 78. Colorado Courts, 2020. <https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/scserials/sc112internet/sc1122019internet.pdf>.



liaison team of 11 officers, and officers are invited to participate in the conferences themselves. “When police officers participate, their engagement in the process is what fuels their excitement and willingness to refer” Dana says.

Another thing that makes the program work is the dialogue between victims and responsible persons. “A court proceeding is set up to protect the rights of the people accused of a crime, so they don’t have dialogue with the people they harmed,” Jessica says. To avoid incriminating themselves, responsible people will often take little or no responsibility in a courtroom. However, the conference provides a safe space for the responsible

person to admit and apologize for harm. “The beautiful thing about it is that with greater understanding, with a feeling of safety there’s a willingness to be vulnerable, and accountability requires vulnerability,” she says.

Finally, Dana cites LCJP’s strengths-based approach as key to their success. When volunteer facilitators speak to the responsible person about the case, they look to learn more about who they are outside of just the harm they’ve caused. They identify that person’s strengths and skills, not just to make the responsible person feel better about themselves, but to create a meaningful restorative contract. “We integrate those strengths into meaningful repair items that can go on the contracts, because that makes a big difference” Dana says.

Funding and Support

LCJP’s community conferencing programs are 60% community supported, including voluntary donations and volunteer hours, and receive 40% of their income from the city of Longmont.

At a minimum, our programs require two full-time staff, but ideally 3 full-time,” Jessica says. LCJP staff do all the intake, assessment, case management, and volunteer coordination, as well as building relationships, maintaining relationships, and training with justice system partners like the police and courts. LCJP has 65 total volunteers, most of whom serve as either community surrogates, who represent the victim when they don’t want to attend a conference, or conference facilitators. The rest serve the program through administration, board, and committee work.

How to Implement a Restorative Conferencing Program in Your Community

The first thing LCJP recommends for starting a similar program in another community is patience. “It takes a lot of diligence to win over [justice] system-involved stakeholders,” Jessica says. LCJP uses implementation science in their training institute, which helps train other organizations and leaders how to implement LCJP’s model in their community. They estimate it will take about 3 years to get something like this moving in a community. “Having time is really necessary.”

For advice on implementing a similar program in your community, contact LCJP at <https://www.lcjp.org/>.