

Chair Steiner, Chair Sanchez, and Members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee,

We write this letter as members of the Racial Justice Council to speak to the importance of the Criminal Justice Commission's Restorative Justice Grant Program (RJGP) and to urge the legislature to allocate \$4 million for the RJGP in the 2024 end of session bill. In 2021, the Criminal Justice Reform Committee of this Council engaged in extensive discussions regarding the future of criminal justice reform and the path to a more equitable and effective system. These discussions and subsequent legislative advocacy led to the establishment of the RJGP, which supports community-based restorative justice programs that operate as alternatives to prosecution.

Restorative justice is a survivor centered approach to accountability that focuses on meeting the needs of the person who has been harmed and on promoting accountability for the person responsible for the harm. These programs inspire responsible parties to be active participants in their own accountability, by requiring them to face the impacts of their actions and, to the extent possible, repair the harm they caused. The needs of the survivor are centered at every stage of the process, which often culminates in bringing the two individuals together in a healing dialogue, where the survivor can get answers to their questions, express the impacts of the harm, and participate in the development of a plan for repair. When someone who has caused harm is required to sit across from the person they harmed, listen to their story, answer their questions, and make genuine steps towards repair, they often experience genuine transformation and engage in a kind of accountability that is not available in the criminal legal system.

In many ways, the criminal legal system does not inspire true accountability. Defendants are discouraged from talking to trusted friends and family members about their actions. Conversations about whether to plead guilty or go to trial have more to do with the state's evidence and defense strategy than with real accountability. The shame of a criminal conviction and the threat of incarceration often motivate people to deny their actions rather than to own them. Restorative justice invites us to recognize that equating incarceration with justice will only do more harm and will continue to entrench our society in a racist system that does little to inspire internal accountability and motivate genuine change in people who have done wrong. By focusing on the human impact and seeking to provide healing, restorative justice provides a pathway to true accountability and better results for everyone involved, including the broader community.

Though the restorative justice programs in Oregon are largely in their infancy stage, data from the state's few pre-existing programs demonstrate lowered recidivism rates as well as cost savings when compared to the criminal legal process. In addition, several of the funded programs are working in partnership with national experts to implement models of restorative justice that have proven highly effective in other areas of the country. Oregon is benefiting from state level collaboration between the funded programs as well as a high degree of national level support. The state is poised to be a leader in implementing effective and survivor centered approaches to harm that strengthen communities and reduce our reliance on an expensive and often times counterproductive carceral system that disproportionately impacts communities of color.

The Restorative Justice Grant Program has opened new possibilities for the state of Oregon. The RJGP made its first disbursement of grant funds in 2022, creating five new programs and expanding three others. These programs serve over thirteen counties and span urban, rural, and tribal areas of the state. District attorney offices and law enforcement agencies have partnered with community based restorative justice centers in these areas to create more effective approaches to harm that empower survivors and center their healing, as a means to achieving true accountability. The ability of these programs to continue building and take root in these communities will have a strong impact on public safety, while significantly reducing costs in the long-term. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, these restorative justice programs present an opportunity to develop an approach to harm that is equitable and does not replicate the racial disparities that plague our current system. The investment is modest (\$4 million), and the potential impact cannot be overstated. We ask that the legislature support healing, accountability, and effective public safety measures for Oregonians, by approving funding for the Restorative Justice Grant Program.

Sincerely,

The Racial Justice Council