

# Executive Summary

Our Restorative Justice (OurRJ) works to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline that has become endemic in US cities, particularly in communities of color. In many cases, youth become involved in the juvenile justice system as a result of a relatively minor infraction, such as being verbally disruptive in a class at school. Once a young person is court-involved, it becomes difficult for them to break free from a cycle of surveillance, missteps, and incarceration, detention, or other punishment, and youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system have a high likelihood of remaining entangled in the criminal justice system as adults.

Our Restorative Justice has been working with the Lowell Juvenile Court System since 2012 to divert youth from the juvenile justice system into a restorative process. Restorative justice, as practiced by OurRJ, is a voluntary process in which young people accused of an offense, as well as those who were harmed, members of their community, and their support network come together in a "circle" to discuss the causes of that harm, what its impact has been, and how it can be repaired. After the initial circle, OurRJ staff and the other circle members work together to hold the young person accountable and ensure that the reparative work is

completed. For example, a social worker who is part of the circle might work with the young person to seek mental health counselling and to find a summer job through a local youth program. RJ thus seeks to address the root causes of behavior, equipping both young people and members of their communities with the tools necessary to avoid the same negative situations in the future.

Based on their experience working with individual young people, OurRJ believes that

restorative justice is most effective when reparative work can take place in the schools, organizations, and communities they are already in, and when it can connect them to resources that help address the underlying causes of the challenges they face. Therefore, OurRJ is seeking to

build a restorative justice "hub" -- or network of organizations doing related work -- that will embed their restorative justice work in the existing network of community organizations and resources in greater Lowell. Building relationships among organizations will allow OurRJ's model to reach a larger number of youth, and will also assist youth engaged in the RJ process in accessing resources that will complement their RJ work, ideally addressing some of the root causes of the harm they have

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caused and preventing future offenses.

This field project provides preliminary research for the creation of a restorative justice hub in Lowell. Our team's objective was to consider both best practices in the field of community organization collaboration as well the local context in Lowell to offer recommendations that are specific to OurRJ's specific circumstances and, we hope, will position a future hub for success.

Through a review of the academic literature focusing on hubs and inter-organizational collaboration, we explore different forms a hub might take, as well as best practices for forming and maintaining a hub. We have also undertaken an initial review of the organizational landscape in Lowell by researching a list of local organizations. We identified possible partners, mapped the organizations' locations to show spatial relationships, and used this information to offer some recommendations for OurRJ as they continue to conceptualize how a restorative justice hub can enhance their work and benefit the youth and families they serve

Our findings demonstrate that hubs can be effortful to build and maintain, and their best chance for success occurs when their membership and structure leverage pre-existing relationships and recognize the community context. Deep knowledge of both individual local organizations and their relationships with each other and the community are a necessary prerequisite to

building a hub that is lasting, effective at delivering services, and has the potential to make real social change. In addition, all members of the hub must develop a shared understanding of the available community resources. We've identified four key lenses that will help OurRJ consider how other organizations might participate in a hub: population served, mission match, services provided, and existing network. Through our case studies and recommendations, we've tried to demonstrate best practices and potential pitfalls for organizations as they begin to work together.

We hope that this project brings OurRJ one step closer to creating a hub that meets their organizational needs and improves outcomes for youth in Lowell.

We use the terms **hub, network, coalition, and collaboration among organizations** in this report. All have similar meanings, with some subtle distinctions. In our literature review, we use the terms used by each author we discuss. When presenting recommendations for Our Restorative Justice, we primarily use the term hub, their preferred term. Therefore, while we are not using the terms interchangeably, we are assuming that lessons drawn from one model can be applied to the others.