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## Our Restorative Justice (OurRJ) ..... At a Glance

**Who we are:** OurRJ is a nonprofit organization that works with courts, schools, and communities to facilitate restorative justice practices in Middlesex and Suffolk Counties. Our holistic model helps youth and their families resolve conflicts outside of court.

In Massachusetts, a juvenile record permanently impacts a young person's future and societal participation. OurRJ empowers youth to continue their education, move toward the workforce, and become engaged community and society members.

**Founded:** 2012

**Mission:** To disrupt the school to prison pipeline by helping marginalized young people and their families resolve conflicts outside of court through the use of restorative justice practices.

**How We Do It:** The conventional justice system focuses on proving crime and meting out punishment. However, the repair of harm is not part of the solution. This structure often leaves victims dissatisfied with the "punishment" called "justice" absent attention to healing or repair of the harm caused. OurRJ's approach focuses on understanding the harm and its impact and then working to repair it. OurRJ brings together youth, their families, and those impacted by youth offending, using restorative justice circles. This process includes:

**Referral to OurRJ:** From either District Attorney's Offices for delinquency cases or from the clerk's office, Department of Youth Services, Probation, Defense Attorneys, or Juvenile court judges for Children Requiring Assistance (status offense) cases (Middlesex County)

**The Circle:** A time-honored and developmentally appropriate facilitated process bringing together the youth, family, impacted parties, and community resources to address harm and devise a solution designed to repair and heal, rather than simply punish.

**Reparative Agreement:** Designed to acknowledge responsibility and set out concrete steps toward repairing harm, while giving young people the tools they need to meet their obligations and to address root causes of behavior.

**Closing of Case:** Upon successful completion of the Reparative Agreement and acknowledgement by the relevant juvenile law court or office, the young person's case is officially closed and either a lifelong criminal record is avoided or parental rights are not terminated.

**Accomplishments:** Since 2012, OurRJ has: **diverted over 80 cases** away from the juvenile justice system; **trained over 1,000 police officers** in restorative justice practices; **trained youth** in restorative justice and leadership; contributed to school climate & discipline reform efforts in **Lowell and Gloucester High Schools** after racially motivated incidents in 2015.

**Funding:** **2017 Organization Budget: \$129,000**  
**58%:** Foundations and government grants  
**27%:** Individuals and board giving  
**10%:** Other (In-kind, Fundraising Events)  
**5%:** Program fees

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## A Story

*Ashton entered the OurRJ program as a result of a school conflict issue at the end of his 8th grade year. Ashton was initially sent to the principal late in the school day for allegedly disrupting class. At the end of the school day, he was then pulled off of his school bus following miscommunication about whether he was supposed to take the bus home or wait for his mother to pick him up. At this point, a school police officer was called over. When Ashton became upset over what he felt was unfair treatment and unclear directives from school staff, the situation escalated, culminating in his arrest for disturbing the school assembly.*

*“When Ashton first entered the OurRJ program, I asked him where he imagined his life in five years. His response: **‘All of my teachers tell me I’m going to jail.’** However, by the end of our circle process, I could see a real change in him. After participating in circles, Ashton could actually see a whole group of adults that care about him. **More importantly, he felt he had a future.**” - Eli Plenk, OurRJ Program Manager*

Ashton’s pathway into OurRJ is a typical example of the way in which many young people enter the juvenile justice system. Minor school conflicts escalate and increasingly, rather than school-initiated disciplinary actions, these conflicts result in police involvement and arrest. For many other young people in the Commonwealth, the outcomes of their stories are often very different from Ashton’s. In communities in which OurRJ is working, economic and educational marginalization, along with school discipline policies that disproportionately impact youth of color, contribute to what is frequently referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” In contrast, OurRJ focuses on keeping kids in school and out of court. Our program transforms the way justice impacts young people and their communities, providing solutions and closure for both the young offender and the victim while helping young people take responsibility for their actions.