EQUITY AUDIT OF VERMONT RESTORATIVE PROGRAMS

Equity Through Data, Justice, Inclusion & Education (EDJIE)

THE **CREATIVE DISCOURSE** GROUP

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About The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG)

The Creative Discourse Group, LLC (TCDG), established in 2021 and headquartered in Burlington, Vermont, is a Black+LGBTQ+Woman owned certified Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) co-founded by Dr. Nadia DuBose and Susan McCormack. We comprise a collaborative team of Associates, each bringing diverse identities, life experiences, and expertise in strategic planning, equity, diversity, and inclusion, community engagement, organizational change management, and systems transformation. Our collective experience spans the leadership of both concise, focused projects and extensive, multi-year initiatives.

At TCDG, we provide a comprehensive suite of services, including strategic business process consultation, organizational landscape analysis, equity assessments, executive leadership coaching, and shared learning opportunities through in-person or virtual trainings, workshops, and retreats. Additionally, our offerings encompass equitable community engagement, data collection, analysis, and theming, along with systems review and implementation support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Restorative justice, rooted in indigenous peacemaking traditions, has evolved as a tool to address mass incarceration and criminal justice reform. In the late 1990s, the Vermont Department of Corrections collaborated with local governments and nonprofits to establish community justice centers and reparative boards. By 2000, the Vermont legislature formally codified restorative justice, resulting in the creation of 23 restorative justice centers offering eight distinct programs, such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) and Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ). These programs, funded by various state departments, have contributed to a significant decrease in Vermont's incarcerated population. However, systemic racism and classism continue to impact who is incarcerated and who can access restorative alternatives. Despite the commitment of Vermont's Restorative Justice programs to pursue accountability and an anti-racist system, racial disparities persist, with BIPOC individuals making up a disproportionate percentage of the incarcerated population.

The murder of George Floyd intensified the focus on racial justice within restorative justice communities. Despite efforts to promote equity, challenges remain, exemplified by Governor Phil Scott's veto of H645, a bill aimed at ensuring equitable access to restorative justice programs. Additionally, plans to replace a women's prison and establish a new facility for justice-involved youth have raised concerns about perpetuating systemic issues. Factors like rising poverty, housing insecurity, mental health and substance use disorders, and an increased need for English translation services have further strained restorative justice processes, highlighting the need for more robust support systems to ensure equitable participation and outcomes.

In February 2021, Vermont's Restorative and Community Justice Centers drafted and signed a position statement on racial injustice, in which they committed to fostering a justice system that ensures dignity, safety, and repair for all. To further this commitment, they launched the "Vermont's Restorative Justice Statewide Equity through Data, Justice, Inclusion, and Education (EDJIE)" initiative which included contracting with The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG) to conduct a statewide equity assessment of policies and practices that contribute to inclusive and equitable restorative programs.

In June 2023, TCDG began auditing Vermont's twenty-three restorative justice programs to identify opportunities to reduce biases and inequities. An Equity Assessment team, consisting of EDJIE Initiative leaders, directors of restorative justice programs, and a community volunteer, was formed to guide and support this work.

To engage project partners, collaborators, and community members in an assessment process, TCDG utilized a combination of surveys, listening sessions, interviews, and a document review. The goal of the assessment was to understand the current culture, practices, behaviors, and

actions within the restorative justice community, and the community's funding structures, as they relate to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The report provides an overview of the methodology utilized in the equity audit, a summary of themes noted across multiple assessments, and specific recommendations to ensure that restorative justice programs are equitable, inclusive, and just for their staff, partners, and program participants, especially for BIPOC community members and other people who have been marginalized. Assessment responses reflect the work of specific programs and centers, as well as the agencies and systems that support these programs. It was challenging to obtain a proportionate amount of data for this audit from people marginalized by justice systems. Therefore, our analysis emphasizes raising the perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), people identifying as 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more), and past program participants.

Findings from the equity assessment are organized into themes that are internal to restorative justice programs and themes that occur in the systems that fund and support those programs. Themes included positive examples of equitable and inclusive practices, as well as areas for improvement and opportunities for growth. Differences were sometimes noted between centers or between affinity group and non-affinity group respondents.

Within restorative justice programs, all themes were noted as areas of progress toward greater equity and inclusion, as well as areas where more growth is needed. These include: Equity-Driven Organizational Systems and Culture; Diversity and Retention of Staff and Volunteers; Community Engagement and Relationship Building; Equitable and Inclusive Access to Services; and, Data Collection, Analysis, and Storytelling. Respondents identifying as BIPOC and/or 2SLGBTQIA+ provided specific examples of places where additional work is needed to achieve more equitable and inclusive access within restorative justice programs.

Within the systems and structures that underpin the restorative justice process in Vermont, this study uncovered barriers that significantly exacerbate existing inequalities and pose substantial challenges to the equitable implementation of restorative justice processes. Themes noted by respondents as places where there are gaps in access, particularly for those people who are furthest from justice, were around the following: Referrals to Restorative Justice; Policies and Statutes; Fragmented Equity Work; Misalignment of State Agency Policies with Restorative Justice Philosophy; Resources and Capacity; and, Data Collection and Dissemination. Again, BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ people identified specific ways in which the system designed to support and direct restorative justice in Vermont exacerbates inequities and causes harm.

Based on these findings, specific recommendations were made related to the following broad focus areas:

Internal to Centers

1. Equity-Driven Organizational Systems and Culture: Expand training opportunities, opportunities to build a more robust equity culture, and accountability measures.

2. Diversity and Retention of Staff and Volunteers: Improve recruitment practices, diversify volunteer pool, and enhance retention efforts.

3. Community Engagement and Relationship Building: Strengthen relationships with underserved communities, improve the referral process, and expand service offerings.

4. Equitable and Inclusive Access to Services: Enhance community outreach, standardize access protocols, and increase physical and cognitive accessibility.

5. Data Collection, Analysis, and Storytelling: Implement comprehensive data collection, improve data utilization, and incorporate participant perspectives.

Systemic Barriers

6. Referrals: Develop consistent, standardized protocols for referral to restorative justice to minimize bias and maximize access.

7. Policies and Statutes: Advocate for policy change, increase funding and resources, and enhance public awareness.

8. Fragmented Equity Work: Integrate and align practices and allocate adequate funding to support equity work across restorative justice centers and funding agencies.

9. Misalignment of State Agency Policies with Restorative Justice Philosophy: Advocate for policies that align with restorative justice principles of support and healing.

10. Resources and Capacity: Develop grant proposals, partnerships and alternative funding sources to increase financial support for equity initiatives in restorative justice.

11. Data Collection and Dissemination: Standardize data collection methods, identify biases in screening tools, and incorporate participant input into decision-making about restorative justice programs, policies and funding.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

In February 2021, Restorative and Community Justice Centers and programs in Vermont signed Vermont's Restorative Justice Programs Position on Racial Injustice, which stated:

> *"We seek to hold ourselves accountable and move toward a justice system that brings dignity, safety, and repair of harm for all."*

As part of this commitment, a collaborative of all restorative justice centers in Vermont, led by a six-person leadership team of directors of restorative justice programs, launched the "Vermont's Restorative Justice Statewide Equity through Data, Justice, Inclusion, and Education (EDJIE)" initiative. Through EDJIE, The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG) was contracted to conduct a statewide equity assessment of policies and practices that contribute to inclusive and equitable restorative programs.

This statewide equity assessment of Vermont's restorative justice centers is one component of a three-pronged initiative that also included the development, delivery, and institutionalization of professional development training, as well as the assessment of existing data collection and evaluation methods, and the design of new equitable systems.

In June 2023, TCDG launched an audit of Vermont's restorative justice programs to examine existing practices, policies, and procedures. The goal was to identify their impact and find ways to reduce bias, inequities, and harm to marginalized populations involved in restorative programs. An Equity Assessment team, composed of members of the EDJIE Initiative leadership team, restorative justice program directors, and a community volunteer, was convened to support this work and provide feedback on the goals, strategies, and outreach plan.

Context

Restorative justice, rooted in indigenous peacemaking traditions, has evolved as a tool to address mass incarceration and criminal justice reform. The establishment of alternatives to traditional court and corrections responses to crime in Vermont began in 1979, with the first court diversion programs for youth. In 1992, the program was expanded by the Attorney General's Office (AGO) to include adults. Community justice reparative boards were established in 1995, and, with funding from the Department of Corrections (DOC), led to the growth of community justice centers (CJC) throughout Vermont (Barton, 2016). In 1999, the first Balanced

and Restorative Justice (BARJ) program for youth was launched, and it was codified within the Department for Children and Families (DCF) in 2005.

Today, 21 restorative justice centers are established across the state, offering eight distinct programs: Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ), Court Diversion, Tamarack/PreTrial Services, Youth Substance Use Awareness Safety Program (YSASP), Civil Driver's License Suspension (DLS), Restorative Community Engagement, and Reparative Panels. Each county in Vermont provides these programs, funded by DOC, DCF, and AGO. Additionally, some community justice centers have secured extra funding for services beyond the scope of these eight programs, such as mentoring, truancy reduction, and after-school programs (Evans, 2022).

Vermont has seen a decrease in its incarcerated population, from a peak of 2,200 in 2009 to 1,236 in 2022 (Vermont's Prison System by the Numbers, 2023). Despite this progress, racism and classism continue to heavily influence who is incarcerated and who can access restorative alternatives (Vermont's Prison System by the Numbers, 2023). Although only 1.5% of Vermont's population identifies as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), over 11% of the incarcerated population in Vermont identifies as BIPOC (Vermont's Prison System by the Numbers, 2023). The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, by police officers, sparked a nationwide racial reckoning, impacting the restorative justice community in Vermont. In February 2021, Vermont's Restorative Justice programs issued a position on racial justice, expressing their commitment to partnering with state and local governments to pursue accountability and work towards an anti-racist and equitable system (Vermont's Restorative Justice Programs Position on Racial Injustice, 2021).

This equity assessment is part of a broader initiative reflecting the restorative justice community's dedication to this mission. However, restorative justice operates within a larger framework that continues to perpetuate racial and other inequities within Vermont's justice system. A recent example is Governor Phil Scott's veto in June of H645, a bill designed to ensure equitable access to restorative justice programs statewide by establishing baseline standards for prosecutors when deciding whether to refer someone to a restorative justice process instead of the traditional court system (Robinson, 2024). Additionally, in May 2023, Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF) officials announced their selection of Vergennes as the site for a new facility for justice-involved youth, raising concerns from Vermont's Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The committee highlighted Vermont's "troubling history of abuse and neglect at juvenile detention facilities," noting the state's consistent failure to address these systemic issues despite numerous reform efforts (Vermont Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2024).

Participants in this assessment identified several factors that have significantly impacted access to and outcomes of restorative justice programs over the past three to five years.

Although these factors existed before the pandemic, they were exacerbated by it and continue to negatively affect communities. The most frequently noted factor was a rise in poverty and its related impacts. For instance, an increase in housing insecurity often intersects with mental health and substance use disorders, and when existing support systems are under-resourced, people may be unable to fully participate in restorative justice processes. Additionally, center staff observed a rise in the need for English translation services, potentially indicating English language learners' lack of understanding about the criminal court system and the restorative justice process as an alternative. Several centers also reported an increase in racial discrimination, and while racial discrimination is not new, there is heightened awareness due to the inequities exposed by the pandemic and George Floyd's murder.

Glossary of Terms

In this section are terms and their definition used throughout this report. Definitions are provided in order to help clarify meaning within this particular context.

2SLGBTQIA+

Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender or sexual identities. To separate sexuality from gender identity, some sections parse out transgender and non-binary respondents from LGBQA+ respondents.

BIPOC

Black, indigenous, people of color

CISHET

Cisgender and heterosexual

DEI

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. A framework that organizations and communities use to promote fair treatment, opportunity, and advancement for all individuals. There are several variants of DEI, each emphasizing additional aspects such as DEIJ (Justice), DEIB (Belonging), DEIA (Accessibility). In this report DEI is used for simplification and is not meant to discourage focus on other aspects.

EDJIE

Equity through Data, Justice and Inclusion Initiative

Equity Assessment/Equity Audit

In this report, the terms "assessment" and "audit" are used interchangeably to refer to the examination of a system, institution or organization's policies, programs and practices and their impact on individuals with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, ability, socioeconomic status or other socioculturally significant factors.

Volunteers

Over 400 people volunteer in restorative justice programs throughout the state of Vermont in a number of ways, including participation on restorative panels, as members of Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), or serving on the Board of Directors/Trustees for organizations.

Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI)

The YASI is a juvenile risk assessment tool that measures risk, needs and protective factors in at-risk and juvenile justice-involved youth.

METHODOLOGY

From December 2023 through May 2024, TCDG conducted an Equity Audit of Vermont's Restorative Programs. The data collection process which was designed to uncover the factors within Vermont's restorative justice community that may be advancing or limiting the collective commitment to equity and justice. The audit approach and data sources are described in detail below.

TCDG's Equity Assessment Framework

TCDG's approach to equity assessments involves seven critical components: A clearly defined purpose; capacity building with project champions; A customized plan and assessment tools; A mixed methods approach; An iterative analysis, reporting, and recommendations process; prioritization and implementation support; and centering and uplifting the perspectives of marginalized people.

This equity assessment includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative survey data, interviews, and a document review related to the four State funders of restorative programs. Based on discussions with EDJIE project leaders, this report prioritized analyzing race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and income in the survey data. Therefore, there was a special focus on how restorative justice work impacts BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more) people, people experiencing poverty, and other staff and program participants who have been historically marginalized or excluded. To do this, TCDG designed customized surveys and semi structured interview protocols.

THE **CREATIVE DISCOURSE** GROUP
EQUITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

- Clearly Defined Purpose
- Capacity Building with Project Champions
- Prioritization and Implementation Support
- Centering & Uplifting the Perspectives of Marginalized People
- Customized Plan and Assessment Tools
- Iterative Analysis, Reporting, and Recommendations Process
- Mixed Methods Approach

Data Collection and Analysis

There are four main components to the organizational equity assessment that are discussed in this summary of findings: (1) a document review, (2) a survey, and (3) interviews through both virtual focus group and one-on-one conversations. In addition, TCDG participated in the Vermont

Restorative Justice Community + Volunteer Conference to share more about the equity audit and allow an opportunity for additional thoughts and input on initial recommendations.

Document Review

In December 2023 and January 2024, TCDG conducted a review of the grant agreements, program manuals, applications, intake and referral paperwork and other relevant documents, and rules as well as documents related to the four State funders of restorative programs. TCDG also reviewed reports from previous equity assessments of the Vermont Association of Court Diversion Programs (VACDP), Lamoille Restorative Center (LRC), and Burlington Community Justice Center (BCJC). A TCDG Associate also attended a panel discussion on restorative justice led by staff at BCJC. A list of these documents and the complete review can be found in Appendix A.

Surveys

In March 2024, TCDG administered two anonymous online surveys to assess the current climate of equity and inclusion in the restorative justice community in order to identify examples of equity work being done and places for growth. The first survey, referred to as the ***Directors Survey***, was distributed to program or center Directors, with 15 out of 23 programs responding. This consisted of 13 open-ended questions designed to assess the current climate of equity and inclusion in the restorative justice system, to raise up examples of good work being done, and to identify places for growth.

The second survey, referred to as the ***All Collaborators Survey,*** was distributed to a larger group of collaborators (staff, volunteers, board members and past participants) with a total of 181 responses. This survey included multiple choice questions with positive, neutral, and negative choices, linear scale questions with a scale of 1 to 5 (1= low, 5 - high), and open-ended questions.

The participants in this study included 196 survey respondents, comprising 15 from the Director Survey and 181 from the All Collaborators Survey. Among the respondents in the All Collaborators Survey, 40 identified as LGBQA+, 23 as BIPOC, 6 as transgender and/or non-binary, and 12 reported having an annual household income of less than $25,000.

In order to maintain anonymity with the sample size of the Directors Survey, this report disaggregates only the results of the All Collaborators Survey by identities and by role of respondents. Additionally, demographic data was not collected in the Directors Survey.

Listening Sessions

In addition to surveys, listening sessions and interviews were conducted in April 2024 to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research data. While surveys offer quantitative data and broad trends, listening sessions and interviews provide qualitative insights that are crucial

to deepen understanding. During listening sessions, participants were able to express their thoughts in detail, providing richer, more nuanced information and stories. They were also able to provide more context than possible with a survey alone. In addition, interviewers can monitor non verbal cues for opportunities for deeper exploration to gain better understanding of participants' experiences.

TCDG conducted five listening sessions and an additional phone interview with staff, volunteers (including Board members, CoSA volunteers, and restorative panel volunteers), and people who had previously participated in a restorative justice process. Participants were recruited from the All Collaborators Survey and were given the opportunity to join a BIPOC or 2SLGBTQIA+ affinity listening session. The listening sessions were 90-minute conversations with TCDG Associates and the one-on-one interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes.

Fourteen individuals participated in listening sessions, with 5 identifying as LGBQA+, 4 as BIPOC, and 1 as transgender and/or non-binary.

Listening sessions allowed participants to share their reflections on the restorative justice program(s) they had the most experience with, the ways people can access this alternative to the traditional court process, and barriers that might get in the way of that access, particularly for people from communities that are often marginalized, such as BIPOC or 2SLGBTQIA+. Two listening sessions were held for people who identified as BIPOC: (1) for staff and volunteers, (1) for past participants. One listening session was held for staff and volunteers who identified as 2SLGBTQIA+. Two listening sessions were held for people who did not request to participate in an affinity group: (1) for volunteers and (1) for past participants. A TCDG Associate held one phone interview with a past participant who did not identify with an affinity group.

It is important to acknowledge that despite efforts to engage past program participants, their involvement in this assessment was limited. As a result, their perspectives are not well represented in the findings. However, where applicable, their input was amplified through the use of quotes and in the recommendations.

Participant Identity Data

	All Collaborator Survey Respondents (181)	Listening Session Participants (14)
Identify as BIPOC	23	4
Identify as 2SLGBTQIA+	41	5
Identify as transgender and/or non-binary	6	2
Identify as having an annual household income of less than $25,000	12	unknown

Interviews

TCDG also conducted three interviews with four administrators representing State departments that fund restorative justice programs, including the Attorney General's Office, Department of Children and Families, and Department of Corrections.

Vermont Restorative Justice Community + Volunteer Conference

In June 2024, TCDG participated in the Vermont Restorative Justice Community + Volunteer Conference in Lake Morey, Vermont. The conference offered a professional development opportunity to the Vermont restorative justice community and a platform to highlight the EDJIE initiative. During the conference, TCDG's role included introducing attendees to the Statewide Equity Audit of Restorative Programs, engaging with center Directors to share and receive feedback on initial findings and recommendations, and connecting with BIPOC attendees to gather final input and feedback on priorities. This engagement allowed TCDG to incorporate an iterative feedback loop into the analysis, thereby strengthening the final report and ensuring it was more comprehensive and responsive to community needs.

FINDINGS

The data analysis produced several key findings, highlighting the most frequently presented themes, which are illustrated through direct participant quotes. Within each theme, areas of strength and areas of improvement are identified. Additionally, the findings are organized into two categories: (1) the internal work of restorative justice centers and (2) the systems that fund and direct this work.

SUMMARY OF THEMES - INTERNAL TO CENTERS

The equity assessment revealed several themes specific to the internal operations of restorative justice centers. These themes highlight both exemplary models of equitable and inclusive practices and areas needing improvement. The key themes identified are:

1. **Equity-Driven Organizational Systems and Culture**
2. **Diversity and Retention of Staff and Volunteers**
3. **Community Engagement and Relationship Building**
4. **Equitable and Inclusive Access to Services**
5. **Data Collection, Analysis, and Storytelling**

For each theme, insights were gathered from affinity group findings, comparing survey responses across demographics including race, sexual orientation and gender identity, age, and income. A complete list of questions can be found in Appendix B. It's important to note that TCDG did not test for statistical significance due to the sample size. Additionally, the number of respondents is approximate, as not all participants answered every question.

The tables are color-coded to highlight responses that fall outside of an expected range. In general, positive responses are coded light green, neutral are light yellow, and negative are light red. Responses that are exceptionally positive (90%+ and 4.5+) are coded dark green. Likewise, modest to high response rates (10%+) in the neutral and negative categories are coded dark yellow and dark red, respectively. This allows readers to more readily notice responses that indicate strengths as well as areas of growth.

Equity-Driven Organizational Systems and Culture

Equity-driven organizational systems and culture prioritize inclusion and the active dismantling of systemic inequities within an organization. These systems aim to create an environment where all members, regardless of their identity or status, have equitable access to opportunities, resources, and support. When asked to share examples of equitable and inclusive practices, respondents most frequently provided examples of organizational systems and culture as places where organizations have made positive change. This is likely due to the foundational

nature of the initiatives described by respondents that underpin other transformative efforts and encompass a broad spectrum of actions.

Areas of Strength and Progress

Prevalence of Equity Conversations. Data revealed the prevalence of equity conversations within restorative justice centers. Respondents reported that they engaged in open and ongoing discussions on equity, often facilitated through internal committees or teams dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), racial equity, and similar areas. In some cases, these conversations are standing agenda items in meetings, fostering a culture of continuous dialogue and reflection on equity issues.

Staff Resources. Center Directors highlighted the establishment of DEI or racial equity committees, along with the allocation of staff, volunteer, and board time to these initiatives. This dedication is reflected both formally, in specific roles, and informally, through regular discussions and agenda items. Specific examples include the creation of a Justice and Belonging position and a position focused on supporting BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, underscoring some centers' commitment to institutionalizing equity efforts.

Culture of Personal Growth. A culture of personal growth has emerged within these centers, characterized by a strong desire and ample opportunities for learning about anti-racism, equity, inclusion, and privilege. This commitment is operational at both the organizational and interpersonal levels. Volunteer participants particularly emphasized the high standards set by staff in treating all individuals who come to restorative justice services and programs with sensitivity, responsiveness, and respect.

> **"I feel like my center is ready to do the work" - BIPOC respondent**

Training and External Consultants. Training and the engagement of external consultants have played a crucial role in advancing equity within these centers. Most centers have worked with external consultants or trainers to deepen their understanding of equity issues and their implications for restorative justice work. Several organizations identified specific examples of collaboration with and learning from marginalized individuals and communities, such as the Abenaki nation and the Rainbow Coalition.

> **"Since staff did a training there is more awareness and discussion around microaggressions. Definitely feels more present, which is something that has been missing." - 2SLGBTQIA+ respondent**

Implementation of Equity Initiatives. Some centers have modified existing processes or implemented new strategies to support increased equity for both participants and staff. For example, some centers have started asking individuals their pronouns on intake forms and during restorative panels. While this practice was noted as a strength for some centers, it was also identified as an area for growth by others, indicating the need for ongoing collective efforts to enhance inclusivity and respect for diverse identities.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

While respondents acknowledged areas of positive change within their respective restorative justice centers, they also identified several areas requiring significant improvement. The most common suggestions for enhancement focused on bystander intervention training and practice and volunteer training and accountability.

Bystander Intervention Capacity. Some 2SLGBTQIA+ and BIPOC respondents noted that, despite the availability of equity training, most individuals lacked the skills necessary for effective bystander intervention. Instances where heterosexist, racist, or cissexist (anti-trans) comments were made during programming revealed that volunteers and staff members often did not know how to step in appropriately to demonstrate allyship
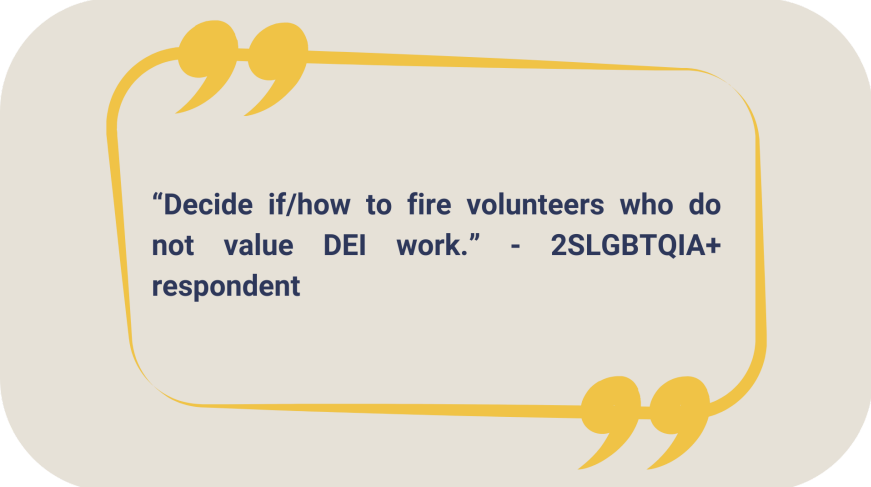
or mitigate harm. In addition, there is a need to broaden these conversations to include education about class and trauma in addition to race.

Reporting and Accountability. Respondents noted a significant gap in the availability of systems or processes to report or address bias-related incidents and harm within centers. This lack of infrastructure means that incidents of discrimination, bias, or harm often go unreported and unaddressed, leading to a potential perpetuation of inequity and mistrust among staff, volunteers, and participants.

> **"Staff, volunteers, and participants are all guilty of aggressions but there's no procedures for when a staff or volunteer does an aggression... It's just office gossip and then it passes." - 2SLGBTQIA+ respondent**

Volunteer Training and Expectations. Many respondents referred to the absence of clear criteria and expectations for volunteers around equity and inclusion training and practice. Volunteers are often older, white, cisgender, heterosexual, and from higher economic classes than program participants. This demographic disparity can inadvertently perpetuate existing biases and barriers to access. For instance, volunteers from this demographic may be less likely to use gender pronouns correctly or may refer to program participants as "offenders" instead of "responsible parties," which can impact the inclusivity and sensitivity of the restorative justice process.

> **"Decide if/how to fire volunteers who do not value DEI work." - 2SLGBTQIA+ respondent**

Insights From Affinity Group Participants

With respect to equity-driven organizational systems and culture, three key survey questions—questions 2, 5, and 8, detailed in Appendix B—were utilized to explore potential trends in perceptions of equity culture across various affinity groups.

Race. BIPOC respondents were more likely to feel 'mostly negative' or 'neutral' about centers than white respondents (5% BIPOC vs. 0% white and 9% BIPOC vs. 3%, white), and less likely to feel 'mostly positive' than white respondents (86% BIPOC vs. 97% white). BIPOC respondents were less likely than white respondents to 'mostly agree' that the organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes in restorative justice programs (86% vs 91%) and they perceived the organization as slightly less willing to take risks when talking about racism and inequities than white respondents (4.18 vs 4.36).

Q2. Overall, how do you feel about this restorative/ community justice organization?			Q5. This organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes in restorative justice programs.			Q8. How would you describe this organization's willingness to take risks when talking about racism and inequities? (1: Not Willing - 5 Very Willing)	
A	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=150)	A	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=150)	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=150)
+	86%	97%	+	86%	91%		
neutral	9%	3%	neutral	9%	8%	4.18	4.36
-	5%	0%	-	5%	1%		

Sexuality and Gender Identity. Overall, 2SLGBTQIA+ and Cishet participants reported similarly favorable responses to questions about equity-driven organizational systems and culture. 2SLGBTQIA+ participants were slightly more neutral in their belief that their organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes (15% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 6% cishet).

Q2. Overall, how do you feel about this restorative/ community justice organization?			Q5. This organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes in restorative justice programs.			Q8. How would you describe this organization's willingness to take risks when talking about racism and inequities? (1: Not Willing - 5 Very Willing)	
A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=41)	cishet (n=128)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=41)	cishet (n=123)	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=41)	cishet (n=129)
+	98%	97%	+	85%	91%		
neutral	2%	2%	neutral	15%	6%	4.34	4.35
-	0%	1%	-	0%	3%		

Income. Lower income respondents (<$50,000/year) were slightly more likely than middle to high income respondents ($50,000+/year) to agree that centers reduce barriers and create opportunities (93% lower income vs. 87% middle to high income), whereas middle to high income respondents were slightly more likely to respond with neutrality than lower income respondents (11% vs. 5%). Middle to high income respondents were slightly more likely to think their organization is very willing to take risks when talking about racism and inequities than lower income respondents.

Q2. Overall, how do you feel about this restorative/ community justice organization?			Q5. This organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes in restorative justice programs.			Q8. How would you describe this organization's willingness to take risks when talking about racism and inequities? (1: Not Willing - 5 Very Willing)	
A	**lower (n=45)**	**mid/high (n=113)**	**A**	**lower (n=45)**	**mid/high (n=113)**	**lower (n=45)**	**mid/high (n=113)**
+	91%	96%	+	93%	87%		
neutral	7%	4%	neutral	5%	11%	4.16	4.36
-	2%	0%	-	2%	2%		

Age. On average, participants aged 26-65 (n=96) and those over the age of 65 (n=60) reported similar perceptions of equity-driven organizational systems and culture. In comparison, the oldest age group had the most favorable perceptions whereas the youngest age group of those 18-25 years old (n=16) had the least favorable, albeit not negative. The oldest age group were the most likely to report positive feelings about the organization (98% Oldest vs. 81% Youngest), believed that the organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities (90% Oldest vs. 73% Youngest), and perceived the organization as very willing to take risks when talking about racism and inequities (4.52 Oldest vs. 4.00 Youngest).

Q2. Overall, how do you feel about this restorative/ community justice organization?				Q5. This organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes in restorative justice programs.				Q8. How would you describe this organization's willingness to take risks when talking about racism and inequities? (1: Not Willing - 5 Very Willing)		
A	**18-26 (n=16)**	**26-65 (n=96)**	**>65 (n=60)**	**A**	**18-26 (n=16)**	**26-65 (n=96)**	**>65 (n=60)**	**18-26 (n=16)**	**26-65 (n=96)**	**>65 (n=60)**
+	81%	98%	98%	+	73%	87%	90%			
neutral	19%	1%	2%	neutral	27%	11%	8%	4.00	4.30	4.52
-	0%	1%	0%	-	0%	2%	2%			

Staff and Volunteers. In addition to the questions above, questions 14, 15, and 19 were to rate the perceptions of staff and volunteers on organizational practices in order to help ascertain possible trends related to equity and culture.

Race. BIPOC staff and volunteers were slightly more likely than white staff and volunteers to agree that their organization has regular trainings and discussions for staff on racial disparities (67% BIPOC vs. 56% white). However, the responses of BIPOC staff and volunteers were slightly more negative than white staff and volunteers with respect to their restorative justice center's resource allocation (8% BIPOC vs. 2% white) and policies and practices (9% BIPOC vs. 2% white) that address racial and other inequities.

Q14. This organization allocates resources such as time and money to support equity and inclusion.			Q15. This organization has policies and practices in place to address concerns about racial inequities and barriers to opportunity.			Q19. This organization has regular trainings and discussions for staff and volunteers about removing barriers to opportunity and reducing racial disparities both internally and externally.		
A	BIPOC (n=12)	white (n=45)	A	BIPOC (n=11)	white (n=45)	A	BIPOC (n=12)	white (n=43)
+	84%	87%	+	45%	49%	+	67%	56%
neutral	8%	11%	neutral	45%	49%	neutral	25%	37%
-	8%	2%	-	9%	2%	-	8%	7%

Sexuality and Gender Identity. There were no notable differences between 2SLGBTQIA+ and cishet staff and volunteers with respect to their restorative justice center's resource allocation and policies and practices that specifically address racial and other inequities. However, 2SLGBTQIA+ staff and volunteers were less likely to be neutral on whether their organization has regular trainings and discussions on racial disparities (27% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 47% cishet). While 2SLGBTQIA+ participants were 10% more likely to agree that their center has regular trainings and discussions on racial disparities than cishet participants, they were also 10% more likely to disagree with this statement.

Q14. This organization allocates resources such as time and money to support equity and inclusion.			Q15. This organization has policies and practices in place to address concerns about racial inequities and barriers to opportunity.			Q19. This organization has regular trainings and discussions for staff and volunteers about removing barriers to opportunity and reducing racial disparities both internally and externally.		
A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=19)	cishet (n=35)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=19)	cishet (n=34)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=15)	cishet (n=32)
+	89%	86%	+	47%	47%	+	60%	50%
neutral	5%	11%	neutral	47%	50%	neutral	27%	47%
-	5%	3%	-	5%	3%	-	13%	3%

Diversity and Retention of Staff and Volunteers

The presence of staff, volunteers, and board members who reflect the backgrounds and experiences of program participants is essential for creating an equitable and inclusive environment. Such representation can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of restorative justice initiatives in addition to mitigating biases.

Areas of Strength and Progress

Many centers have made significant strides in improving their hiring practices and volunteer recruitment to foster a more diverse and inclusive workforce. In some cases, centers have reported positive outcomes from these enhanced hiring practices, particularly where the presence of multiple BIPOC staff members within a center has contributed to a more supportive and inclusive work environment.
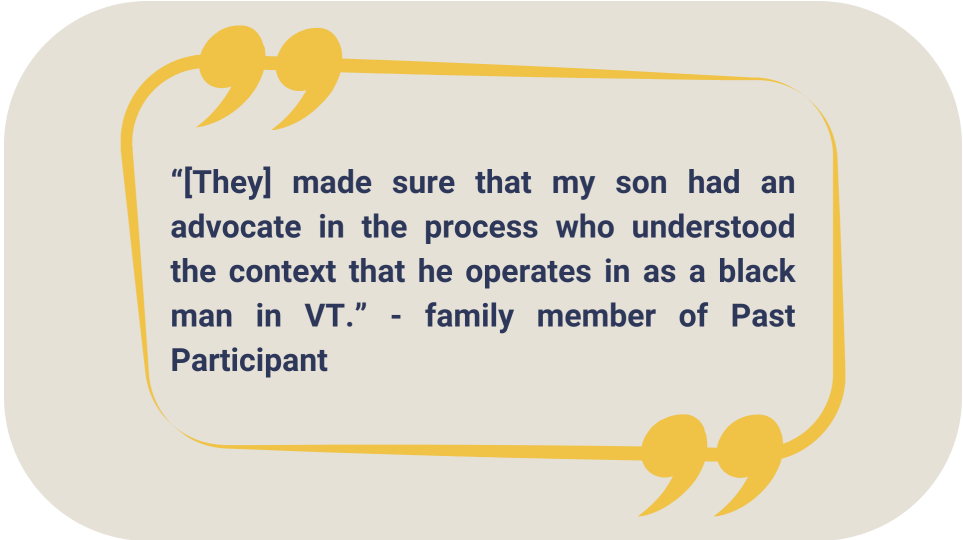
Improved Recruitment and Hiring Processes. Respondents highlighted notable advancements in recruitment and hiring processes across various centers. To combat classist practices, some centers have updated their hiring requirements, reducing educational prerequisites while increasing salaries. This approach includes the integration of paid contractors to complement volunteer and staff efforts, particularly for relational outreach and work with underserved communities. Efforts have also been made to reduce biases in hiring processes and focus on diverse representation and lived experience

"When I started I was the only BIPOC staff person, now [several] staff are BIPOC." - BIPOC respondent

Staff and Volunteer Diversity. Centers located in or near college towns have experienced some success in recruiting younger and more racially diverse volunteers. Additionally, some centers have staff and volunteers representing a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, including individuals who have previously been responsible parties in a

restorative justice process. Some centers have also engaged cultural advocates to observe discussions and provide feedback to volunteers, enriching the process with diverse perspectives.

> "[They] made sure that my son had an advocate in the process who understood the context that he operates in as a black man in VT." - family member of Past Participant

Policy Improvements at the Administrator Level. Administrators also emphasized the need to address the lack of diversity among the staff and volunteers supporting restorative justice programs. One forthcoming policy improvement involves removing volunteers from the purview of the Department of Corrections, which will reduce application barriers and lower the professional expectations placed on volunteers. These policy shifts are anticipated to create a more welcoming and equitable environment for all individuals involved in restorative justice initiatives.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

Staff and volunteer diversification was universally recognized by all centers as an area in need of significant growth. Despite concerted efforts to increase the diversity of its workforce, according to the 2022 census over 93% of Vermonters identify as white. This demographic composition highlights the ongoing challenges for centers who are making concerted efforts to achieve a more racially-inclusive and representative staff. In addition, most centers continue to rely heavily on volunteers and Board members who are predominantly older, middle or upper-middle class, white, cisgender, heterosexual, retired individuals with means and privilege. This can create an unequal power dynamic within the restorative justice process, as well as increase the potential for incidents of racial or other identity biases that cause harm. Additionally, if those in positions of power and decision-making over the strategic direction of the organization and the allocation of resources are exclusively or predominantly white, cisgender, and heterosexual, the values and strategic direction of the organization may be shaped based on their worldview, further entrenching existing power imbalances.

Retention issues. Retention emerged as a significant barrier to diversifying staff and volunteers, but no organizations reported specific initiatives or successes with retention. This underscores a critical area for development, as the sustainability and effectiveness of restorative justice programs are closely tied to the stability and continuity of their personnel.

Limited adoption of hiring best practices. While some centers have implemented notable hiring improvements, such as reducing educational requirements and increasing salaries, these best practices have not been adopted systematically across all centers. The uneven application of these practices indicates a need for more widespread and standardized approaches to hiring that prioritize diversity and inclusion. Respondents offered suggestions such as enhanced transparency in job descriptions, providing exact salary and benefits information, and ensuring consistency in the recruitment process.

Participant-centered recruitment. Another area requiring attention is the consideration of demographic representation for participants in the recruitment process. Centers do not consistently account for the importance of aligning staff and volunteer demographics with those of the people they serve. Ensuring that participants see themselves represented among the individuals supporting their restorative justice journey can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of these programs.

> **"Our staff and volunteers are almost completely white (as far as we can tell) in a community that is…well…more racially diverse than that!" - Staff member**

Insights From Affinity Group Participants

Analysis of the survey data reveals that BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents may have a more positive perception of their organization's ability to engage in discussions about race and racism compared to their counterparts. This optimistic outlook suggests that these groups recognize some efforts by staff and leadership to address these crucial issues. Despite the relatively positive views on discussions about race and racism, BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents expressed significant concerns about their organizations' strategies for engaging and retaining

a diverse and representative workforce. Specifically, BIPOC respondents were three times more likely to indicate that their organization lacks a plan to engage or retain staff and volunteers who reflect the demographics of their community and client population.

Race. BIPOC respondents were three times more likely to disagree with the statement that their center has a plan to engage and retain diverse and representative people than white respondents (15% BIPOC vs. 5% white). BIPOC staff and volunteers are less likely to be neutral on whether the organization's staff and leaders are generally skilled when talking about race and racism (33% BIPOC vs. 51% white). While BIPOC staff and volunteers are slightly more likely than white staff and volunteers to think that their organization's staff and leaders are generally skilled when talking about race and racism (58% BIPOC vs. 47% white), they were also slightly more likely to disagree (8% BIPOC vs. 2% white).

Question 12. Based on my experience, this organization incorporates the voices of staff in decision-making about things like strategic planning, policies, or programmatic changes.			Question 16. Organization staff and leaders are generally skilled at talking about race, racism, and how race and racism show up when providing services.			Question 18. This organization has a deliberate plan to engage and retain people that are reflective of the demographics of the community and client population.		
A	BIPOC (n=13)	white (n=46)	A	BIPOC (n=12)	white (n=45)	A	BIPOC (n=13)	white (n=39)
+	84%	89%	+	58%	47%	+	38%	46%
neutral	8%	9%	neutral	33%	51%	neutral	46%	49%
-	8%	2%	-	8%	2%	-	15%	5%

Sexuality and Gender Identity. 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents were slightly more likely to believe their organization incorporates diverse voices in decision-making (90% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 84% cishet) and were less likely to believe that their organization has a plan to engage and retain diverse and representative people than their cishet peers (40% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 50% cishet).

Question 12. Based on my experience, this organization incorporates the voices of staff in decision-making about things like strategic planning, policies, or programmatic changes.			Question 16. Organization staff and leaders are generally skilled at talking about race, racism, and how race and racism show up when providing services.			Question 18. This organization has a deliberate plan to engage and retain people that are reflective of the demographics of the community and client population.		
A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=20)	cishet (n=37)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=22)	cishet (n=34)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=15)	cishet (n=34)
+	90%	84%	+	50%	47%	+	40%	50%
neutral	5%	14%	neutral	45%	50%	neutral	53%	44%
-	5%	3%	-	5%	3%	-	7%	6%

Community Engagement and Relationship Building

Cultivating opportunities to engage and build relationships with communities, particularly those BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, as well as individuals living in poverty, has become a critical focus for many centers. In some centers, these initiatives have seen notable progress and continue to evolve with planned growth. In other places, there is a significant need for growth in order to provide more equitable services and ensure fair access to restorative justice.

Areas of Strength and Progress

Some centers report that they have made positive changes by developing relationships with community organizations that serve marginalized communities, going out into the community to share information about restorative justice, and connecting people with other resources and supports.

> **Targeted Community Connections:** Centers have successfully strengthened their connections with communities by addressing clearly-identified needs and meeting people where they are. For instance, one center responded to a pressing local demand by organizing legal clinics, including a highly successful expungement clinic. Centers also assist in connecting people with essential resources, such as securing housing vouchers, thereby directly addressing immediate needs and fostering trust within the community. In addition, centers have made strides in building relationships by engaging with individuals in their own environments. For example, staff members have visited hotels where people are residing to share information about restorative justice programs.

> **Collaborating with Cultural Advocates:** Establishing formal relationships with cultural advocates and underserved groups has been a key area of progress. Centers have engaged these advocates through consulting contracts and advisory support, ensuring that the services provided are culturally relevant and responsive to the unique needs of diverse communities.

> **Partnering with Community Organizations:** Many centers shared examples of positive relationships they have cultivated with community partners who serve people from marginalized communities in order to better identify and work to remove barriers and inequities in restorative justice programs. Several centers also referenced their development of positive relationships with police departments and State's Attorney's offices, which has helped to facilitate a more holistic approach to community support and improved the access to restorative justice programs.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

There is a need for centers to enhance efforts to engage and build relationships with organizations to improve service delivery. Respondents specifically pointed to gaps in

knowledge from referring partners, effective strategies to reach remote communities, and the ability to provide comprehensive support by connecting with additional service providers.

Insufficient Knowledge of Programs by Referring Partners: A significant challenge is the lack of awareness and understanding of restorative justice programs among those responsible for making referrals. This knowledge gap can lead to the perpetuation of statutes that exacerbate existing inequities and hinder advocacy efforts for additional funding. To address this, centers have identified the need to educate and communicate more effectively with decision-makers, ensuring they are well-informed about the benefits and operations of restorative justice programs.

Limited Relationships with Organizations Led by or Serving Marginalized Communities: While there have been positive relationships with some community partners, centers recognize there is a need to continue to build and expand relationships with organizations led by people with marginalized identities that serve diverse groups.

> **"[Centers should be] developing strong ally relationships with BIPOC-led orgs" - BIPOC respondent**

Outreach to Remote Communities: Expanding outreach efforts to remote and underserved communities remains a crucial area for development. Effective strategies need to be implemented to ensure these populations have access to the same level of support and services as those in more centralized locations.

Connecting Participants with Additional Support: Providing comprehensive support to participants is essential for their overall well-being. Centers recognize the need to better connect individuals with additional services, including mental and physical health care, housing, and other critical resources. This holistic approach ensures that all aspects of participants' needs are addressed, promoting more sustainable outcomes.

Insights From Affinity Group Participants

Race. BIPOC respondents were less likely than white respondents to remain neutral on whether their organization incorporates the voices of program participants in decision-making (20% BIPOC vs. 40% white). BIPOC respondents were more likely to agree with this statement than white respondents (70% BIPOC vs. 57% white), but also more likely to disagree (10% BIPOC vs 2% white).

Question 13. Based on my experience, this organization incorporates the voices of program participants in decision-making.			Question 17. Organization staff and leaders support participation from people from diverse cultural, racial and ethnic groups.		
A	BIPOC (n=10)	white (n=42)	A	BIPOC (n=13)	white (n=48)
+	70%	57%	+	69%	75%
neutral	20%	40%	neutral	23%	23%
-	10%	2%	-	8%	2%

Sexuality and Gender Identity. There are marginal differences between 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents and cishet respondents perceptions of their organizations' engagement with program participants. However, cishet respondents were less likely than 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents to remain neutral on whether their organization incorporates the voices of program participants in decision-making (31% cishet vs. 42% 2SLGBTQIA+). Cishet respondents were more likely to agree with this statement than 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents (59% cishet vs. 53% 2SLGBTQIA+), but also more likely to disagree (9% cishet vs 5% 2SLGBTQIA+). On the other hand, 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents were less likely to remain neutral on whether their organization staff and leaders support diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic participation (14% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 24% cishet). 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents were more likely to agree with this statement than cishet respondents (81% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 73% cishet), but also more likely to disagree (5% vs. 3%).

Question 13. Based on my experience, this organization incorporates the voices of program participants in decision-making.			Question 17. Organization staff and leaders support participation from people from diverse cultural, racial and ethnic groups.		
A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=19)	cishet (n=32)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=21)	cishet (n=37)
+	53%	59%	+	81%	73%
neutral	42%	31%	neutral	14%	24%
-	5%	9%	-	5%	3%

Equitable and Inclusive Access to Services

Restorative Justice Centers want a wide variety of people to be able to access their services and to feel a sense of inclusion and belonging in their spaces. This goal is foundational to the mission of restorative justice centers, which seek to serve diverse communities equitably and inclusively. Efforts are being made to address barriers and create welcoming environments for all participants, however there are many challenges and opportunities for growth.

Areas of Strength and Progress

There is a general recognition across centers of the barriers that prevent people from accessing restorative justice programs. While these continue to be a challenge, respondents shared examples of ways that their individual centers have worked to remove or reduce these barriers. This section highlights some of those examples, however it is important to note that these positive developments include efforts that address the needs of specific communities but are not wide-spread across the state.

> **Remote and Flexible Services:** Centers are increasingly offering remote and flexible services, making it easier for participants to engage without the need to be physically present.

"Virtual has been a huge bonus" - 2SLGBTQIA+ respondent

> **Language Access:** Efforts to improve language access and accommodations are underway, including the implementation of "I speak" packets to help participants identify translation services and accommodations needs. Although highlighted as a need, many centers are making adjustments to provide necessary language tools. One notable example is the Vermont Language Justice Projects video on Restorative Justice as an alternative system (Vermont Language Justice Project, 2024)

> **Customization to Reduce Barriers:** There is some progress in tailoring services to meet individual needs, such as encouraging participants to bring support people to programs

to help navigate the process both practically and emotionally, connecting participants with resources for mental and physical health, housing, transportation, and other needs. Confidential accommodations are also being offered throughout the restorative process.

Welcoming Physical Spaces: Some centers are working on making their physical spaces more welcoming and accessible, including providing food to create a hospitable environment.

> **"We make sure we have food accessible for all clients who come through our doors"** - **Staff member**

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

Center directors recognize the importance of this work and identify it as one of their largest challenges. Ensuring equitable and inclusive access to services requires ongoing effort and adaptation to meet the evolving needs of diverse communities, as well as dedicated resources. Below are areas identified for growth:

Referral Process: The process of referring individuals to restorative justice as an alternative to the traditional court system remains a significant barrier, largely outside the control of centers. However, through collaboration with community partners, centers can help educate underrepresented populations about restorative justice programs and advocate for referrals in cases where bias or discrimination might prevent access.

Mutual and Ongoing Accountability and Growth Mindset: There is a need for a growth mindset and mutual accountability, not only for those who have caused harm but also for the community that may have failed them. This involves recognizing that the struggles faced by program participants may evolve over time and ensuring accountability for current actions. Existing manuals often overemphasize the accountability of the person who caused harm, neglecting the broader societal and community responsibilities. Ensuring that volunteers come from within the same

community as the program participants and fostering a culture of mutual learning helps to build societal and community commitment. This approach acknowledges that accountability and growth are ongoing processes that involve everyone, not just the individuals directly involved in the harm.

> **"If a volunteer is only there to help the core member not to recidivate and to understand the impact of their actions, but they aren't there to learn from the core member, we've missed the point."**
> **- Funding Administrator**

Assumptions and Inclusive, Humanizing Language: Interactions and some materials contain harmful stereotypes or biases, particularly related to gender and race. For example, materials addressing sexual and domestic violence often presume victims are cisgender and heterosexual such as in the PREA Orientation Handbook. More inclusive language, such as using "they/them" pronouns and avoiding terms like "juvenile," "offender," and "at-risk," can help humanize participants. Some materials also contain biased or culturally offensive imagery such as in the DOC Volunteer Manual.

> **"A lot of the materials presume a gender binary and that the cause of that violence is always cis-men to cis-women." - 2SLGBTQIA+ respondent**

Plain Language and Support for Low Literacy: Manuals often lack plain language summaries of legal texts, making them inaccessible to those with low literacy rates or divergent cognitive abilities. Providing clear and consistent terminology is crucial. For example, the COSA 2021 ReEntry Coordinator Handbook effectively uses plain language and summarizes materials, whereas the 2022 Volunteer packet uses inconsistent terminology, leading to confusion.

Variability and Inconsistency: Efforts to increase program access vary significantly across the state. One volunteer noted the lack of uniformity in restorative justice panels and approaches.

> "So much is dependent on who gets referrals. We need to be in touch with communities so we can advocate to AG, DOC…". - BIPOC respondent
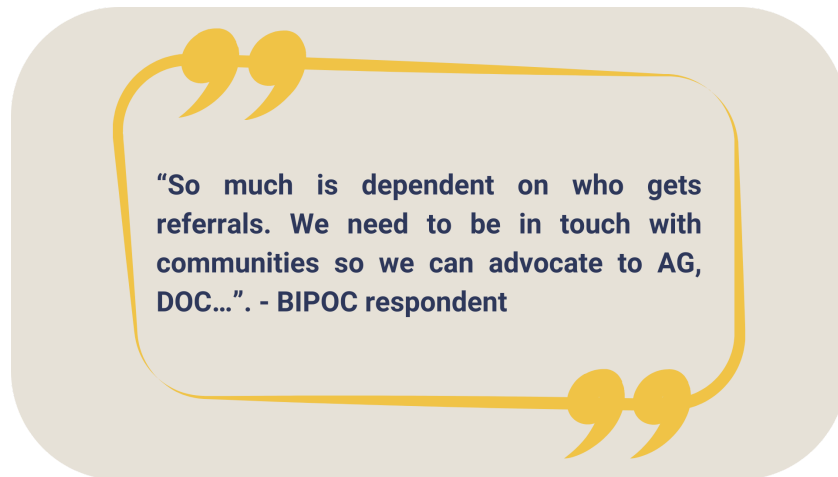
Insights From Affinity Group Participants

Race. Perceptions of access and inclusion among BIPOC respondents differ noticeably from those of white staff and volunteers. A higher proportion expressed negative feelings overall regarding access and inclusion. The most significant contrast was observed in their perception of organizational accessibility. BIPOC staff and volunteers were much less likely to agree that their was accessible to them than their white peers (74% BIPOC vs. 91% white).

Question 3. I feel welcome at this organization.			Question 4. I feel safe when working at or with this organization.			Question 6. This organization cares that everyone gets the services and support they need.			Question 7. This organization is accessible to me (language access, website access, access to public spaces).		
A	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=150)	A	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=150)	A	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=146)	A	BIPOC (n=23)	white (n=149)
+	87%	96%	+	91%	97%	+	87%	95%	+	74%	91%
n	9%	3%	n	4%	2%	n	9%	3%	n	22%	8%
-	4%	1%	-	4%	1%	-	4%	1%	-	4%	1%

Sexuality and Gender Identity. The most notable disparity was in 2SLGBTQIA+ staff and volunteers' perception of organizational accessibility. 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents were less likely to think their organization was accessible to them than their cishet peers (78% 2SLGBTQIA+ vs. 92% cishet). Additionally, 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents were five times as likely as their cishet peers to respond neutrally to this question.

Question 3. I feel welcome at this organization.			Question 4. I feel safe when working at or with this organization.			Question 6. This organization cares that everyone gets the services and support they need.			Question 7. This organization is accessible to me (language access, website access, access to public spaces).		
A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=40)	cishet (n=151)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=40)	cishet (n=151)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=38)	cishet (n=150)	A	2SLGBTQIA+ (n=40)	cishet (n=150)
+	95%	95%	+	98%	97%	+	100%	94%	+	78%	92%
n	5%	4%	n	2%	1%	n	0%	4%	n	20%	4%
-	0%	1%	-	0%	1%	-	0%	2%	-	2%	2%

Income. Lower-income staff and volunteers were slightly less likely to think their organization was accessible to them than their middle to high income peers (84% lower vs. 89% mid/high).

Question 3. I feel welcome at this organization.			Question 4. I feel safe when working at or with this organization.			Question 6. This organization cares that everyone gets the services and support they need.			Question 7. This organization is accessible to me (language access, website access, access to public spaces).		
A	lower (n=45)	mid/high (n=137)	A	lower (n=45)	mid/high (n=137)	A	lower (n=44)	mid/high (n=133)	A	lower (n=44)	mid/high (n=136)
+	93%	93%	+	93%	96%	+	96%	96%	+	84%	89%
n	4%	5%	n	4%	2%	n	0%	2%	n	14%	10%
-	2%	2%	-	2%	2%	-	4%	2%	-	2%	1%

Age. Older participants expressed significantly more positive sentiments than younger participants regarding their feelings of welcome, inclusion, and access to centers (by 25-37 percentage points). Respondents aged 26 to 64 generally responded similarly on average to those aged 65 and older, with the exception of access (Q7), where the middle age bracket tended to feel more neutral. Conversely, individuals under the age of 26 were notably less likely (by 16 to 31 percentage points) than their older counterparts to feel safe or that the organization prioritized access to support or services (Q4 and Q5). They also felt less welcome and perceived the organization as less accessible to them (by 29 to 38 percentage points) compared to older respondents.
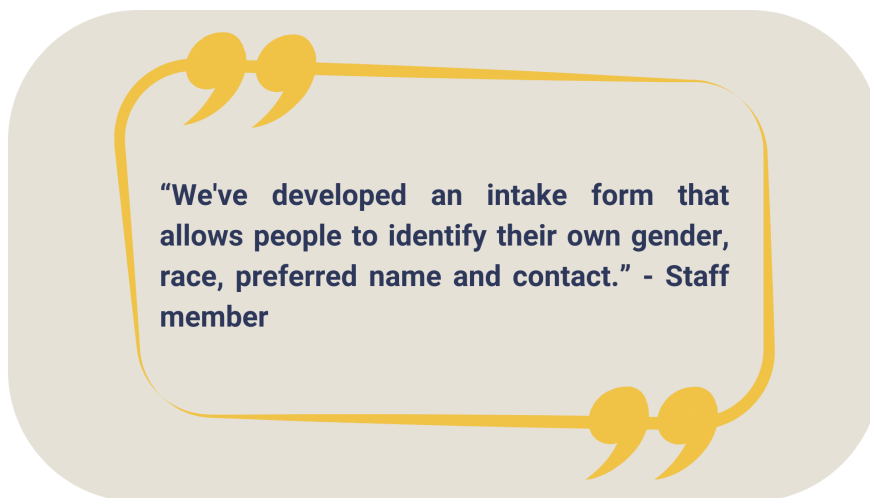
	Question 3. I feel welcome at this organization.				Question 4. I feel safe when working at or with this organization.				Question 6. This organization cares that everyone gets the services and support they need.				Question 7. This organization is accessible to me (language access, website access, access to public spaces).		
A	**18-26** (n=16)	**26-65** (n=96)	**>65** (n=60)	**A**	**18-26** (n=16)	**26-65** (n=96)	**>65** (n=60)	**A**	**18-26** (n=16)	**26-65** (n=96)	**>65** (n=60)	**A**	**18-26** (n=16)	**26-65** (n=96)	**>65** (n=60)
+	69%	96%	100%	+	81%	97%	100%	+	75%	94%	93%	+	63%	88%	100%
n	31%	2%	0%	n	19%	1%	0%	n	25%	3%	3%	n	37%	10%	0%
-	0%	2%	0%	-	0%	2%	0%	-	0%	3%	0%	-	0%	2%	0%

Data Collection, Analysis, and Storytelling

In order to ensure programs and services are resulting in positive outcomes for participants, there is a need to collect and analyze data about the experiences of people in the restorative justice system. In addition, this data can be used as a tool to tell the story about the impact of restorative justice on individuals and communities. While there was limited data provided in this theme, respondents offered several opportunities for growth with respect to the collection, analysis, and use of data to increase equity, inclusion, and access to restorative justice centers and programs. It is also important to note that this area of focus is in progress through the data collection and evaluation phase of the EDJIE initiative

Areas of Strength and Progress

Data Collection for Equity and Inclusion: While few respondents highlighted data collection as a positive advancement in equity and inclusion, they acknowledged the existence of improvements related to information gathered post-referral. For instance, centers are beginning to invite participants to self-identify their language, gender, and racial or ethnic identity whenever possible. This approach helps tailor services more effectively and inclusively.

"We've developed an intake form that allows people to identify their own gender, race, preferred name and contact." - Staff member

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

Case Studies and Prevention: Respondents emphasized the need for more robust storytelling and case studies to prevent harm. Centers have access to qualitative narratives that provide insights into why harm occurs and how systems contribute to these outcomes. There is an opportunity to develop systemic reflection processes, such as interviews with victims and responsible parties, to inform systemic changes within the centers and educate the broader community in Vermont. For example, Burlington previously convened a commission of service organizations to conduct case studies, hear from affected parties, and commit to improvement processes aimed at accountability and systemic change.

Community Education and Prevention: Given their extensive work with individuals re-entering society post-incarceration, centers are uniquely positioned to understand the underlying causes driving people into the justice system and advocate on behalf of those impacted by them. Having access to more robust data about the impact of those causes on an individual's experience with, and access to, restorative justice would empower centers to communicate effectively with decision-makers about structural barriers and challenge the notion that everyone has equal opportunities. Using data as a storytelling tool could also enable volunteers to help educate and empower their communities so they can work together to rebuild and repair relationships, and address the root causes of harm.

Measuring Impact: While centers have anecdotal evidence of their impact, there is a recognized need for more systematic measurement. One system funder we spoke with expressed a worry that there may be hesitance or resistance about revealing stagnant or worsening metrics due to concerns about possible funding cuts. However, it's crucial to measure and track outcomes to demonstrate effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and advocate for continued support amidst broader societal reliance on incarceration.
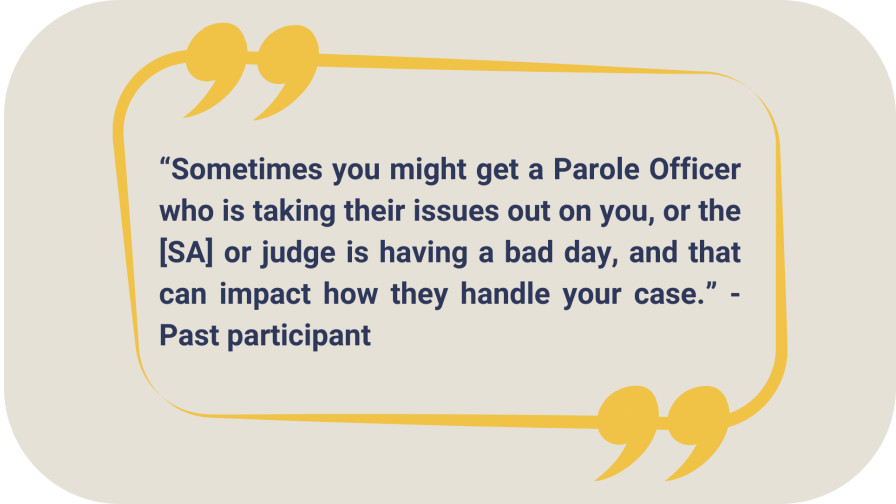
SUMMARY OF THEMES - SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Restorative justice centers in Vermont are confronted with numerous systemic barriers originating from broader court, legislative, and carceral systems. These barriers significantly exacerbate existing inequalities and pose substantial challenges to the equitable implementation of restorative justice processes. This section delves into the various systemic conditions that impede restorative justice work, including issues related to referrals; policies and statutes; fragmented equity work; misalignment of state agency policies with restorative justice philosophy; limited resources and capacity; and data collection.

Referrals

The referral process is a critical juncture that significantly impacts equitable access to restorative justice. This process, which involves directing individuals away from traditional court proceedings towards restorative justice alternatives, is riddled with barriers that can undermine its effectiveness and fairness.

> **Impact of Individual Discernment.** The process of referring individuals to restorative justice heavily relies on the discernment of various actors within the justice system, such as judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officers. This reliance introduces a substantial level of variability, as referral decisions are subject to the personal biases and discretion of these individuals. Such variability can lead to inconsistent application of restorative justice, where some individuals may be unjustly excluded based on the subjective judgments of decision-makers. This poses a significant challenge for restorative justice centers, which strive to provide equitable access but have limited control over the initial referral decisions. The influence of individual biases in referral practices highlights the need for standardized guidelines and training to ensure that all individuals are afforded equal opportunities to participate in restorative justice programs.
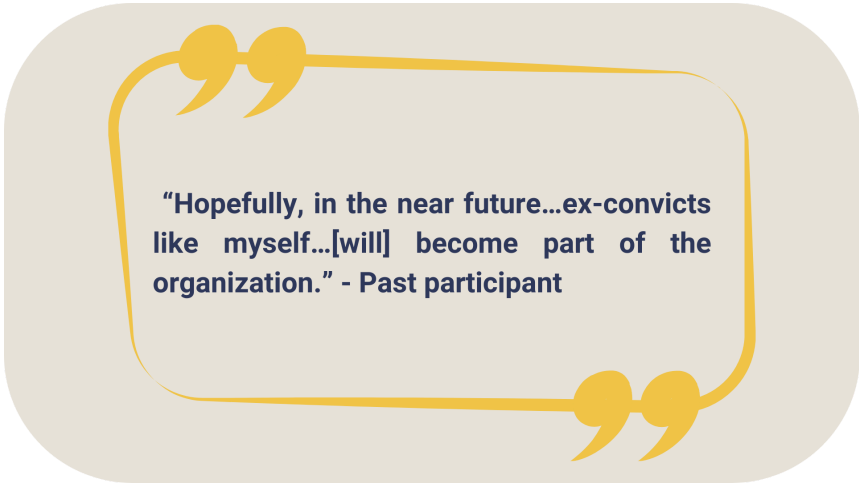
"**Sometimes you might get a Parole Officer who is taking their issues out on you, or the [SA] or judge is having a bad day, and that can impact how they handle your case.**" - Past participant

The court system is experiencing significant backlogs. The Vermont court system's significant backlogs further complicate the referral process. According to a May, 2024 report by Vermont's Seven Days weekly newspaper, the number of unresolved criminal cases has surged to approximately 15,000, which is double the pre-pandemic norm (Brouwer & Elder-Connors, 2024). These backlogs create substantial delays in the judicial process, impeding the ability of victims and responsible parties to seek timely resolutions. The prolonged wait times not only exacerbate the stress and uncertainty faced by those involved but also hinder the restorative justice process from addressing the root causes of behavior and providing necessary services. The delays in trial processes underscore the urgency for alternative solutions, such as restorative justice, which can offer more timely and constructive resolutions.

Policy and Statutes

The landscape of federal and state requirements presents significant barriers to equitable access within restorative justice practices. These statutes often incorporate processes, restrictions, or language that are inherently exclusionary or biased, thus limiting the potential for equitable implementation of restorative justice programs.

Exclusionary Legislative Frameworks. Federal and state statutes governing restorative justice practices often impose restrictions that hinder program directors and state funders from fostering equitable environments. For instance, current Department of Corrections policies prohibit formerly incarcerated individuals from volunteering in restorative justice programs. This exclusion prevents the integration of critical insights from those with lived experiences into policy-making, undermining the principles of healing, community involvement, and equitable access central to restorative justice. Additionally, some restorative justice programs charge participation fees as part of the funding model. Although centers can and often do waive these fees due to the economic hardships faced by many participants, this creates funding challenges since the fees are intended to support the programs. In recent years, the legislature has acknowledged this and increased financial support, but not sufficient enough to fill the budget shortfall.

> **"Hopefully, in the near future...ex-convicts like myself...[will] become part of the organization." - Past participant**

Legislative Knowledge Gaps. Many legislators who make critical decisions about restorative justice funding and statutes do not possess an in-depth knowledge of the principles underpinning restorative justice. The restorative justice system in Vermont is a complex network of 23 organizations and programs funded by three different state agencies, rooted in a philosophy that may not be as familiar to legislators as the carceral system. When coupled with exclusive legislative frameworks, this oversight results in program language and policies that often fail to address the unique needs and perspectives of marginalized communities, and perpetuate the cycle of marginalization for those who have lived experiences of incarceration.

Fragmented Equity Work

The landscape of equity work within the restorative justice framework in Vermont is marked by inconsistency and compartmentalization, both within individual centers and among adjacent support services.

Lack of Commitment to Equity Work in Adjacent Support Services. Many restorative justice processes necessitate engagement with external providers, such as mental health or substance use treatment programs. However, some respondents noted that these providers often do not share the same commitment to equitable access. This discrepancy creates significant barriers for participants, who may find themselves unable to utilize necessary services. For instance, one administrator was initially denied a request for translation services that was being offered by a community service provider for a participant in the Impaired Driver Rehabilitation Program (IDRP).
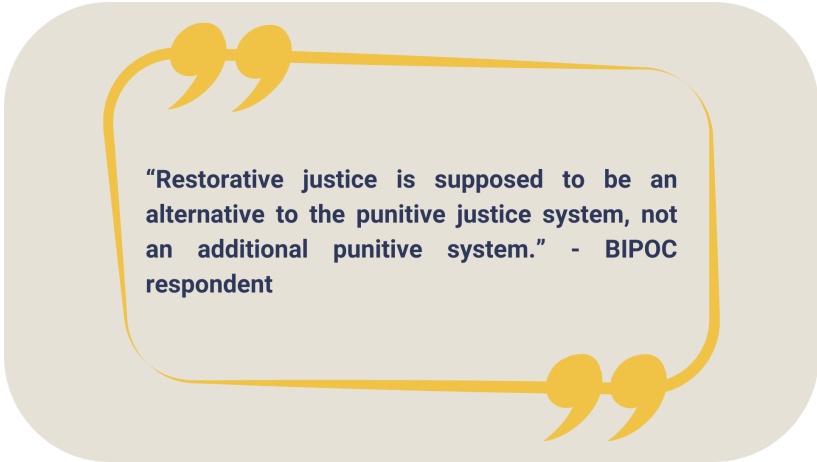
Lack of Statewide Consistency. Efforts to increase access to restorative justice programs vary considerably across the state, leading to inconsistencies. One volunteer noted the lack of uniformity in restorative justice panels. Likewise, some centers charge fees while others do no.This lack of consistency confuses participants and undermines the principle of equitable access, as participants' experiences and opportunities for restorative justice may differ significantly based on geographic location.

Compartmentalized Equity Work Within Funding Agencies. Within funding agencies, equity and anti-racism efforts are often compartmentalized, lacking the dedicated time, capacity, and communication necessary to ensure these values are consistently embedded throughout the organization. Several state agencies have committees that focus on anti-racism, equity, and inclusion. However, there is a disconnect between these committees and the practical implementation of their goals within restorative justice programs. Funding administrators expressed uncertainty about how these equity initiatives would be integrated across their agencies, underscoring a critical gap between policy and practice. This compartmentalization means that, despite intention, the lack of dedicated resources and strategic communication hampers the embedding of inclusion and equity into the organizational fabric of restorative justice programs.

Misalignment of State Agency Policy with Restorative Justice Philosophy

The policies that guide access to restorative justice often fail to align with the foundational principles and vision of restorative justice programs. This misalignment manifests in several ways, undermining the effectiveness and integrity of these programs.

Misalignment with Funding Agencies' Missions. Respondents reported that agencies like the Department of Corrections operate within a punitive and corrective framework rooted in systemic racial and other forms of injustice. These agencies' objectives often conflict with the restorative justice philosophy, which prioritizes healing, reconciliation, and reintegration rather than punishment. Although the DOC has recently adopted a new vision that includes advancing restorative justice practices, the historical implications remain relevant and present. It will take time for systemic changes to be actualized and felt, especially by those most impacted by the justice system. In the meantime, restorative justice centers, dependent on funding from such agencies, are constrained by policies and objectives that do not support the holistic and empathetic approach central to restorative justice. Consequently, these centers struggle to mitigate the associated negative impacts, limiting their ability to fully realize their mission.

> "Restorative justice is supposed to be an alternative to the punitive justice system, not an additional punitive system." - BIPOC respondent
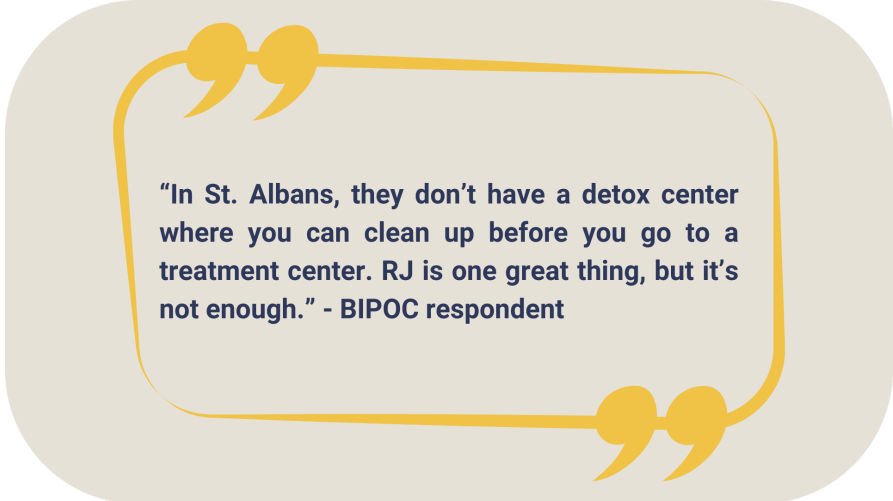
Discrepancy Between Policy and Vision. One notable example of this misalignment is found in the COSA (Circles of Support and Accountability) volunteer manual, which introduces the concept of "radical hospitality." This concept, ideally, should foster an environment of support and care for the core member. However, the manual predominantly focuses on accountability, community safety, and the prevention of reoffense, with little emphasis on the supportive and caring aspects essential to true restorative justice. This focus on accountability over support reflects a broader trend where the punitive elements overshadow the restorative principles of empathy, support, and reintegration.

Lack of Mutual Accountability. Respondents have identified a significant lack of mutual accountability within the culture of restorative justice programs, particularly those associated with the Department of Corrections. These programs often emphasize holding past offenders accountable for their actions, while there is insufficient emphasis on reciprocal accountability. Manuals and guidelines tend to focus on the responsibilities of the participants without equally addressing the responsibilities of facilitators, volunteers, and staff. For restorative justice to be truly effective, it must promote a growth mindset that involves exploring both present and future harm and fostering a culture where all parties—participants, volunteers, and staff—are accountable for their actions and their impact on the restorative process.

Resources and Capacity

The limited resources and capacity of services that support individuals involved in the court system present significant barriers to equitable access and outcomes in the restorative justice process. This lack of resources exacerbates existing inequities and hinders the effectiveness of restorative justice programs. The challenges identified by center staff, participants, and administrators include inadequate funding for staffing, insufficient mental health and substance use disorder services, lack of affordable housing, and gaps in additional support services such as childcare, transportation, and employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Services for Mental Health and Substance Use Treatment. The scarcity of mental health and substance use disorder services is particularly acute in rural areas of the state. This shortage significantly impacts the restorative justice process, as many individuals involved in the court system require these services to address underlying issues contributing to their involvement in criminal activities. The lack of accessible treatment and residential options, especially for BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ people, exacerbates the difficulties faced by these individuals and limits their ability to fully engage in and benefit from restorative justice programs.
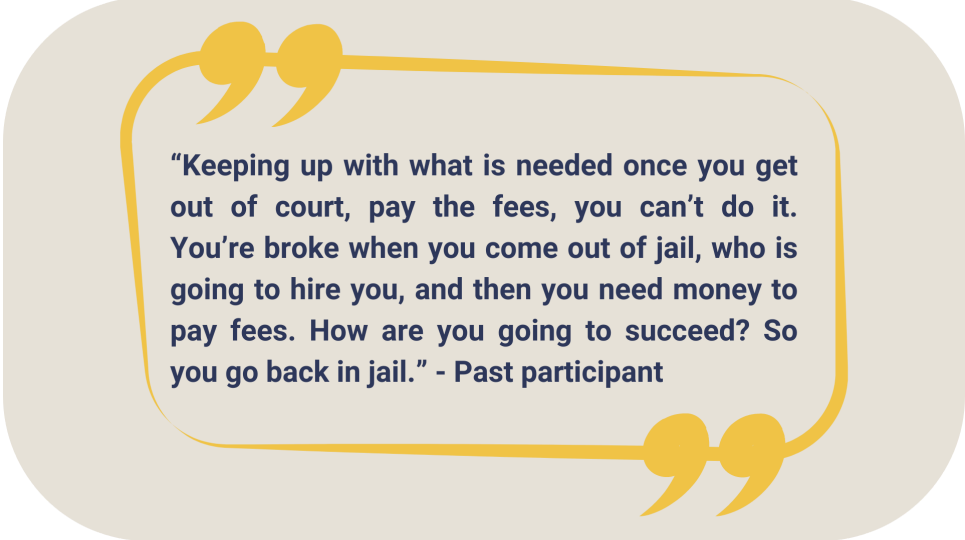
> **"In St. Albans, they don't have a detox center where you can clean up before you go to a treatment center. RJ is one great thing, but it's not enough." - BIPOC respondent**

Funding for Staffing. One of the primary challenges is the insufficient funding for staffing. Adequate funding is essential to hire a sufficient number of staff members at a livable wage, which directly impacts an organization's ability to hire and retain a diverse workforce. The reliance on unpaid volunteers, often limited to retired individuals with stable incomes, further restricts the pool of available and diverse candidates. This financial constraint also means organizations may lack the resources to hire dedicated staff for outreach to marginalized communities, thereby limiting the inclusivity and reach of restorative justice programs. In addition, if there are gaps in staffing, center directors might be unable to dedicate time on advocacy work that is critical during the initial drafting of restorative justice legislation.

Affordable and Non-Discriminatory Housing. Stable housing is a critical component for individuals participating in restorative justice programs. However, many potential participants lack affordable housing or face discrimination in their search for housing, which increases their likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice system. The absence of secure housing not only undermines their stability but also poses a significant barrier to their successful reintegration into the community, ultimately affecting the overall outcomes of the restorative justice process.

Additional Support Services. The availability of additional support services such as transportation, childcare, and employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals is also limited. These services are crucial for enabling individuals to participate fully in restorative justice programs and rebuild their lives post-incarceration. Access to these services can be even more challenging for those who speak languages other than English, have disabilities, are people of color, or hold other marginalized identities. The intersectionality of these challenges further compounds the barriers faced by these individuals, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to support services.

> **"Keeping up with what is needed once you get out of court, pay the fees, you can't do it. You're broke when you come out of jail, who is going to hire you, and then you need money to pay fees. How are you going to succeed? So you go back in jail." - Past participant**

Data Collection and Dissemination

The effectiveness of restorative justice programs hinges significantly on robust and equitable data collection and dissemination practices. However, numerous challenges have been identified regarding the current state of data collection within these programs.

Lack of Centralized, Consistent Data Collection. The absence of a centralized method for collecting data complicates efforts to pinpoint areas where disparities exist and to implement targeted interventions. Addressing this issue requires establishing standardized data collection protocols that encompass demographic information and provide multiple avenues for participants to contribute their perspectives. Such measures are crucial for gaining comprehensive insights into program effectiveness.

Absence of Participant Perspective. There is a lack of consistent commitment to incorporating participant perspectives in decision-making processes, program evaluation, and educational efforts related to restorative justice programs. The meaningful inclusion of participant perspectives is essential for ensuring that programs are responsive to the needs of those they aim to serve. Without this input, there is a risk that programs may fail to adequately address systemic barriers that affect participants.

> **"We aren't mining for narratives that could be harnessed in a political and a human way." - Funding Administrator**

Screening Tools and Potential Bias. The use of screening tools like the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI) are employed to determine eligibility for programs such as the Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) Process. However, concerns have been raised about the potential for these tools to introduce bias, thereby creating inequities in access to restorative justice programs. Ongoing revalidation studies, such as those examining whether youth of color receive disproportionately higher risk scores compared to their white counterparts, are underway and underscore the need for vigilant oversight and adjustments to mitigate biases that could perpetuate disparities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are organized under two headings: Internal to Centers and Systemic Barriers. There is some overlap across sections where recommendations serve multiple purposes. For organizational clarity, some recommendations may be restated under multiple headers to address their relevance to different contexts. Additionally, simplified charts of recommendations can be found in Appendix C.

TCDG acknowledges and highly values the importance of global understanding, the collaborative implementation of strategy, and the necessity for a localized approach to restorative justice practices that is attuned to the distinct needs of individual communities. It is evident that not every recommendation provided will be directly applicable to each center or organization due to the unique characteristics and requirements of different communities. It is also true that there are important considerations for centralizing practices across the state to promote equity in restorative practices statewide.

TCDG strongly urges readers of this report to disseminate these recommendations among program staff, volunteers, former participants, and community partners, and to create robust opportunities for people across the system to discuss report findings, recommendations, and next steps. This dissemination plan is intended to foster a dialogue that critically examines and contextualizes the recommendations, prompting collaborators to reflect on how these suggestions can be effectively tailored and implemented within their specific setting while also identifying broad actions that can be applied collaboratively and uniformly across the state. Engaging in this reflective practice will enhance the relevance and impact of restorative justice initiatives, ensuring they are both culturally sensitive and practically effective in addressing the diverse needs and challenges of this work.

INTERNAL TO CENTERS

Equity-Driven Organizational Systems and Culture

Creating an equitable and inclusive environment within restorative justice centers requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach. The following recommendations, organized by key areas, aim to foster systemic change and enhance organizational culture. Implementing these strategies is crucial for embedding equity within restorative justice centers. By adopting these recommendations, centers can cultivate a dynamic, inclusive environment where equity conversations are integral to the organizational culture, ensuring that all staff, volunteers, and participants are actively engaged in fostering a more equitable and just system.

Expand Equity Conversations Within and Across Centers

To create an environment that prioritizes equity and inclusion, it is essential to integrate ongoing and structured equity discussions within the organizational framework of restorative justice centers. This approach encourages continuous engagement, learning, and collective action.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Ongoing Equity Discussions:** Integrate ongoing equity discussion topics into standing organizational meetings to ensure that equity remains a continuous focus in organizational culture and decision making. Adopt an equity decision-making framework to ensure a structured approach to embed principles of fairness, inclusivity, and justice into every facet of center operations.
- **DEI Facilitators:** Schedule regular, structured equity discussions and workshops led by skilled Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) facilitators to provide expert guidance and support and create spaces where staff can have open and honest conversations about challenging topics related to equity and inclusion.
- **Whole Center Equity Projects:** Create intentional opportunities for ongoing equity work throughout the organization, ensuring that equity initiatives are integrated into daily operations. Engage entire organizations in equity projects to foster a collaborative and inclusive work environment. This could be dedicated monthly equity time for hands-on projects such as developing and implementing a language access plan. This hands-on approach ensures practical application of equity principles.
- **Cross-Center Sharing and Collaboration:** Facilitate the sharing of best practices, successes, and challenges between centers to promote consistency and collaborative learning across the organization. Seek out and expand upon opportunities to collaborate and build relationships across centers.
    - **Regional Equity Working Groups:** Establish regional equity working groups to evaluate and share progress, identify gaps, drive equity initiatives, and support smaller centers that may lack the capacity for a full internal team. Regular communication between these groups and the centers will ensure consistent progress and mutual support. Task these working groups with assessing the effectiveness of equity initiatives, identifying areas for improvement, and sharing updates on progress.
- **Participant Feedback:** Develop mechanisms to regularly gather and examine input from past participants to inform and improve equity practices.

Implement A System-Wide Enhanced Training Program

Developing and implementing a comprehensive training program is crucial for ensuring consistency and effectiveness across all restorative justice centers. While we understand this work has begun through the EDJIE collaboration with VIBE Consulting, it is important to uplift

the perspectives of study participants in this equity assessment and raise TCDG's particular recommendations related to the topic.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Expand the newly established System-Wide Training Program:** Leverage existing progress of the unified training curriculum for all RJCs to ensure sustainability in equity and restorative justice practices across the system. Continue developing the skills and support systems of the existing cohort and utilize their experience to mentor and train new members.

> "I'd like to see in-person trainings across different offices to both learn from each other and from an expert. And practicing bystander intervention." - BIPOC respondent

- **Mandatory Training Protocols:** While mandatory trainings can be hard to implement, they are important to build a new culture with organizations. Centers should establish protocols for training for all staff and volunteers. This may include a plan to manage resistance in order to ensure that people participate in learning the skills needed to participate in an inclusive, equitable culture. There may be circumstances where it makes sense for people who hold marginalized identities to opt out. Develop a 6-month rollout plan that includes timelines, specific training sessions for volunteers, and strategies for addressing resistance. Be prepared to let go of volunteers unwilling to participate in the mandatory training, emphasizing the importance of commitment to equity.
- **Specific Training Topics**
  - **Bystander Intervention Training:** Incorporate bystander intervention training into the mandatory program to equip individuals with skills to effectively address discriminatory remarks or actions. Provide specific training on how to disrupt racist, heterosexist, cissexist, classist, and other discriminatory incidents.

- **Anti-Discrimination Training:** Implement robust anti-discrimination training and practices within all restorative justice centers. Focus on developing a deeper understanding of systemic discrimination and providing practical tools for combating it.
- **Additional Training Topics:** Expand the training curriculum to include education on class, trauma, ability, and privilege, particularly as these intersect with race, sexuality, and gender. Ensure that these topics are integrated into the broader context of restorative justice practices.

Increase Accountability Measures

To enhance the effectiveness and transparency of equity initiatives, it is essential to develop and implement robust accountability measures within restorative justice centers.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Co-Develop Policies and Practices:** Collaboratively develop policies and practices across centers that can be customized according to each center's specific needs, fostering shared best practices and collective expertise among all participants. Provide comprehensive training on various policy types and successful center practices to assist in effective policy prioritization and customization. Engage center staff actively in the policy development process to address real-world challenges and ensure practical implementation, crucial for enhancing buy-in and the efficacy of restorative justice processes.
- **Develop Bias Reporting Systems and Protocols:** Establish systems and protocols specifically designed for reporting bias-related incidents and achieving individual and community restoration. These systems should be clear, confidential, and include robust investigation protocols managed by trained personnel. Define and communicate transparent processes for addressing biased behavior within a restorative framework, ensuring consistent application across all cases. Additionally, provide comprehensive support for individuals reporting incidents, including access to counseling and peer support resources. Foster transparency by regularly reporting on incidents and actions taken, demonstrating a strong commitment to accountability within the restorative justice framework.
- **Track and Report Equity Initiatives:** Develop and implement robust tracking systems to monitor and report on equity initiatives and their outcomes. This involves establishing clear metrics and regular reporting intervals to assess progress. Each center should designate a specific point person or team responsible for tracking both internal and system-wide equity initiatives. It is crucial that this team maintains communication with the statewide equity work group to ensure alignment of local efforts with broader state-level goals and strategies. Transparency is key; therefore, make sure that reports are readily accessible to everyone, including staff, volunteers, and participants.

- **Elevate Equity Conversations:** Advocate for the establishment of a statewide Restorative Justice Advisory Committee that includes representation from past participants, volunteers, staff, directors, administrators, and community partners. Ensure regional representation to address the diverse needs and challenges across different areas effectively. Elevate internal equity discussions to regional and statewide forums to promote consistency and mutual learning among all centers. Develop robust communication channels to facilitate ongoing dialogue and updates on equity initiatives between centers and the statewide equity working group. Regularly disseminate information within the restorative justice community and to community partners, highlighting ongoing equity efforts, progress achieved, and areas identified for future development.
- **Establish Clear Criteria and Expectations for Volunteers:** Establish clear criteria and expectations for volunteers regarding equity and inclusion, incorporating specific language into volunteer and staff handbooks to outline these expectations clearly. Implement comprehensive equity training programs for volunteers, ensuring they are grounded in restorative justice principles and philosophy. Hold volunteers accountable for maintaining inclusive practices within the centers, addressing any challenges related to apathy or misunderstanding of the value of restorative justice work through targeted training and support initiatives.

Diversity and Retention of Staff and Volunteers

To enhance diversity and retention within restorative justice centers, it is crucial to improve recruitment practices, diversify the volunteer pool, and implement effective retention efforts. These actions aim to create inclusive environments where staff and volunteers from diverse backgrounds feel valued and supported. By implementing these recommendations, restorative justice centers can create more inclusive and supportive environments that attract and retain staff and volunteers from diverse backgrounds and promote equity, diversity, and inclusion across all levels of the organization, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of restorative justice practices.

Improve Recruitment Practices

Creating equitable and inclusive recruitment practices is essential for fostering diverse and effective teams within restorative justice centers.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Lower Barriers to Entry:** Codify lower barriers to entry by reducing unnecessary educational requirements, offering competitive salaries across all centers, and ensuring transparency in job postings by clearly outlining benefits and avoiding vague terms like "other duties as assigned."

- **Standardized Interview Processes:** Conduct all interviews with panels using the same set of questions for each candidate to ensure fairness and consistency. Establish and communicate statewide recruiting and hiring practices to streamline processes and promote equity across centers.
- **Emphasize Lived Experience and Diversity:** Emphasize lived experience and diversity in job communications and recruitment processes to attract a broader range of candidates. Remove barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals to work or volunteer in centers, promoting inclusivity and diversity.
- **Reduce the Biased Legacy of Rigid Professionalism**: Work to dismantle the often racist definition of professionalism prevalent within organizations in the US and imposed by some agencies. Staff and volunteers should be expected to demonstrate skills in empathy and restorative justice, not outdated appearance and professionalism standards.

Diversify Volunteer Pool

To enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of restorative justice centers, proactive efforts are needed to recruit volunteers from diverse backgrounds, including younger individuals and those currently underrepresented.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Actively Recruit from Diverse Backgrounds:** Actively recruit volunteers from diverse backgrounds, including younger individuals and those underrepresented in the current volunteer pool. Be up front and clear about expectations, responsibilities, and benefits one might gain from volunteering. Recruit multiple young people simultaneously to develop a supportive cohort that can help change the culture together. Focus on long term one-on-one relationship building by showing up to community events or organizing events at places owned or frequented by marginalized populations.
- **Training and Support:** Ensure that training and support for volunteers align with equity and inclusion goals to foster an inclusive volunteer environment. Pay volunteers from diverse backgrounds to recognize their contributions and commitment.
- **Share Cultural Advocate Program:** Share the Cultural Advocate program across centers to provide regional support, particularly beneficial for smaller centers with limited resources. Ensure that participant demographics are represented among volunteers to promote inclusivity and shared understanding.

Enhance Retention Efforts

It is essential to enhance retention efforts of underrepresented staff and volunteers within restorative justice centers.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Support Systems for BIPOC Staff and Volunteers:** Develop support and empowerment systems, such as mentorship programs and affinity groups, for BIPOC staff and volunteers. Provide resources to affinity groups to empower them to make meaningful changes within the organization.
- **Education on Supporting Marginalized Staff:** Educate all staff on how to support marginalized colleagues, especially when encountering bias, discrimination, or bigotry, to create a supportive workplace environment. Share successes and best practices in staff diversity and retention across centers to inspire and inform ongoing efforts.
- **Specific Support and Recognition:** Consider paying volunteers with marginalized identities to acknowledge their contributions and commitment. Share specific salary and benefits information transparently during recruitment to set clear expectations.
- **Affinity Groups and Cultural Advocacy:** Form affinity groups across centers for BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, and differently-abled staff and volunteers, providing resources for advocacy and support. Educate all staff on how to support marginalized colleagues, enhancing inclusivity and support within the organization.
- **Shared Responsibility for Equity Learning and Implementation:** Volunteers from diverse backgrounds should not be solely responsible for educating their peers or staff on equity issues. Centers should refrain from expecting diverse volunteers to undertake equity labor for the organization and instead, prioritize comprehensive equity training for all members, fostering an inclusive environment where everyone shares responsibility for learning and implementing equitable practices.

Community Engagement and Relationship Building

Building strong relationships with underserved communities and partner organizations is crucial for fostering trust and enhancing the effectiveness of restorative justice centers. The following recommendations aim to strengthen these relationships and expand service offerings to meet community needs.

Strengthen Relationships with Underserved Communities

Strengthening relationships with underserved communities is crucial for ensuring that restorative justice programs are inclusive and accessible to all individuals, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Establish Formal Partnerships:** Continue to deepen and solidify relationships with community organizations, particularly those serving underrepresented groups, such as BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, and other marginalized individuals.

- ○ **Forge partnerships** with organizations like Migrant Justice and the Vermont Language Justice Project to enhance outreach and support.
  - ○ **Host community events** in rural counties to position these centers as key advocates for equity work.
  - ○ **Listen and Learn** by taking time to understand the needs, concerns, and priorities of the community organizations and the individuals they serve. Actively listen to their stories and experiences to gain insight into their challenges and aspirations.
  - ○ **Work collaboratively on projects** across centers and with community organizations on projects or initiatives that address shared goals and priorities. Involve community leaders and members in decision-making processes. Ensure these project include regional partners

- **Community Forums and Targeted Programs:** Seek opportunities to co-host community forums to understand and address community needs and educate underserved communities about available services. Develop targeted programs with partners to address specific community issues, such as legal clinics or housing initiatives.
- **Early Intervention Opportunities:** Identify points earlier in the court system where there may be opportunities to shift towards restorative processes, such as pre-screening at arraignments for people in county prisons.

> **"It's important for underserved communities to know that we exist and that they can use our services. It's important to connect to communities so we can develop new programs and meet those needs." - BIPOC respondent**

Strengthen Relationships with Partner Organizations and State Agencies

Building and maintaining strong relationships with partner organizations and state agencies that fund restorative justice work is essential for the success and effectiveness of restorative justice centers. By fostering these connections, centers can enhance their service delivery, broaden their reach, and address the needs of the community more comprehensively.
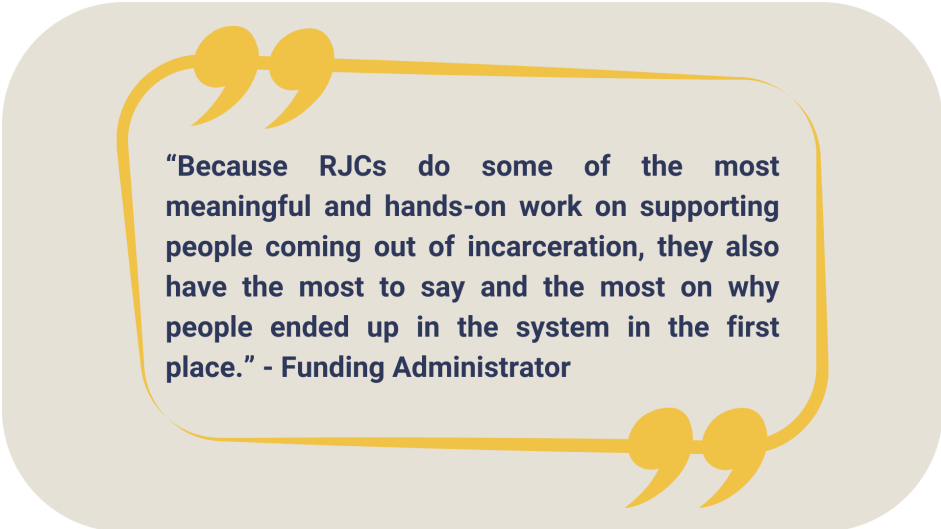
Recommendations for Action:

- **Ongoing Learning and Dialogue:** Engage in continuous learning and dialogue with referral sources, including police, courts, and other agencies, about restorative justice practices, trends, needs, benefits, and concerns.
- **Collaboration and Information Sharing:** Explore opportunities to partner, share information, and collaborate with existing referral sources. Identify ways to deepen relationships with police departments, defense attorneys, state's attorneys, judges, and parole officers.
- **Community Presence Beyond Panels:** Build a more prominent presence in communities beyond reparative panels. This could include initiatives like offering free legal clinics and hosting community dialogues to address local issues.
- **Replicate Success Stories:** Replicate examples of successful collaborations between center staff, funding administrators, legislators, judges, and others to build awareness and trust within the community. Highlight restorative justice stories through public discourse, such as podcasts featuring volunteers, staff members, and past participants.
- **Leverage VACDP:** Utilize the Vermont Association of Court Diversion Programs (VACDP) to strengthen relationships, share best practices, and work towards systemic change. Engage in legislative or policy development collaboratively with program partners, directors, and case managers.

Expand Service Offerings

To effectively serve the diverse needs of the community, it is crucial to expand and adapt the service offerings of restorative justice centers.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Flexible and Accessible Services:** Ensure services are flexible and accessible, including offering remote options where feasible, to meet the diverse needs of the community.
- **Collaboration with Funding Administrators:** Identify and strengthen opportunities for collaboration between program staff and funding administrators to enhance service delivery and resource allocation. This could include joint planning meetings, co-created goals and metrics, shared training and development, and perhaps, collaboratively developing pilot projects and innovative service delivery ideas.
- **Addressing Poverty and Related Impacts:** Explore funding and resources to support partners addressing housing, mental health, and substance use treatment for community members, providing allyship and advocacy and addressing gaps where possible. Seek opportunities to ensure equitable access to legal representation and support services, regardless of socioeconomic status.

> **"Because RJCs do some of the most meaningful and hands-on work on supporting people coming out of incarceration, they also have the most to say and the most on why people ended up in the system in the first place." - Funding Administrator**

Equitable and Inclusive Access to Services

Ensuring equitable and inclusive access to restorative justice services is crucial for addressing systemic inequities and enhancing the effectiveness of these programs. In this audit, perceptions of access and inclusion among BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents were significantly lower than white respondents, underscoring the importance of standardizing protocols, enhancing language access, improving physical and cognitive accessibility, and reducing financial barriers. These tangible changes can have a significant impact in achieving greater equity and inclusion.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Standardize Access Protocols**: Develop consistent state-wide protocols to be implemented across all centers, aiming to minimize variability in service access and quality. This standardization is crucial for ensuring equitable treatment of all participants within the restorative justice system.
- **Language Access**: Ensure uniform language access plans are consistently available across all centers to meet the needs of non-English speaking, deaf or hearing impaired participants. Enhance translation services to better serve non-English speaking communities, facilitating improved understanding and access to restorative justice services.
- **Increase Accessibility Physically and Cognitively**: Ensure that all centers are physically accessible to community members, including those with disabilities, and that they feature at least one "all gender"/unisex bathroom. Provide materials and support for individuals with low literacy or cognitive differences to enhance understanding and inclusivity in information and processes. Maintain a balance between remote work

flexibility and in-person access to staff, ensuring that all participants can receive necessary support in a manner that accommodates their needs effectively.
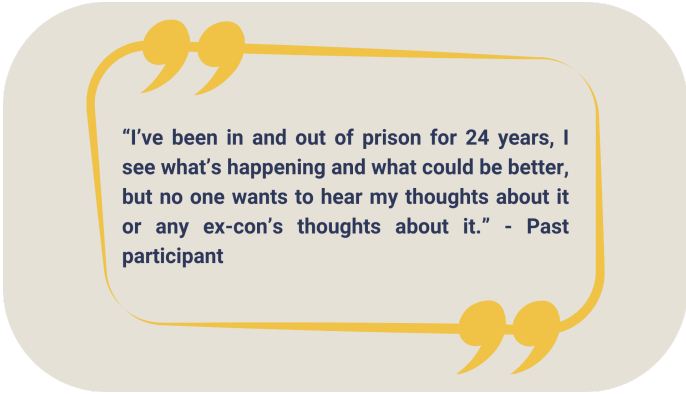
- **Eliminate Program Fees**: Remove program fees across all centers and programs to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent access to restorative justice services.
- **Gather Participant Feedback**: Regularly solicit feedback from participants to understand what would make their experience more accessible and inclusive.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Storytelling

Comprehensive and consistent data collection, coupled with effective analysis and storytelling, is essential for addressing inequities and improving restorative justice practices. While we understand this work has begun through the EDJIE collaboration with Vela Consulting, it is important to uplift the perspectives of study participants in this equity assessment and raise TCDG's particular recommendations related to the topic. Implementing standardized data methods, utilizing the data for meaningful changes, and incorporating participant experiences and ideas can significantly enhance the impact and reach of restorative justice initiatives.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Comprehensive Data Collection:** Implement comprehensive data collection practices by establishing uniform protocols statewide to track demographic information and service outcomes consistently. This should be complemented by thorough staff training in data collection and analysis to maintain accuracy and effectiveness. Moreover, maintaining community-based data collection allows for nuanced data gathering methods that are relevant to the unique characteristics and needs of each community. Where possible and able to be done anonymously, disaggregate data by identity in order to understand the experiences of those furthest from justice.
- **Improve Data Utilization:** Enhance data utilization by leveraging it to identify and address gaps in service provision and equity. Furthermore, utilize data as a tool to advocate for policy reforms and secure additional funding to support equity initiatives.
- **Incorporate Participant Input:** Implementing robust strategies to gather and utilize feedback effectively within restorative justice programs. Regularly solicit feedback from program participants to continuously inform and improve program operations. Emphasize participant narratives in reports and communications to illustrate the tangible impact of restorative justice, employing inclusive storytelling techniques to elevate the perspectives of BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Facilitate reflective processes that involve both victims and responsible parties to understand the root causes of harm and integrate these insights into systemic changes within the centers. Educate the broader community in Vermont on proactive measures through widespread communication of these efforts.

"I've been in and out of prison for 24 years, I see what's happening and what could be better, but no one wants to hear my thoughts about it or any ex-con's thoughts about it." - Past participant

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Referrals

Addressing the barriers within the referral process is crucial for enhancing equitable access to restorative justice. Efforts must be made to standardize referral practices and mitigate the influence of individual biases through comprehensive training and clear guidelines. Additionally, addressing the systemic delays within the court system can help facilitate more timely and effective restorative justice interventions. By improving the referral process and reducing court backlogs, restorative justice programs can more effectively serve their intended purpose of providing fair and constructive resolutions for all parties involved.

"Not sure why, but referrals vary according to the deputy state attorney handling the case." - Center Director

Recommendations for Action:

- **Referral Process**: Advocate for standardized referral practices and comprehensive training to mitigate biases. Identify places earlier in the court system where there may be an opportunity to refer someone to a restorative process. Develop more specific tools that objectively guide referrals. Identify opportunities for restorative justice staff to participate in referral decisions.

> **"In counties with prisons, there is an opportunity for people to do pre screenings arraignments to see if they would be good for center services." - Staff member**

- **Court System Reform**: Work with partners to reduce systemic delays in court processes affecting restorative justice referrals.

Policy and Statutes

Addressing federal and state policies that hinder restorative justice practices is imperative. Educating legislators on restorative justice principles and advocating for inclusive legislative processes are essential steps. Moreover, revising exclusionary statutes and removing financial barriers embedded in legislation are critical steps toward achieving a more equitable restorative justice system. By aligning legislative frameworks with the core values of restorative justice, we can create a more just and compassionate system that genuinely serves all individuals involved.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Policy Advocacy**: Advocate for policy changes to remove financial barriers and revise any exclusionary statutes such as those that prohibit formerly incarcerated people from participating on panels. Work with Legislators to revise policies that inhibit equitable access to restorative justice related to program fees, the referral process, and funding sources. Advocate for policy change to reduce bias in the referral process and increase equitable access.
- **Legislative Education**: Educate legislators on restorative justice principles and promote inclusive legislative practices.
- **Legislative Representation from Center**: Ensure restorative justice centers are represented on legislative workgroups and in advocacy efforts related to current or proposed restorative justice directives.
- **Codify Equity Practices in Manuals:** Work with state partners to update program manuals, with a real move toward a more restorative process especially where existing directives and documents fall short.

- **Highlight Successes:** Recognize centers and programs that have adopted more inclusive processes such as places where risk screenings must be completed before the State's Attorney makes a decision on a case. Share these examples in ways that those in decision-making positions can easily understand, especially those with little familiarity with the restorative justice system.

Fragmented Equity Work

The fragmented nature of equity work within and around Vermont's restorative justice system poses significant barriers to achieving truly equitable outcomes. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to align the commitment to equity across all levels of service provision, ensure consistent practices statewide, and integrate equity work holistically within funding agencies. By doing so, restorative justice programs can more effectively serve all participants, upholding the core values of equity and inclusivity that underpin the restorative justice philosophy.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Equity Integration**: Promote statewide consistency in equity practices and resource allocation to ensure uniformity in restorative justice programs.
- **Funding Alignment**: Work with funding agencies to integrate equity considerations into funding criteria and practices.

Misalignment of State Agency Policy with Restorative Justice Philosophy

While some agencies, such as the Department of Corrections, have codified aspirations in its new vision and mission, there has historically been a misalignment with the restorative justice philosophy. The effectiveness of restorative justice programs is significantly compromised when the guiding policies of their funders do not align with the foundational principles of restorative justice. Addressing this misalignment requires a thorough re-evaluation of policies to ensure they reflect core values of support, mutual accountability, and healing. This shift would foster a more supportive and less punitive environment that aligns with restorative justice objectives.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Policy Alignment**: Advocate for agency policies codified in manuals, procedures, and protocols, that align with restorative justice principles of support and healing.
- **Mission Evaluation**: Review and revise funding agencies' missions to support restorative justice goals.

Resources and Capacity

The resource gaps identified by center staff, participants, and administrators underscore the urgent need for increased funding and capacity building in restorative justice programs. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes adequate staffing, accessible mental health and substance use disorder services, affordable housing, and comprehensive support services. There is a critical need for a coordinated approach to this work. Rather than individual agencies working in isolation, a unified effort involving all partners can more effectively address systemic issues and push for necessary changes. This collaborative strategy can amplify the impact of advocacy efforts, ensuring that the collective voice is stronger and more influential in securing the resources and support needed for restorative justice programs.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Resource Development**: Secure funding to hire adequate staff at a competitive wage to enhance support services critical to restorative justice initiatives, such as mental health and substance use treatment. Develop grant proposals, partnerships and alternative funding sources to increase financial support for equity initiatives in restorative justice.

Data Collection and Dissemination

Addressing the challenges in data collection and dissemination is pivotal to advancing the equity and effectiveness of restorative justice initiatives in Vermont. By establishing centralized, inclusive data collection methods, addressing biases in screening tools, amplifying participant input in decision-making processes, and standardizing data collection practices, centers can enhance program transparency, accountability, and accessibility. These efforts are essential for promoting fair treatment, addressing disparities, and ultimately fostering positive outcomes for all individuals involved in the restorative justice process.

Recommendations for Action:

- **Data Standardization**: Advocate for standardized data collection methods and tools to enhance transparency. At the same time, individual centers should have the autonomy to expand upon these standardized tools to account for regional differences and needs.
- **Bias Mitigation**: Address biases in screening tools to ensure fair treatment in restorative justice processes.
- **Participant Input:** Use inclusive storytelling and other tools to incorporate participant input into decision-making, educate the broader community about restorative justice and its benefits, and highlight the need for systemic changes.

CONCLUSION

The equity assessment conducted by The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG) under the "Vermont's Restorative Justice Statewide Equity through Data, Justice, Inclusion, and Education (EDJIE)" initiative represents a significant step towards addressing racial and systemic inequities within Vermont's restorative justice programs. The assessment revealed both progress and persistent challenges in creating equitable and inclusive environments for all participants, particularly BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Key findings highlighted the importance of developing equity-driven organizational systems and culture, enhancing diversity and retention efforts, ensuring equitable access to services, fostering community engagement, and improving data collection and utilization. These internal improvements are essential for building a restorative justice framework that truly upholds dignity, safety, and repair for all individuals involved.

Moreover, the assessment identified critical systemic barriers that continue to hinder the equitable implementation of restorative justice in Vermont. Issues such as inconsistent referral processes, outdated policies and statutes, fragmented equity efforts, and practices misaligned with the values of restorative justice were highlighted as significant obstacles. The findings underscore the need for standardized protocols, policy advocacy, integrated equity work, sustainable funding, and collaboration across all partners to address these systemic challenges. By aligning policies and practices with restorative justice principles and securing adequate resources, Vermont can create a more just and equitable justice system that better serves marginalized populations.

The recommendations provided by TCDG offer a comprehensive roadmap for both internal and systemic reforms. Expanding training and accountability measures, diversifying staff and volunteer pools, enhancing community outreach, and standardizing data practices are critical steps for internal improvements. Systemically, developing consistent referral protocols, advocating for policy changes, integrating equity work, and increasing financial support are essential for overcoming barriers and fostering a more inclusive restorative justice system. By implementing these recommendations, Vermont's restorative justice programs can better fulfill their commitment to equity, justice, and inclusion, ensuring that all community members, especially those marginalized by the justice system, receive the support and opportunities they deserve.

> *"When the process begins with an unjust or racist referral, there is no justice to be had in the restorative process that follows."*

APPENDIX A. LIST OF DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Department of Children and Families: Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ)

Document Name	Description
Closure Form	Data
Data Reporting Explanation	Data
Referral Form	Data
Direct Referral Post Adjudication Form	Data
Contract Template	Grants
Roles and Responsibilities	Policies/Program Manuals
Case Transfer Guidance	Policies/Program Manuals
Records Retention	Policies/Program Manuals
Mission	Policies/Program Manuals
Youth Justice Flowchart	Policies/Program Manuals
Jurisdiction Charts	Policies/Program Manuals
Juvenile Restorative Panel Description	Policies/Program Manuals
Victim-Offender Review Board	Policies/Program Manuals
Role of the Volunteer	Policies/Program Manuals
Juvenile Restorative Process	Policies/Program Manuals
Common Questions about the YASI	Policies/Program Manuals
Full Assessment Brief Interview Guide	Policies/Program Manuals
Guidance for Sharing YASI Recommendations	Policies/Program Manuals
Pre-Screen Brief Interview Guide	Policies/Program Manuals

Center for Crime Victim Services

Document Name	Description
Victim Assistance Subgrantee data report	Data
VT Victims Rights	Education/Training Materials
Voice and Choice RFP	Grants

Attorney General's Office: Court Diversion/PreTrial Services

Document Name	Description
FY 23 Policy Manual	Policies/Program Manuals
All Record Info for Participants	Policies/Program Manuals
VACDP Vision	Policies/Program Manuals
AGO_DCPTS FY2024 RFP	Grants

Department of Corrections

Document Name	Description
2022 Volunteer and Grantee Application Packet	Policies/Program Manuals
CoSA 2019 Volunteer Manual	Education and Training
DOC 2022 Volunteer Manual	Policies/Program Manuals
PREA Orientation Handbook	Policies/Program Manuals
Reentry Coordinator Handbook 2021	Policies/Program Manuals
2016 Volunteer Services and Management Directive	Policies/Program Manuals
Volunteer Services and Management Implementation Guide	Policies/Program Manuals

Others

Document Name	Description
Lamoille Restorative Center Equity Assessment Report	Equity Report
Burlington Community Justice Center Equity Audit Report	Equity Report
Vermont Association of Court Diversion Programs (VACDP) Compiled DEI Strategic Plans	Strategic Plans

APPENDIX B. SURVEY QUESTIONS

Q1. Which restorative and community justice organization, center or program(s) are you affiliated with?

Q2. Overall, how do you feel about this restorative/community justice organization?

Q3. I feel welcome at this organization.

Q4. I feel safe when working at or with this organization.

Q5. This organization reduces barriers and creates opportunities for equitable and just outcomes in restorative justice programs.

Q6. This organization cares that everyone gets the services and support they need.

Q7. This organization is accessible to me (language access, website access, access to public spaces)

Q8. How would you describe this organization's willingness to take risks when talking about racism and inequities?

Q9. What is ONE example of a positive change made at this organization with respect to supporting BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+ and others who are often underrepresented?

Q10. What is ONE example of an area where this organization could better support BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+ people and others who are often underrepresented?

Q11. What is your connection with this organization?

Q12. Based on my experience, this organization incorporates the voices of staff in decision-making about things like strategic planning, policies, or programmatic changes.

Q13. Based on my experience, this organization incorporates the voices of program participants in decision-making.

Q14. This organization allocates resources such as time and money to support equity and inclusion.

Q15. This organization has policies and practices in place to address concerns about racial inequities and barriers to opportunity.

Q16. Organization staff and leaders are generally skilled at talking about race, racism, and how race and racism show up when providing services.

Q17. Organization staff and leaders support participation from people from diverse cultural, racial and ethnic groups.

Q18. This organization has a deliberate plan to engage and retain people that are reflective of the demographics of the community and client population.

Q19. This organization has regular trainings and discussions for staff and volunteers about removing barriers to opportunity and reducing racial disparities both internally and externally.

Questions 20-30 asked optional contact information for participants who opted into a prize drawing and demographic questions for disaggregation.

APPENDIX C. CHARTS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Equity Assessment Recommendations

INTERNAL TO CENTERS

Equity-Driven Organizational Systems and Culture

Recommended Actions				
Expand Equity Conversations Within and Across Centers	Ongoing Equity Discussions	DEI Facilitation	Whole Center Equity Projects	Cross-Center Sharing and Collaboration/ Regional Equity Working Groups	Participant Feedback
Implement A System-Wide Enhanced Training Program	Expand the newly established System-Wide Training Program	Mandatory Training Protocols	Specific Training Topics: ● Bystander Intervention ● Anti-Discrimination ● Additional		
Increase Accountability Measures	Co-Develop Policies and Practices	Develop Bias Reporting Systems and Protocols	Track and Report Equity Initiatives	Elevate Equity Conversations	Establish Clear Criteria and Expectations for Volunteers

Equity Assessment Recommendations

INTERNAL TO CENTERS

Diversity and Retention of Staff and Volunteers

Recommended Actions				
Improve Recruitment Practices	Lower Barriers to Entry	Standardized Interview Processes	Emphasize Lived Experience and Diversity	Reduce the Biased Legacy of Rigid Professionalism	
Diversify Volunteer Pool	Actively Recruit from Diverse Backgrounds	Training and Support	Share Cultural Advocate Program		
Enhance Retention Efforts	Support Systems for BIPOC Staff and Volunteers	Education on Supporting Marginalized Staff	Specific Support and Recognition	Affinity Groups and Cultural Advocacy	Shared Responsibility for Equity Learning and Implementation

Equity Assessment Recommendations

INTERNAL TO CENTERS

Community Engagement and Relationship Building

Recommended Actions				
Strengthen Relationships with Underserved Communities	Establish Formal Partnerships	Community Forums and Targeted Programs	Early Intervention Opportunities		
Strengthen Relationships with Partner Organizations and State Agencies	Ongoing Learning and Dialogue	Collaboration and Information Sharing	Community Presence Beyond Panels	Replicate Success Stories	Leverage VACDP
Expand Service Offerings	Flexible and Accessible Services	Collaboration with Funding Administrators	Addressing Poverty and Related Impacts		

Equity Assessment Recommendations

INTERNAL TO CENTERS

Equitable and Inclusive Access to Services

Recommended Actions				
Standardize Access Protocols	Language Access	Increase Accessibility Physically and Cognitively	Eliminate Program Fees	Gather Participant Feedback

Data Collection, Analysis, and Storytelling

Recommended Actions		
Comprehensive Data Collection	Improve Data Utilization	Incorporate Participant Input

Equity Assessment Recommendations

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Recommended Actions					
Referrals	Referral Process	Court System Reform			
Policy and Statutes	Policy Advocacy	Legislative Education	Legislative Representation from Center	Codify Equity Practices in Manuals	Highlight Successes
Fragmented Equity Work	Equity Integration	Funding Alignment			
Misalignment of State Agency Policy with Restorative Justice Philosophy	Policy Alignment	Mission Evaluation			
Resources and Capacity	Resource Development				
Data Collection and Dissemination	Data Standardization	Bias Mitigation	Participant Input		

APPENDIX D. REFERENCES

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