

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE SUMMIT

Messages of Hope **INTERRUPTING** . . . THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE



Partnering



with Elkhart
Community Schools

**Message from
Graham Salinger**
YOUTH PROJECTS
COORDINATOR



A student gets upset and hits another student in a moment of anger. A student steals something from a school. Should these students, who are at a specific point in their development, be treated as criminals who need to be punished until their behavior changes? Should they be treated as young people who should be supported in their efforts to learn from their mistakes while empowered to make things right and repair the harm they have caused?

We have all made mistakes, and we have all hurt people. I know I have. We are all also worthy of having the opportunity to do better. The school-to-prison pipeline is a dangerous cycle that stops that opportunity from being realized. As a restorative justice practitioner with CCJ, I have the honor of working with educators, youth, and their families to provide opportunities for growth and healing for youth who are in danger of being locked up and locked out of the chance of a great life. If I am working with youth in one of our programs, it is because of something that they did when they were not at their best, but it gives me great hope to see their promise restored through their hard work. Interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline starts with building healthy relationships with youth and with helping to create just and equitable environments in which they can thrive. I appreciate your interest in this topic, and we look forward to working with you to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

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WHY THIS SUMMIT

"I ended up graduating from high school pretty much thanks to you guys", explained a youth we worked with who was on the path to getting lost in the school-to-prison pipeline until being referred to the Center For Community Justice. The school-to-prison pipeline is an easy pattern to understand; students who are suspended are more likely to drop out of school and people who drop out of school are at a higher risk of getting arrested.

The question is how do we interrupt this pattern? At the Center for Community Justice, we know that it starts with school and working to reduce suspension rates through restorative justice practices. We also know that beyond working with schools, we need to provide restorative solutions for youth and their family. The Center for Community Justice works tirelessly in partnership with JUVENILE DETENTION ALTERNATIVES INITIATIVE (JDAI), juvenile courts, juvenile probation and Elkhart Community Schools to provide services to youth that increase their conflict resolution skills and social-emotional competencies. We also work with our partners to empower them so that youth support systems are operating in just and equitable ways that instill a sense of belonging and value in the youth that we serve.

This pamphlet will summarise a number of our programs that support youth and the systems that they interact with including numerous efforts to create restorative justice-centered schooling through our ongoing partnership with Elkhart Community Schools, Promise Academy for Conflict Resolution, our youth diversion workshop series, Family Group Conferencing in partnership with the (JDAI) and our victim-offender program (VORP).

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Speakers

Kempis Songster

Program Manager of Restorative Justice Diversion with the Youth Art & Self- Empowerment Project

Kempis Songster, also known as Ghani, is the Program Manager of Restorative Justice Diversion with the Youth Art & Self- empowerment Project based in Philadelphia.

He spent the first seven years of his life carefree in the beautiful twin island state/ nation of Trinidad & Tobago; his next 8 years as an honor student in the concrete jungles of Brooklyn, NY. As a teenager he ran away and spent four months as a runaway selling cocaine from drug houses in Philadelphia. During that time he took another person's life. He began a 30+ year prison sentence to life without parole/death by incarceration that began at the age of 15. He occupied his time behind prison walls trying to regain his humanity and moral rectitude and learning how to advocate for the humanity of others.

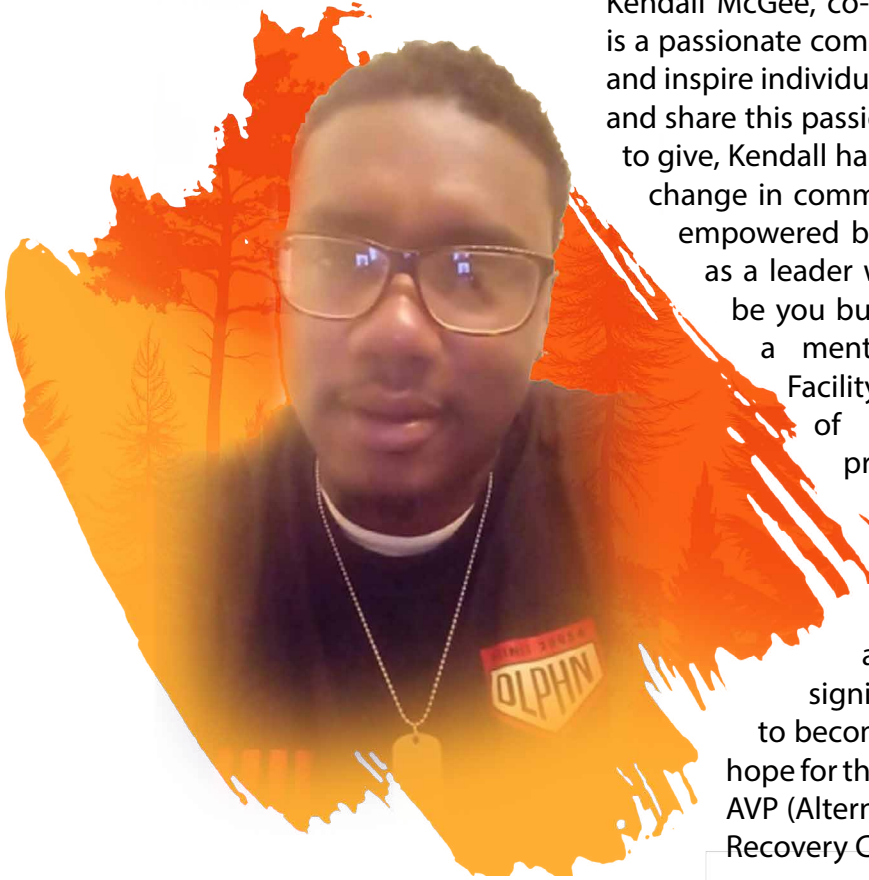
He is a founding member of Right to Redemption, and a founding member of the Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration (CADBI). He is a co-founder of The Redemption Project. He is also co-founder and director of Ubuntu Philadelphia. His case is the focus of the Transom and Frontline two-part documentary Living With Murder by Samantha Broun and Jay Allison. In 2019, Living With Murder was among eight Frontline features to be honored with the rare Gold Baton from the Alfred Dupont Columbia Awards.

Ghani worked as the Healing Justice Organizer with the Amistad Law Project for the first three years after his release from prison. He was also the co-creator and host of Amistad's monthly podcast show Move It Forward. He is now on staff with the Youth Art & Self-empowerment Project as the Program manager of Healing Futures, a Restorative Justice Diversion program. Ghani has spent his entire adult life in the fight for a more livable world.



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Kendell McGee



Kendall McGee, co-founder of The Village Community Center, is a passionate community servant with the ability to motivate and inspire individuals in identifying their potential to continue and share this passion to serve others. With this ongoing quest to give, Kendall has been able to promote significant, positive change in communities and individuals through advocacy, empowered by compassion. Kendall established himself as a leader while in prison showing men that you can be you but for all the right reasons. So, he launched a mentoring program for Miami Correctional Facility which focused on changing the mindset of troubled men through personal and professional experiences to foster change. An Elkhart native and single-mother raised, Kendall has grown to be familiar with a striving through strife mindset based on a strong foundation built in the Church and on educational values. The brief but significant attributes have naturally inspired him to become a voice to the voiceless and a beacon of hope for the hopeless. Kendall is a certified facilitator of AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project) , a Certified Peer Recovery Coach , Pastor, and a credible messenger.

Bryan Hammontree

Bryan Hammontree is the principal of Elkhart Academy, the alternative high school program for Elkhart Community Schools. He is an Elkhart native who has spent most of his life in the area. His personal experience has been similar to many of the students that he serves at his school. Bryan tries to use his experience to serve others. He seeks to use what he has learned and his story to make a positive impact on his school and his community. Currently, Bryan is working to implement RJE at Elkhart Academy and Elkhart Community Schools to support all members of the school community.



PASTOR EDWIN NEWSOME'S T H O U G H T S

ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM & THE-SCHOOL-TO PRISON-PIPELINE

What is a system?

When we understand a system, we realize that the person who authors a system creates it, possibly unknowingly, for his way of thinking to be the most successful. After all, the creator always puts some of himself within his creation. The very arrangement, perspective, and even the functionality to move through the different phases will be designed to benefit the one who created the system. However, another person, who has a different set of beliefs, sees the world from a different lens and functions differently from the system's originator will have a completely different experience.

What is the goal of our current education system as reflected by the National Education Association?

"Our vision is a great public school for every student.,

"Our mission is to advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world."

How is our current education system failing to meet this goal?

Many children whose learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and availability of resources cause them to be drastically negatively impacted in their experience within our educational system are drawn into what is known as the School to Prison Pipeline. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, which last year ordered school districts to respond to student misbehavior in "fair, non-discriminatory, and effective" ways, Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. In contrast, Black and LatinX students account for 70 percent of police referrals. Also, students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended as their non-disabled peers. In Ohio, a Black child with an emotional disability was 17 times more likely to be suspended than a White, non-disabled peer. Combine these "risk factors," and you're talking about a child who might as well stay home. Black children represent 18 percent of pre-school students but account for 48 percent of pre-school suspensions. Yes, we're talking about 4-year-olds.



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Why are we failing to meet the needs of every student?

The education system seems to be designed to educate only a particular style and type of student. The mere fact that we can label a child "learning disabled" because the child has a different way of processing information excludes many in the learning experience, making a child feel rejected in that experience. Once they are feeling rejected, they lose hope and fall into the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Pastor, Jerimiah Wright said; "I believe a change is going to come because many of us are committed to changing how we see others who are different." adding, "different doesn't mean deficient."

Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund Direction Attorney Arlene Mayerson explains why students become destined for failure, "At some point, a student who has not gotten the academic help he or she needs is so far behind, so alienated, and has heard themselves described as a 'bad student' so repeatedly that misbehavior becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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A group of five diverse young adults (three women and two men) are standing in front of a white brick wall. They are all smiling and holding a large, light-colored rectangular sign. The sign has the word "ADVOCATE" in orange and "FOR US" in green. The background features a stylized orange and yellow mountain range graphic.

**ADVOCATE
FOR US**

ACCOMPANYING PEOPLE IN PRISON COUNTERING MASS INCARCERATION:

DONATE

*This article is taken from **Intersections Summer 2018, volume 6, Issue 3**, a quarterly publication by MCC's Planning, Learning and Disaster Response Department*



In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27), challenging us not to place limits on who our neighbor is and whom we are called to love. However, we generally prefer to name for ourselves whom we identify as our neighbor. Too often we have been guilty of marginalizing those deemed unworthy because of acts they have committed, or simply because of who they are. Jesus calls us to the kind of love that refuses to be complicit in the marginalization of people, the kind of love committed to justice by opposing all that exploits and neglects. It is our hope that this issue of *Intersections* takes us further on the journey of compassion and justice for persons too often rendered invisible in our society—specifically, those incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons who are, and remain, our neighbors.

In recent years, MCC has become increasingly active in responding to the realities of imprisonment and to the needs and hopes of prisoners and returning citizens. In the United States, MCC's response has been shaped by the rise of mass incarceration and a prison-industrial complex marked by systemic injustice and racial disparities. In this issue, several authors examine different dimensions of mass incarceration in the U.S. Elaine Ewert Kroeker and Cherelle Dessus reflect on different MCC efforts to raise awareness among Anabaptist churches in the U.S. of the harms and the racialized character of mass incarceration, while Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz examines the impact mass incarceration has had on Indigenous peoples in the United States. Through an interview, Dwayne Harmon and Ron Muse, themselves former prisoners, reflect on the challenges returning citizens face and the best ways to accompany people upon their release from prison. Barb Toews, meanwhile, presses us to think about physical space, justice architecture and design in the context of mass incarceration and asks us to imagine what a correctional facility would look like that was truly focused on rehabilitation, accountability and healing.

Meanwhile, MCC also supports restorative justice and peacebuilding efforts in prisons outside the U.S. Paul Shetler Fast and Keith Mwaanga describe and analyze MCC efforts in Haiti and Zambia to support people both while in prison and upon their release. Together, the articles in this issue of *Intersections* challenge those who would follow Jesus in the U.S. and around the world to discern what loving our neighbor looks like in the context of mass incarceration.

Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz is MCC U.S. restorative justice coordinator.

Krista Johnson Weicksel works as peacebuilding coordinator in MCC's Planning, Learning and Disaster Response department.

CCJ School to Prison Pipeline Interrupter Services

IMPACT FROM THE FRONT-LINE

**Partnering with Elkhart Community Schools to
Create Restorative School Cultures**

In an effort to decrease the disproportionate rate at which students of color and students with disabilities are suspended, expelled and arrested, CCJ works with Elkhart School District's leadership team, administrators, principals, teachers and other school staff to infuse restorative justice principles into the school district's ecosystem. We do this by working with district leaders to identify and execute strategic restorative justice goals and through trainings that leadership and staff can take with us to achieve those goals. This past year, for example, we hosted our inaugural 24-hour restorative justice training for members of the Social-Emotional Learning leadership team and select principals. One principal who took part in that series explained that they would recommend this training for other educators because "sometimes we can only think punitively. This will help establish the why behind using restorative justice practices". They concluded that "I would like to see this as common practice around the district." Rhiannon Harrison, a District English Language Coach, had this to say about her training with the Center for Community Justice " RJE is so needed in public schools! I would recommend that other people take this course because it helps you have a different perspective and understand where others are coming from. It helps to keep in



mind that everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. This training has confirmed my beliefs that restorative justice is a more holistic approach that considers the whole child. After { the sessions on justice and equity}, I decided to understand my whiteness and privilege more" Echoing the connection between restorative justice and equity in education, Todd Kelly, a Behavior Consultant for Elkhart Community Schools, had this to say about being part of CCJ's Intensive Restorative Justice in Education Training Cohort:

"We now have a group of people in ECS who can speak intelligently about RJE. The progress feels good. Helping people understand what it means to be restorative is foundational to this work. The more we can get people on the same page, the better. Talking about race and identity is so incredibly important, and we really don't usually put in the effort. The experience was refreshing."

Last school year we also facilitated online community building circles for middle school students, teachers and a student resource officer with the aim of building relationships between school police

and students so that there was a greater sense of community in the middle schools. As one of the teachers who attended explained, it was a mutually beneficial learning experience for adults and kids that helped build trust and better understanding. The SRO who works at all three middle schools also highlighted how the circles helped establish positive communication with students around challenging topics in a way that changed school culture.

This summer we also offered district-wide community building circle training and will be offering a conference to repair harm training soon. We also help individual schools that have invited us on as consultants to implement restorative justice in education at their schools. Through these partnerships, we train principals and their staff in restorative justice theory, history, and language and then train them to be circle keepers. This also included ongoing professional development and professional development training, for example teaching staff how to use restorative chats. One of the schools that we have been partnering with is run by Bryan Hammontree, who you heard from as a summit speaker, he had this to say about the experience so

far “truthfully, students were apprehensive to be part of this program, probably thinking this would reinforce teacher’s positions. However, this was not the case; honesty and openness, by both staff and students, provided everyone with that valuable quality and equanimity; along with the importance of listening to each other” In addition to working with specific schools we are also a referral source for students in conflict and take mediation, circle or conferencing referrals for any student in the district so that when there is conflict or harm youth have a resource that will work with them to be agents of their own change and future.

Promise Academy for Conflict Transformation

We began PACT in 2019 in an effort to offer restorative justice services to youth who have gotten in trouble with the law. In partnership with juvenile probation we offer PACT as a four-part workshop series rooted in restorative justice practices to empower youth to transform conflict. The goals of PACT are also designed to align with many of the outcomes that the United States Department of Justice has listed as necessary program components for reducing suspensions and expulsions. This includes; increased motivation, and the promotion of more adaptive behavior, the fostering of supportive relationships between a young person and a non-parental adult who serve as role models providing support, social skills training aimed at enhancing students’ socio-cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavior skills to regulate maladaptive behaviors, violence reduction efforts that specifically target increasing self-control and reducing violence in schools and finally character-building and civic engagement.

CCJ’s staff of conflict resolution and restorative justice experts teach program participants conflict resolution skills to help them stay out of trouble in the future. With a focus on constructive communication, perspective-taking, and non-violence, PACT challenges youth to take nonviolent approaches to conflict. The social-emotional development that youth experience from the PACT workshop series helps them at school, at





home, and in the community. Furthermore, starting in August of 2020, parents received weekly pre-recorded webinars aimed at demonstrating what was learned in class so that parents can reinforce learning objectives at home. Giving youth a second chance to make things right when they have caused harm recognizes the promise that youth have. Empowering them to live up to that promise is a PACT worth making. For more details and data about the PACT program check out our 2020 annual report. To learn more about the imPACT that CCJ is making on youth and the community check out this local news report.

Seeing is hearing?

"I learned that talking about feelings and emotions due to conflict is better than fighting or arguing and I learned the ways that my actions affect people. Now I will talk things through instead of fighting."

"IT WAS FUN!!!!!! I was comfortable and I was able to express myself without having to worry about being judged. I liked to talk to Alice and Graham and meet new people and learn new things. I learned how to compromise, and be helpful towards others. I will use the things I have learned to keep me out of trouble."

"This was a really helpful class and I learned from my mistakes. I learned that there are other ways of dealing with conflict than fighting and that I can

walk away from a conflict"

What parents are saying

A parent wrote, "He told me that he liked to go there. He felt that it was easy to speak to the staff and other children without feeling judged. I think that him having to listen to other people with some of or close to the same problems helped him open up and know he wasn't alone".

Another parent stated that since taking PACT their child "is not in trouble like before because she is less argumentative with her peers. She is also starting to do better in school and has better family relationships"

JUVENILE DETENTION ALTERNATIVES INITIATIVE (JDAI) Partnership

Through our partnership with JDAI CCJ offers mediation services or family group conferencing for youth referred through their school and or school resource officer. Using a strength based approach, CCJ meets with youth, their family members and people from the school to discuss concerns and how to create a strategy to address those concerns so that youth don't get in additional trouble that could lead to expulsion from school or arrest. For an example of one of our many success stories watch this video with

one of our Family Group Conferencing participants.

VORP

The Center for Community Justice also receives referrals from juvenile court and probation for restoration between juvenile offenders and victims of crime. While some youth who are asked to do VORP have been adjudicated delinquent, others do VORP in order to have their charges diverted upon successful completion. In juxtaposition to a court hearing in which a judge makes a determination of restitution and/or other sanctions, the VORP program gives youth who have committed a crime an opportunity to meet with the person they harmed so that they can take accountability for their actions, answer any questions that the victim may have and come up with a written plan for making sure that they repair the harm that they have caused. This not only provides space for learning and growth for the youth who have caused harm, it also provides space for victims to heal. As this victim testimonial attests to, the VORP process, through its restorative justice approach, provides opportunities for transformation that putting kids in jail can't.

Supporting our Impact - Become an Interrupter

With your support CCJ staff will be able to expand its services to youth through a program that will include online tutorials, one on one mentoring and group coaching sessions. By becoming an Interrupter you can help sponsor youth so that they can receive educational and community building services at no cost to them or their family. As you heard from our guest speaker's stories of hope, hope starts with providing youth both the tools and sense of belonging that they need to not just survive but thrive. As an Interrupter hope will start with you, if you are unable to donate money at this time but are interested in supporting youth in their growth, consider signing up to be a mentor volunteer that will work with a CCJ staff member to help mentor a youth. If you know someone who would be interested in volunteering please also refer them to us. Perhaps most importantly, if you know a youth who could use some mentorship or coaching please send them our way. Help us break the chains by building bonds, thank you for your support.



ORDER OF EVENT OF S U M M I T

6:00

Introduction to the event & Introduction of
Speakers – Graham Salinger
Irwin Larrier – Executive Director

6:05

Keynote Speaker Kempis Songster – Messages of
Hope

6:25

Bryan Hammontree (Principal Elkhart Academy)

6:40

Kendall McGee – Executive Director The Village
Community Center

6:55

Q & A

Invitation to Support School to Prison Interrupters

We're Hiring

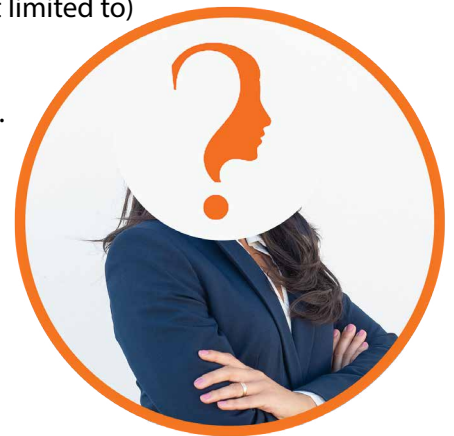
TRANSITIONAL & RECOVERY COACHING PROGRAM: COACHING CORDINATOR

The TRC Coaching Coordinator is primarily responsible for the oversight of all phases of coaching, with a specific focus on coaching justice-involved women; which includes, but is not limited to, direct coaching of program participants, and the development and training of volunteers with an emphasis on peer support.

PRINCIPLE RESPONSIBILITIES AND DUTIES:

Program Management and Coordination

- Manage IDOC and local jail inmate referrals.
- Maintain community awareness and support including (but not limited to)
 - a. IDOC
 - b. Criminal justice community
 - c. Service agencies such as housing, food, addictions, etc.
 - d. Religious Community
 - e. Service Clubs
- Keep up to date contact information for community resources.
- Oversee matching of coaches and coachees.
- Meet weekly with program coordinator for program review.



Volunteer Management

- Recruit, train and approve volunteer coaches
- Coordinate training for volunteer coaches
- Assign program participants to volunteer coaches
- Supervise volunteers, to include regular evaluations of volunteer coaches and their teams
- Create and maintain a pool of possible peer support from program participants

Program Promotion

- Promote the program in public speaking engagements
- Present to universities, religious organizations, service clubs and other agencies as requested to maintain ongoing Volunteer coach recruitment and financial support
- Collect success stories whenever possible

Perform other duties as assigned by the Program Coordinator or the Executive Director.

QUALIFICATIONS:

- Currently possess, or be willing to obtain, a certification in peer recovery support
- Person-centered, not program centered
- Positive attitude
- Strength's focused
- Goal oriented
- Equipper, not a problem-solver
- Willing to provide positive support to someone, regardless of their current or prior convictions
- Willing to meet with people while still incarcerated (additional requirements imposed by various correctional facilities)
- Not currently under IDOC or court supervision (parole or probation)

We're Hiring

Changing Lanes and Victim Impact Panel Coordinator

CCJ's Victim Impact Panel (VIP) is a longstanding program focused on reducing driving under the influence in Elkhart County. When someone is convicted of an OWI, the Courts often include VIP as part of sentencing. Traditionally, VIP has been an in-person gathering where parties and professionals who have been affected by drug or alcohol related crashes share their stories and discuss the impact of this crime in human terms.

COVID-19 has caused us to rethink what is possible for VIP. Now that gathering physically is not safe, CCJ staff have worked to adapt and deepen the online VIP experience. VIP itself is now happening via Zoom, and we have also added a prerequisite asynchronous learning program called Changing Lanes.

As Changing Lanes and Victim Impact Panel Coordinator, you would:

- Support participant progress from registration for Changing Lanes through completion of VIP, and follow up with participants as needed
- Recruit and supervise Changing Lanes Passengers (volunteers who will act as support people for those currently going through the curriculum by reading and responding to course work and offering encouragement)
- Cultivate relationships with volunteer Victim Impact Panel speakers in coordination with VIP Facilitator
- Troubleshoot technical questions related to registration and participation in the course, and find solutions with Thinkific, the course platform, as needed
- Maintain and strengthen relationships with our partners in probation and courts
- Create goals for program development with CCJ's Executive Director
- Monitor survey data and check in with VIP Facilitator
- Return phone calls related to Changing Lanes and VIP
- Respond to all emails sent to the vip@centerforcommunityjustice.org email address

Starting Pay:
\$14.00/HR

HOURS:
20 per week

Center for Community Justice is an equal opportunity employer committed to building a diverse staff and an inclusive organization. We welcome qualified applicants of all races, colors, religions, national origins, sexes, gender identities, sexual orientations, and disability statuses. CCJ encourages people who are formerly incarcerated or justice-involved to apply.

We're Hiring

Starting Salary: \$35,562.00

CHANGING LANES AND VICTIM IMPACT: PANEL CORDINATOR

The practitioner is responsible to manage a caseload and mediate/facilitate for the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP), Community Mediation, Promise Academy for Conflict Transformation (PACT), and other mediation or facilitation work, as well as with Restorative Justice in Education.

ACCOUNTABLE TO

The Executive Director and Restorative Mediation and Facilitation Coordinator.

PRINCIPLE RESPONSIBILITIES AND DUTIES:

A. Restorative Mediation and Facilitation

1. Case Management for VORP, Community Mediation, and other referrals
2. Prepare and maintain caseload using computer database and hard files
3. conduct intake interviews with victims, offenders, and/or community members involved in cases
4. Arrange and facilitate mediations when applicable
5. Track restitution agreements for victims
6. Report to referral sources on case status
7. Attend and testify in court proceedings when necessary
8. Oversee volunteers who manage cases

B. Trainings and Education Services

1. Assist in planning and facilitating restorative training
2. Assist in implementation of Restorative Justice in Education within school buildings and districts
3. Assist in conducting workshops for PACT

C. Other Duties

1. Assist Program Coordinator with responsibilities required in the operation of the program.
2. Perform other duties as assigned by the Coordinator or Executive Director.

SKILLS AND STRENGTHS NEEDED:

- A. Commitment to restorative justice philosophy
- B. Ability to practice empathy
- C. Good written and oral communication skills
- D. Strong organizational skills
- E. Ability to work constructively as part of a team
- F. Preferred candidates will be able to use lived experience to connect with persons through the work.
- G. Preferred candidates will bring diversity of identity and experience to our team.
- H. Spanish language skills a plus.
- I. Preferred candidates will have good self-awareness and reflective practice.

TIME REQUIRED: 40 hours per week, Monday through Friday, occasional evenings or weekends.

COMPENSATION: Position is salaried with vacation and benefits, starting at \$35,562.

UPCOMING RJ EVENTS



October 12, 2021

Changing
Lanes (VIP)

Time 6:00PM – 7:15 PM

November 30, 2021

Giving in the Middle
of a Crucible

Time 10:00AM – 5:00 PM

December 16, 2021

Celebration of Hope:
Into the Future

Time 6:00PM -7:15PM

February 8, 2022

Moving Beyond
Hard Conversations

3:00PM – 4:30 PM

*****All events will be online***



Welcome and thank you for choosing to participate in this event. We want you to write down some of the things that have engaged you and even challenged you. Please use this space to make notes of these things. (This section is for you alone)

Please list 3 things that got your attention during this event

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Of the three things listed above, which one challenges you to think and see the world differently?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The question now arises "How can I help?" There are three ways you can help. We invite you to choose from the below options.

- a. Be a Champion _____
- b. Invite others to be engaged _____
- c. Invest/Sponsor _____

For further information, and help in talking about how you can partner with us as we drive this mission forward, please reach out to Irwin Larrier at ilarrier@ccjelkhart.org or call 564-295-6149.

DONATE

Message from the Executive Director Irwin Larrier

What are we to do?

It is Tuesday morning, August 2008, and the sun is struggling to show its face as the dark clouds of morning bring with them the promise of hope along with the threat of rain. On the inside, I am nervous, hesitant, even afraid. However, on the outside, my smile is broad and deep, exuding confidence. The shoulders back, head held high, shirt perfectly pressed and ironed, shoes shining brightly from the spit and polish that I had been trained all my life to do as I stepped into life and the uncertainties of teaching students already identified as at risk.



I had heard the stories, watched the movies, listened to the palpable fear emanating from many around me. "It is not going to work; those are 'bad kids'; those kids have been suspended for fighting too many times; one more strike and they're out; are they worth it?". These and many more comments, worldviews,



perspectives messages of failure swirled around my head, especially when I couldn't understand a word they said. They found my British accent amusing, even funny. And here I am standing before a group of 16 to 18-year-olds who I later found out were in the "School to Prison Pipeline."

I didn't know what the school-to-prison pipeline was but was able to guess what it meant and how it put a starkly unfair value on young men and women who lived seriously complicated lives. I felt the helplessness of the students in my class. They told stories of physical abuse, violence, gang involvement, gang avoidance, relationship abuse, and the trauma of living in a context that had written them off. My most difficult challenge was losing some to gun violence while watching others expect to "catch a charge" and follow the pathway to jail, prison, incarceration.

I remember standing in front of the judge advocating for a young man who is doing right, but his past has chained him down in the eyes of the system. I see the fear in his eyes, the looks of pitilessness in the attitudes of those who are also in court on various charges. I see the resignation in the eyes of his parents, and then the judge invites me to speak. All the things I rehearsed in my head came flowing out, but to me, these things were empty, useless in the face of a robust system of punishment as it sought justice for those who my former student victimized. And then I stopped sharing my rehearsed rhetoric. I just said, “your honor, he’s so sorry for what he’s done; he’s broken on the inside; he’s working on getting his GED/HSD and was caught up in the only life he knows to survive. I can’t promise he will never do anything wrong again; I can’t promise that he won’t lie or steal again. All I can do is speak to who I know him to be and believe that with the support of adults like myself, his struggling parents, teachers, and support of the system, he can make it and become the reality of the promise deep within him. Thank you. My student was put on probation for nine years—what a challenge, what a hurdle. The last thing I hear about him is that he’s keeping his promise even as he struggles to live a life of promise. Thank you for your messages of hope and the support you daily give to our community for those of us who serve our communities in multiple ways. We need more “Messages of Hope” as we “Interrupt the School to Prison Pipeline.”



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