

“Realize that we, as human beings, have been put on this earth for only a short time and that we must use this time to gain wisdom, knowledge, respect, and the understanding for all human beings since we are all relatives.” Cree Proverb

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

What We Heard Report

Building capacity for culturally relevant restorative justice services and supporting Alberta Justice’s comprehensive provincial strategy to integrate Restorative Justice services seamlessly into the justice system.



Otipemisiwak
Métis Government

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BACKGROUND

Connecting with Indigenous and racialized restorative justice and social work practitioners over the years, a common theme surfaced: the absence of a culturally relevant platform to share our stories, struggles, experiences, and insights. Conversations often centered around our children and how we create impactful change for future generations.

With the announcement of the provincial restorative justice (RJ) strategy, a call to action became clear: Establish a platform to support the development of an Indigenous stream within Alberta Justice's provincial RJ strategy with the goal of addressing the disproportionate representation of Indigenous people in the justice and child welfare systems. *See Corrections Services Canada, Transforming the Criminal Justice System: Indigenous over-representation – Jorgina's Story 4-minute video: [CSC Jorgina's Story](#)*

Working collaboratively, the Metis, Indigenous, and Racialized Community (MIRC) Engagement project team with the support of Otipemisiwak Métis Government President Andrea Sandmaier, submitted a grant proposal to Alberta Justice. The focus was to engage in Indigenous-led research guided by the principle of 'Nothing About Us, Without Us' to mobilize from within, build relationships, and learn from one another about the issues we face and how to best deal with them.

At this juncture, we had many doubts. Uncertain if we'd receive funding, and if we did, would Metis, First Nations, and racialized communities be interested in working together? Do people have the time to participate? What are the barriers to engagement? Can we address them? How do we organize ourselves to get the work done? How do we ensure stakeholders don't feel marginalized? Which is the very thing we're trying to address. How do we empower from within? We had big questions with limited resources that posed concerns at the get-go. Faith, trusting the process, and relying on traditional values and restorative principles guided us.

In March 2024, the Otipemisiwak Métis Government of the Métis Nation within Alberta received a \$25,000 one-year Alberta Community Justice Grant to address the unique challenges Metis, Indigenous, and racialized communities face regarding barriers to developing culturally relevant, sustainable restorative justice services.

The project team convened stakeholder committee meetings from July to September. Meeting with like-minded people with shared experiences naturally created a safe space for people to feel comfortable talking openly and honestly, lifting the burden of advocacy. Each meeting started with a prayer and was open to anyone interested in attending.

In September and October, we facilitated eight online sharing circles attended by 62 people, and 38 attended the 2024 ARJA engagement session. Some individuals shared stories about growing up in the child welfare system, experiences with the criminal justice system, or frustrations working within the social justice system. For anonymity and assurance of safety to openly share without the fear of reprisal, the names of participants are not provided in this report.

This report encompasses what we heard in four theme areas: RJ's intention, desired outcomes, success and overcoming challenges, and practitioner wellness. To ensure the report honours what we heard, we asked volunteer stakeholders to review it—a heartfelt thank you to Kim Ghostkeeper, Shannon Mah, Jeffery Chalifoux, and Stacey Harrison.

Acknowledgments

This province-wide engagement initiative would not have been possible without the dedication and support of the Alberta Justice Community Safety Initiatives Unit team. The project team would also like to acknowledge the Alberta Restorative Justice Association (ARJA) for helping to promote awareness and hosting an engagement session at last year's conference.

The dedication of the core project team members made this project happen. Thank you to Gayle Desmeules, Gloria Brathwaite, Jordan Broadhead, Cora Martin, Sarah Holmes, and Sharon Bourque. The project team is equally grateful for the prayers, traditional teachings, and spiritual guidance from Métis Elder Sarah Skwarchuk, Blackfoot Elder Bryan Yellowhorn, and Somali Community Elder Yusuf Osman, which helped keep us grounded in the work.

Our utmost gratitude to the First Nations, Metis, racialized community members, and allies who attended Steering Committee meetings and participated in the engagement sessions this past year. The personal stories shared in focus group sessions remain in the circle, but the insights gained are captured in this report. The committee felt strongly about leaving the raw input as recorded. Therefore, some sections of the report may seem repetitive. Since we are at the beginning of this historical journey, we chose not to summarize the data to protect and honour the integrity of individuals who shared their voices.

WHAT WE HEARD

In the online focus groups, we asked stakeholders if they wanted to be separated into distinct groups: Metis, First Nations, and Racialized Communities. The attendees chose mixed groups based on the following:

- We're all experiencing many of the same barriers and cultural relevancy issues.
- By working together, we can better support each other in addressing the disproportionate representation of Indigenous and racialized peoples in the criminal justice and social services systems.
- Restorative justice is about the greater good: our collective well-being and healing.

This report recounts what we heard from people who attended online sharing circles, the stakeholder engagement session held at the 2024 ARJA Conference, and relevant research. The Steering Committee also developed recommendations to support a relational approach to capacity building for the Indigenous stream of the Alberta Restorative Justice Strategy, ensuring that progress is led and informed by traditional wisdom and justice practices.

Key Findings

This Restorative Engagement Initiative has made considerable progress in identifying systemic barriers and fostering collaborative relationships. However, continued investment in culturally relevant RJ practices, sustainable funding, and practitioner support are critical for long-term success.

Findings revealed the need to build capacity for First Nations and Metis (FNM) practitioners and communities to address a critical issue: the disproportionate representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice and child welfare system. Transformative change occurs with everyone at the table, racialized practitioners and allies alike.

The following is a summary of seven key findings:

1. **Barriers to Restorative Justice (RJ) Development**

- Systemic issues connected to unresolved intergenerational trauma, colonial mindsets, and lack of cultural competence in mainstream justice systems hinder RJ adoption.
- Practitioner burnout due to limited resources and over-reliance on volunteers impacts the quality of RJ services, inadequate training, mentorship, and internal leadership conflicts, exacerbating the challenges associated with RJ development.
- Lack of standardized Indigenous RJ facilitation qualifications and certification creates barriers to practice and recognition.

2. **Culturally Relevant Practice**

- Traditional practices such as circle processes, incorporating Elders, land-based cultural practices, and ceremonies are crucial for healing and reconciliation.
- RJ benefits all parties by fostering healing, accountability, and reintegration into communities, reducing recidivism, and strengthening family and community ties.
- The focus should be on increasing the availability of FNM RJ services, given the substantive disproportional representation in the mainstream justice system.
- Incorporate local traditional practices and values into RJ processes to ensure cultural alignment and effectiveness from pre-charge diversion referrals to post-custody.
- Developing culturally relevant, trauma-informed training and certification under a provincial Indigenous RJ Agency would enhance practitioner competencies and program credibility.

3. **Practitioner Wellness**

- RJ practitioners face significant emotional demands and require self-care, peer support, and trauma-informed counselling.
- RJ practitioners experience significant emotional strain, including burnout, lateral violence, and vicarious trauma. Holistic healing resources are essential to support their mental, emotional, spiritual and physical well-being.
- Develop wellness programs for practitioners, including peer support networks, debriefing opportunities, and access to counselling services.

4. **Sustainable Funding**

- Inconsistent funding and lack of centralized networking limit the capacity to scale RJ practices.
- Systemic biases, policy constraints, and inadequate outreach reduce stakeholder participation and alignment.

5. Provincial Indigenous-Led Non-Profit Entity

- A non-political, neutral provincial organization can serve as a centralized networking platform; a hub for RJ practitioners to share resources, provide support and mentorship, and, when needed, access outside facilitation services.

For example, in smaller communities where facilitators know or are related to the people involved, they should access an outside (roster) facilitator to ensure impartiality. In cases of serious offenses, such as drug trafficking or homicides, a facilitator may be fearful of reprisal or subject to retaliation.

- The focus needs to be on addressing Indigenous disproportionate representation. This project, initially called Metis, Indigenous, and Racialized Communities (MIRC), should be rebranded as Alberta Indigenous Restorative Justice in Action (AIRJA). This in no way negates the needs and valuable contributions of racialized members and allies—inclusivity is mutually beneficial for the greater good.

6. Provincial Symposiums

- Host gatherings to refine standards of practice, foster relationships, and share learnings.

7. Community Awareness

- Facilitating restorative engagement meetings with Crown Prosecutors, Defense Counsel, Duty Counsel, Judges, RCMP, or local police forces to raise awareness of RJ, understand their hopes, worries, and expectations, and share the same to foster collaborative relationships from a place of mutual respect and intercultural understanding.

FOCUS GROUP SHARING CIRCLES

Theme #1 - Intention of Restorative Justice

September 24, 2024 (Afternoon and Evening Sharing Circle)

Reconciliation: What Is It?

The following understanding of reconciliation provides the context upon which participants shared. Reconciliation is a dynamic process with the overall goal of peacemaking. It validates everyone's history and reality and recognizes their respective rights. This chameleon-like process takes different forms depending on the context, history, and culture.

To some, reconciliation implies that a positive relationship once existed and, therefore, is about restoring that relationship. This definition, however, is limited in that it does not apply in situations where the relationship has arguably never been positive. For Indigenous peoples, whose relationship with European-based cultures has been deeply shaped by colonialism (Blackstock, 2003; Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Milloy, 1999; RCAP, 1996), reconciliation is not about restoring a past relationship but rather establishing a new one founded on equality, respect for distinct cultures and ways of being, and the recognition of inherent rights (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown, & Formsma, 2006; RCAP, 1996).

Human history throughout the world shows how one society prospered from the oppression of another, but the gains of the oppressors are not sustainable over time. At some point, they have to account for their gross inhumanity, which has often been couched in the language of progress and civilization (Wright, 2005).

What's the intention of restorative justice? What are we trying to restore?

The following are quotes from participants captured by the sharing circle facilitators:

- Peace and harmony
- Faith in humanity, faith in the criminal justice and social services system
- RJ is a process of healing and restoring healthy relationships that takes more than one or two circles.
- A culture of understanding, compassion and kindness
- Child and Family Services and the Criminal Justice system formalize family breakdown through policy and approach. If the family is the basic unit of society, healthy families create healthy communities. Where possible, restorative processes need to consider family healing and reconciliation to address self-harm and harming other behaviours (domestic violence, addictions, etc.) to address root issues and stop the cycle of violence and unresolved intergenerational trauma.
- Positive connection with one's culture and community
- Good citizenship: for an individual having 'difficulty' to learn and grow from the experience and understand that taking responsibility is an integral part of growth, rather than being ostracized.
- Healthy workplace cultures
- Safety and well-being for at-risk children and youth
- The ability to share one's story and listen to others' experiences
- A safe place where the harm done (intentionally or unintentionally) can be meaningfully addressed
- Sacred ways of handling conflict and harm
- Integrity, self-esteem, confidence
- Self-determination to support the development of culturally relevant restorative practices

Progress seems to be seductive; societies globally have and continue to purchase it using their own humanity and values as currency. In societies torn by gross violations of human, economic, and social rights, reconciliation for the oppressed can mean restoring the right to survive as a distinct people and, for the oppressors, restoring their humanity and values. Thus, reconciliation involves a process of transformation from systems of domination to a relationship of mutuality that involves improvements in personal and political understanding, valuing, and behaving (Sutherland, 2004).

Reconciliation and Restorative Justice are related concepts (Hauss, 2003). While restorative justice is concerned with *repairing harm* (Declan, 2006), reconciliation is concerned with *healing and mending* deep emotional wounds on both sides of a relationship (Assefa, 1999; Herwitz, 2003). Justice and equity are at the core of reconciliation. For this reason, wrongdoers, victims, victim groups, representatives of various communities, government officials, and others must be involved in the processes and the development and designing of restorative processes. Such inclusion contributes to the work of restoration (Llewellyn, 2002).

How did we traditionally deal with conflict and harm?

The following are quotes from participants captured by the sharing circle facilitators:

- Mentoring and holding those accountable by helping them overcome mistakes and move forward
- Involvement of Elders, ceremony, sweats, connection, living according to traditional values
- Being non-judgmental, coming from a place of love, respect, kindness, humility
- Humanize the person who caused harm. Although what they did (past behaviours) is wrong, they are valuable members of the community who can learn through guidance.
- Restore a sense of belonging, like being re-born, to reinstate a positive identity.
- We come together, use collective wisdom, and dig deep to understand one another's experiences, hopes, dreams, and fears.
- Repairing oneself, one's identity, and standing in the community brings healing and reconciliation to everyone.
- Trust, support, and listen
- A place to speak where people are not concerned about their words being used against them.
- Consensus decision-making focused on the welfare of the community and future generations.
- A highly structured circle process helps people manage their emotions to diffuse and understand one another's perspective to repair harm to relationships and rebuild trust.
- Not using punitive measures because they exacerbate rather than heal and promote recovery from inter-generational trauma caused by colonization and systemic racism resulting in socio-economic problems (e.g., poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, poor health): root issues of crime.
- A challenge is that we were disconnected from Elders, and teachings were not passed down. Some of us became lost, took on the role of the oppressor, and became violent towards one another (lateral violence). We adopted a colonial mindset and were punitive in our thinking. Everybody was busy trying to protect themselves and family members from the social justice system rather than passing down traditional/cultural ways of resolving conflict.
- We were supposed to be silent, so growing up, I thought it was better not to speak up. I am learning from relations, my traditional language, and the Elders' teachings. This is what RJ means: reclaiming our traditional ways. Small actions we all take can bring justice and create ripple effects.

Theme #2 - Desired Outcomes

Tuesday, October 1, 2024 (Afternoon and Evening Sharing Circle)

How does RJ benefit the person harmed?

RJ benefits persons harmed in multiple ways. The RJ process allows participants to focus on the issue that has brought them together more intimately and meaningfully than the current criminal justice process. Current criminal justice practices focus on isolation and follow strict, standardized procedures where harmed individuals have little to no chance to participate. Courts are cold, impersonal settings. The harmed person will likely better understand how or why the harm occurred and experience restoration of safety and balance; they can make decisions and regain control.

The harmed person is empowered (personal power vs being a spectator) and has an opportunity to use it (agency) to be heard and validated in a safe, supportive environment. They influence the outcome (administration of justice) rather than the court justice system, where they feel re-victimized. RJ processes are designed based on what they need to help them heal and reconcile the harm.

Below are quotes from participants captured by the online sharing circle facilitators:

- They have a voice and control over the process, and the satisfaction of knowing what they say matters and can directly influence the outcome.
- Autonomy and validation by sharing the impact of their experience in their own words.
- Get their needs met through collaborative problem-solving.
- Healing: a way to process the hurt, harm, anger, and resentment.
- Feel more protected, safe, and supported, and not subject to alienation or other forms of retaliation.
- Get answers to their questions, i.e., Why me? What did I do to deserve this? What's going to happen to the accused? How can I restore safety and rebuild trust?
- Restore family ties and relationships. Victims are heard, spouses referred, and charges withdrawn.
- Respect and safety (spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically)
- Restore trust in the system and faith in humanity
- Experience an environment of shared empathy
- Address the root issues causing the harmful behavior so it doesn't happen again.

How does RJ benefit the person responsible?

Most importantly, the practice of RJ humanizes the person responsible. Current criminal justice processes isolate the person who caused harm and place the focus on denunciation, deterrence, and punishment. It is not transformative: it does not cause a significant change in someone to make them better. Instead, the opposite happens, and we end up in cycles of despair and dependency, further exacerbating (worsening) harm (PTSD).

There is an inherent learning opportunity in the RJ process. Restorative Justice (RJ) emphasizes learning through reparation. The person who has caused harm must take accountability rather than a defensive stance. Through accountability, they gain an understanding of the far-reaching impacts of the harm – on the harmed person(s), the community, and themselves. They come to understand how their unresolved trauma leads them to harmful behavior and exposes them to healthier norms. RJ offers long-term benefits by encouraging pro-social behaviors, unlike the adversarial justice process, in which the main priority is to escape potential punishment.

Below are quotes from participants captured by the online sharing circle facilitators:

- You can't have agency in one's life if you are sitting in a jail cell
- If constantly in a cycle of dependency, child and family services, there's no agency
- Instill hope
- Treated with dignity and respect
- Have a voice. There is a story behind actions, and RJ allows them to tell that story.
- It allows them to begin their healing journey, "need love to give love."
- Prevent a criminal record, especially for youths
- Opportunity to ask for forgiveness
- Supports the person's reintegration into the community or prevents their removal rather than alienation. Young people shunned or ostracized gravitate to negative subcultures or gang life to find somewhere they fit in, for acceptance and belonging, to fulfill an innate human need—connection.
- Opportunity to understand how their actions have impacted everyone—victim, family, community.
- Nothing good comes from just locking people up. Instead of "an eye for an eye," there is a focus on reparation and moving forward positively.
- It gives them their dignity and pride back, self-confidence that they can change and that the incident of harm doesn't have to define them. Shed the 'bad' kid negative label.
- Be viewed as a valuable family and community member; the focus is on addressing the behaviour, not the person, allowing them to "fail upwards."
- Often, the persons responsible are products of a system that has failed them; RJ can rebuild trust and restore their faith in the system (CFS, CJS, Police, Schools)
- Providing emotional closure puts the matter to rest for them and everyone, limiting the potential for repercussions such as alienation.

How does RJ benefit families and communities?

Families of both the person responsible and the person harmed feel isolated, helpless, and hopeless in the wake of harm. Indigenous and racialized communities are often tight-knit, and rifts between families can lead to lateral violence and community breakdown. Family members are given agency to resolve this disharmony through the RJ process because they are able to voice their needs and indicate how those needs can be met. Therefore, healing is possible for everyone who is impacted. The current criminal justice system does not offer a way to repair these fractured relationships.

In some cases, family members put themselves at risk by helping persons who have caused harm to avoid the criminal justice system. They do so because they recognize the system's detrimental effects. This could be avoided if they knew their loved one would receive fair, just, and effective treatment for their offending behaviour. This is possible in cases that are diverted from the criminal justice system to an RJ process.

The culture of individualism leads to the impression that instances of crime and disharmony are the problem of the person(s) causing harm and the harmed person(s) alone. This is inaccurate from a holistic perspective; the community has a role in responding to crime and disharmony. *"It takes a whole community to raise a child. It also takes a whole community to heal relationships between harmers and harmed."* Through the restorative process, the community may better understand the context in which these situations occur, i.e., the effects of addictions, poverty, trauma, or lack of conflict resolution skills.

How Does RJ Benefit Families and Communities Cont'd:

Communities have some responsibility to the person who causes harm as well. Recidivism rates have remained steady, and it is apparent that isolation and banishment are not successful strategies for preventing deviant and harmful behavior. Belonging and inclusion can have a much more powerful effect on behaviour. Through reintegration, the person who causes harm has the opportunity to learn and practice pro-social behavior and is more likely to conduct themselves in such a manner in the future.

Furthermore, RJ does not end when a person completes their sentence. Upon release from custody, an individual can participate in an RJ process to repair relationships with family, community, and—if willing—the harmed person. This opportunity for reintegration reduces the risk of reoffending, strengthens social bonds, and fosters long-term healing.

Below are quotes from participants captured by the online sharing circle facilitators:

- Gets them (the community) meaningfully involved in the process.
- They are comfortable knowing the process; they are not in the dark: open communication and transparency between formal systems and the family/community.
- Strengthens relationships and brings people together to promote safety.
- It gives the community and families closure.
- Bring the connection back.
- Families and communities can hold the person responsible accountable for their actions.
- Eliminate recruitment into negative subcultures and gangs of young people who yearn for acceptance and belonging due to labeling and stigmatization: an unintended consequence of punitive approaches. Therefore, public safety through acceptance.
- It allows everyone to get things weighing on them off their chests. If you're carrying it, other people are too.
- Strengthens family ties and community connections
- Justice their way: We can immediately work on resolving the conflict rather than the longer judicial process.
- It helps to direct people to support programs and get them the help they need more quickly.
- It breaks down stigmas
- Allows for a more creative solution process
- Upon release from custody, the accused/offender can participate in a restorative process to repair relationships with family members, the community, and, if willing, the victim.

How does RJ benefit the Criminal Justice System (CJS)?

The setting where healing occurs is essential in grounding the process and should allow for connection. RJ brings the matter out of the contrived environment of the courtroom setting and into a community setting, which is much more congruent and applicable to real human experience. RJ practice can reduce some of the stress on an overburdened justice system by diverting appropriate matters and positively decreasing recidivism rates.

Below are quotes from participants captured by the online sharing circle facilitators:

- Allows their humanity to come out and be put to good use
- Everyone is equal, and we need everyone's wisdom for the wisest result
- Provide alternatives and options to the traditional court process and help alleviate pressure on court resources and the overall number of files being managed.
- It allows for more creative thinking and problem-solving.
- Reduces the workload of Crown Prosecutors
- Allows more flexibility to work with people for however long they need
- Reduce recidivism by getting to the root of the problem: What unmet needs must be addressed attributing to the reason why the person responsible caused harm
- RJ allows them to express themselves from a place of humanity and engage in open dialogue with victims, offenders, and the community on the impacts of the harm and how to address it.
- Everyone has something of value they can contribute and take from the conversation.
- RJ gives people who work in the CJS hope
- Justice OUR way allows for cultural relevance.
- CJS is a fragmented system, and RJ is a place of true humanity
- One breakout group stated that it was hard to come up with benefits when the system has done so much harm to our communities.

Theme #3 – Successful Programs and Overcoming Challenges

Tuesday, October 8, 2024 (Afternoon and Evening Sharing Circle)

What makes a restorative justice program successful?

Cultural relevance

- A lasting legacy impact of colonization ingrained in the collective Canadian consciousness is the idea that Indigenous belief systems, culture, justice, laws, and spirituality centered around relationships and an interconnected worldview are inferior. The Eurocentric or Western paradigm, well-intentioned or not, embodies an attitude of ‘we know better.’
- Indigenous people may internalize this negative identity, which manifests as internalized shame that operates at the subconscious level—the belief that one is intrinsically unworthy, incapable, and doesn’t measure up/ lesser than others. Harming self and harming other behaviors is a derivative with no process to facilitate healing and recovery (decolonization). In addition, what’s driving disproportionate representation is unresolved inter-generational trauma. The devastating trauma of genocide, loss of culture, and forcible removal from family and communities became a sort of psychological baggage continuously being acted out and recreated in contemporary Indigenous culture.
- Understanding the natural stages of decolonization can help Indigenous practitioners, trainers, and program staff on their recovery journey and frame RJ practices by honouring traditional ways of knowing and cultural practices for reclaiming healthy relationships. RJ provides a path for healing and reconciliation, helping to break cycles of violence and addressing the disproportionate overrepresentation in the social services and justice system.
- Preparation is essential for ensuring cultural relevance to identify and integrate participants’ beliefs into the process. A traditional example of a circle process is starting with a smudge and a prayer, inviting others in the spirit world to join because the answers lay within the circle.

Below are quotes from participants captured by the online sharing circle facilitators:

- Give them a choice of matching them up with an Elder, pastor, grandmother, or grandfather.
- Work with the spirituality of the individuals, teaching the people that they don’t need to go to a specific space to connect with the Creator—you can connect with the Creator wherever you are.
- No judgment on religion; acknowledge each person’s beliefs.
- Restore connections with family and community to reinstate belonging.
- Find ways to incorporate family and cultural traditions so the process is culturally relevant.
- Break down colonial ways, “There is always value in our camp, i.e., I wouldn’t make a good hunter, but I’m good at picking berries.”
- More culturally relevant facilitators and less talking about it.
- Fine-tune to let systems know the Blackfoot ways, Cree, etc.
- Humanity is universal, regardless of ethnicity.
- Take a comprehensive approach by bringing together Indigenous and racialized RJ Trainers, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to develop touchstone principles to guide culturally relevant restorative justice models, practices, and facilitation competencies.
- Going through rites of passage teachings and use of traditional medicines.

Recovery from Intergenerational Trauma

- Honouring traditions, culture, and ways of life help people make connections with the experience of colonization and systemic racism so they can understand where the harm began in their family and community and begin their decolonization journey of healing and self-determination.
- The process should ensure people learn about their history and traditional way of life and how cultural values helped them survive and overcome obstacles. This acts as a north star for their journey of reconnection and grounds them so they can rediscover their true self and purpose in life.
- When we work with the spirituality of individuals (i.e., teaching, praying, smudging), they can send prayers to the Creator or whatever spiritual belief they pray to. Once they are connected to their spirituality, they can overcome their issues.
- There's a mental health issue because of the indoctrination of our people. Instead of using strict ways, use whatever works best for the person based on their culture.
- We can't structure things; we must be more creative and give people more autonomy to restore peace within and with others.
- Understand that Trauma is different from Inter-generational Trauma.
- Literacy is also an issue in school. The children would come home with notes, but the parents couldn't read. They don't understand what is being asked of them and are intimidated by the teachers. That's something that we could work with to repair the harm. Parents get notes from the teacher but don't know how to answer them. They also don't attend parent-teacher interviews because they can't follow or understand. So, they don't go, and the child has nobody standing up for them. There's a little guy over there and nobody there to speak up on his behalf, so that must not make him feel very good, either. So, we need to be able to help the parents for their children's sake so they can understand what is going on because the literacy problem stems from residential school.

Restorative Practice Components

- Ensure participants are comfortable sharing openly and honestly
- Personalize follow-up sessions until the risk factors have been addressed
- Show genuine belief and expression of hope that people can change
- Autonomy, compassion, and customized support
- Open minds and hearts
- Collaboration with agencies, families, and the community to develop a restorative plan.
- Incorporate what a person needs. Use community resources such as family or individual counselling and spiritual guidance. Give people process options, meet them where they are without judgment, and move forward by working 'with' them.
- Focus on the recovery of the person responsible and those harmed rather than the charge.
- No tables, nothing interfering with the interaction and connection.
- Creating space for everyone. Informing them that we are Indigenous-based, and this is how we do things, but we are inclusive in that we will accommodate your beliefs and values.
- Foster connections, community engagement, accountability, feeling heard, understanding impacts, and repairing harm.

- With the traditional justice system, we miss an opportunity to catch them when they are most motivated. When people are imprisoned, they don't know the impact of their behaviours, even when they are willing to make changes.
- Focus on healing, addressing emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual recovery.
- Reclaim power for victims so they can control their healing journey/process.
- Personal growth reduces recidivism. When all parties involved reflect and can move forward.
- Participants must trust in the facilitator and their ability.
- Create safety by ensuring primary involved parties have a support person, and meet with the support person to ensure they understand the process and their role.
- Leadership commitment and education about RJ and how it can benefit them and the community.
- Empower the people to make the change.
- It is about correcting behaviour and taking responsibility for repairing the harm, not punishing.
- Do circles, not the colonial spaces that exist now.
- Open the gaps and barriers and discuss how to solve them.
- Use different facilitation techniques and adjust the circle process to ensure that the flow and dialogue meet the needs of attendees.
- Keeping facilitation services grassroots and authentic
- Get the story about what happened. For example, assault with a weapon. After meeting with the involved parties, it was found that the husband threw a birthday cake at his wife, and he was charged with assault with a weapon.

In Summary

- Take a comprehensive approach by bringing together Indigenous and racialized RJ Trainers, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers to develop touchstone principles to guide culturally relevant restorative justice models, practices, and facilitation competencies.
- Provide consistent funding for long-term support and for agencies to hire full-time culturally relevant facilitators to provide restorative resolution services across the province to address gap areas. For example, the majority of Indigenous Albertans live off-reserve, off-settlement.

What are some of the challenges RJ programs face?

Below are quotes from participants captured by the online sharing circle facilitators:

- When non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants were brought together for a circle process, one non-Indigenous participant called the circle process witchcraft.
- Working in a non-Indigenous system – policy/procedures/legislation
- Getting justice workers on board with RJ is difficult. We need to shift their mindsets to get people out of or prevent them from going back behind bars.
- What should be done when victims don't want to participate? Is it restorative and ethical to proceed in their absence?
- Developing a code of ethics and training and practice standards for facilitators. Right now, anyone can be a facilitator, but we need people adept at handling more serious matters who are culturally competent and trauma-informed.
- Affordable, culturally relevant training.
- CYFEA Court is structured around Children's Service needs, not the families.
- Learned helplessness and internalized shame make engagement challenging with historically oppressed populations.

Capacity Building

There is no Indigenous network authority or dedicated funding to share and support one another and work collaboratively with government and referral authorities to address RJ service gap areas.

- There is no home for RJ: practitioners and agencies working in isolation, in silos.
- We do not have the resources, people show up to ceremony, and there is not enough medicine to go around.

We need to create space for the next generation to learn about RJ and have the necessary support to become trainers and facilitators so they can promote awareness of the benefits and application of RJ in the workplace, schools, family, and community life for crime and violence prevention.

Culture Clash

- There is a clash between the system and traditional ways of healing. The system offers support but does not follow through. The system (e.g., Children Services) takes the idea of cultural relevance and makes it their own, and it is not appropriate for them to define culture and what it consists of.
- There is a literacy issue for older generations of Indigenous peoples; they do not understand foreign processes. Feel alienated and scared.
- There is a lack of collective advocacy for our people in the system. They blanket cases rather than treat them individually.
- Indigenous people knowledgeable and trained to facilitate RJ circles have a different worldview.
- Breaking intergenerational trauma and creating connection.
- Power imbalance and lateral violence. Stigma and reputational damage and how that can impact a person negatively and hinder their healing/ growth.
- Systemic barriers. Navigating regulatory bodies and complaint processes. Many people are not comfortable with being vulnerable, battling emotional triggers, and having a trauma-informed approach.
- Anger management or other counselling services should be offered in person rather than online.
- I call it restorative healing because of the stigma associated with the word justice; people are fearful and reluctant to engage.
- Honesty and truth are subjective, especially considering the extenuating (historical trauma) circumstances of Indigenous people. We tell the truth because the Creator asks us to tell our truth.

Community Awareness

- There is a lack of general knowledge of RJ. It is not something many people think of when dealing with conflict or when harm is done.
- Social media is a big gateway for a lot of hatred and anger, already setting it up for failure.
- The stigma is that everybody in jail is bad, and everybody who goes to court is bad.
- Practicing it is challenging because many people don't know what RJ is, why we do it, or what we are trying to accomplish.

Indigenous Awareness

- Part of our struggle in restorative justice is understanding that culture is correct. Connecting our clients to Elder support or traditional ceremonies is an actual right of Indigenous people. You still have that system that does not understand why this is important. People in the criminal justice system or social services minimize its importance. It's vital to facilitating recovery from the experience of inter-generational trauma and restoring trust between the system and Indigenous people.
- Family Group Conferencing is structured around what Children Services wants, not what the family needs—listening to their perspective. There is always a “well, we need to do this, or we need to get approval for this.” They do not trust that the family knows what they need to help create that safety.
- CFS is supposed to create cultural plans; we are not seeing that right now.

Ideas for overcoming these challenges

- Having two facilitators, one holds the space while the other checks on the people who need one-on-one.
- Teaching people to correct the behaviour, not punish the person.
- Explain to them that here is a chance for empowerment. Do not coerce them; instead, inform them about the RJ process and let them know they can participate in a safe space to share their perspectives and feelings.
- Help them have agency and confidence in the circle and you as a facilitator.
- Do not use a surrogate victim; if the victim does not want to participate, then just continue with a healing circle for the person responsible for the harm.
- Traditional ways of knowing and being are co-principles.
- Trauma-informed approaches, advocacy, and neutral, culturally relevant trained facilitators
- Finding proper training- the foundation of how to facilitate circles.
- Facilitators should be paid employees, not volunteers. It is a highly skilled profession that requires specialized training, culturally relevant certification, active supervision, support, and mentorship.
- Diversity in spiritual beliefs, not just a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Legitimize the process and the facilitators.
- Do the prep work to build relationships and understand everyone's perspective, expectations, and needs.
- Client-centered approach, customize the process based on the needs of the clients.
- Certified facilitators, valid training
- Power dynamic shift must happen.
- More funding
- Creating a place to heal
- Be inclusive.
- Break down the silos and create a platform for us to meet regularly to support one another, network, and share information.
- Take responsibility for the change we want to see through collaboration, communication, and learning from each other to capitalize on our strengths, skills, and knowledge.
- Coordinate with AB Justice for alignment and maximize our efforts.
- Access to Mental Health Services for clients
- Website on who to call for information about RJ.

Theme #4 - Practitioner Wellness

Tuesday, October 15, 2024 (Afternoon and Evening Sharing Circle)

What is needed to support practitioners and agencies?

Below are quotes from participants captured in the online sharing circle facilitators:

- Give ourselves some grace and do therapy. Be mindful that you may get PTSD from the job if you hear terrible stories and circumstances or become desensitized to your pain. We have no business helping people if we don't care for ourselves.
- Walking in the grass barefoot and physically grounding yourself.
- Regular sharing circles between facilitators where we do fun activities or crafts and air out what is weighing on us.
- Share what's happening in our lives and the complex cases we've been facilitating—a safe place to share and unwind.
- Create a peer support network to co-facilitate. It eases the burden and prevents burnout.
- Becoming more self-aware of myself and practicing self-reflection. How do you deal with and process it when you realize you are triggered? Being self-aware and having a supportive team matter.
- If you are in charge, you must ensure facilitators have a place to debrief. You need to ensure that someone else is available. Because, at one point, I had to seek professional counselling and experienced extreme trauma and burnout.
- We need to have our own Indigenous RJ Conference, like the ARJA Conference. I attended the ARJA Conference a few years ago, and it felt like Indigenous peoples were a gloss-over—a box to check.
- I had to leave my job due to PTSD, lack of support from my organization, felt betrayed by my agency.
- Indigenous worldviews are hard to explain to mainstream RJ practitioners. Carrying the burden of advocacy is stressful and challenging, and it's not moving the needle. We need a house to take care of our mental health and wellness in this work and to combine our wisdom. It's a big job trying to address the disproportionate representation of Indigenous and People of Color in the social justice system.

Training

- Indigenous and racialized practitioners need access to culturally relevant training and to receive oversight, co-facilitation, and mentorship support to hone their skills and build confidence in facilitating circles.
- Practitioners need to be trauma-informed to work with clients effectively. The benefits are numerous, but most notably, it ensures a level plane of interaction and judgment is less likely to impede the practitioner-client relationship.
- Research indicates most offending behaviours are rooted in some form of trauma and stress. A practitioner must understand the root causes of the offending behaviors of the client and, equally, address the victim's needs to customize/inform the restorative process(s) offered and support services for healing and reparation/rehabilitation, i.e., wrap-around services.
- A practitioner's cultural competency is imperative. They must possess a deep understanding and applied knowledge of intergenerational trauma and the impacts of colonialism and racist ideology. Grief and loss have an overwhelming effect on these communities, and stresses are cumulative in nature.

- The accused, who is subject to a Restorative Justice (RJ) process, is likely to be experiencing compounded trauma and stress. To effectively work with these clients, a practitioner must have insight and genuine regard for the interplay of these factors, knowledge, and access to community services.
- Support in the form of advocacy and relationship building to help clients access mental health, legal aid, etc., is required.
- Creating and implementing culturally relevant customized training for Crown Prosecutors, RCMP, Child and Family Services, and Schools about Restorative Justice practices.

Cultural Relevance

- Cultural competency is necessary when serving Indigenous and racialized populations. Unique cultural traditions and customary practices in RJ allow participants and practitioners to connect meaningfully to the process.
- Practice should be more relational as this reflects the cultural worldview of many racialized and Indigenous peoples.
- The spiritual aspect (the role of Elders) should play a central role in RJ practice. Their insight is crucial in guiding the process because of their experience, knowledge, and cultural/spiritual connection.

Collaboration

- Connection between and among providers is beneficial in terms of program development. RJ is not a new concept. Using limited resources to capitalize on pre-existing policies and procedures is better—there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Practitioners should be able to benefit from one another's strengths, knowledge, and experience in the spirit of collaboration and mentorship. This will create an environment that supports practice where RJ can flourish and grow.

Meaningful processes

- Participants should be required to put forth considerable effort in completing meaningful requirements as part of the reparation process. Each set of requirements should be unique to the person in question and tailored to their specific needs. Ceremonies acknowledging and celebrating participants' successes should be part of a holistic process, and people should be rewarded for their efforts.

Sustainable funding

- Limited funding limits capacity development. Long-term stable funding would allow agencies to focus on program development and continual quality improvement.

Networking platform

- Western-based RJ agencies benefit from the offerings of the Alberta Restorative Justice Association.
- Developing a hub for connection, peer support, resource-sharing, and training opportunities would benefit culturally relevant practitioners and RJ organizations. This platform would strive for sustainability as part of forward-thinking strategic goals. Lack of representation in the decision-making process is problematic – decisions about practice should be made by the stakeholders who serve the target groups.

What self-care is necessary for practitioners to maintain their wellness?

Nourishing activities

- Practitioners need to engage in activities that nourish them – physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. Doing so helps to relieve stress. Each person has individual preferences and must be encouraged to seek these activities out. Making time each day to do things that nourish oneself should be formalized and encouraged. Land-based connection is intrinsic to the Indigenous worldview and offers many opportunities for healing.

Support networks

- Peer support can be a good way to debrief and manage the stress from RJ circles that are particularly taxing on practitioners. Building a support network amongst coworkers within agencies is essential for creating a nurturing workplace environment. Opportunities to connect through team-building activities can help with this development.

Recognition and understanding of trauma, vicarious trauma, and PTSD

- Most individuals who become clients of RJ practitioners have experienced some form of trauma in their lives. Practitioners can experience vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress while working with these clients. Daily exposure to this trauma compounds the everyday stresses of practitioners. It is crucial to understand how trauma can be transferred and the effects this exposure has on an individual so that strategies for mitigating this harm can be developed. Incorporation of these strategies is paramount in the health and wellness of practitioners.
- Agencies can assist by offering training and educational opportunities for their employees and offering health breaks or days off from work to focus on taking care of one's mental health.

Understanding personal limitations

- Practitioners need to understand their limitations and boundaries. Agencies should work to assist practitioners in developing this understanding. Limitations exist in the scope and role of a practitioner and the client-practitioner relationship. Not all practitioners may be aware of their limitations or have the ability to introduce and enforce their boundaries. So, coaching, training, and mentorship in this area is imperative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Practitioners and agencies reported that having a platform to share their experiences and connect with others in a culturally relevant context is highly positive and beneficial. Building a network of relationships takes time. For various reasons, some practitioners and agencies did not participate or were unaware of this initiative. ***It is recommended that the project seek continued funding from Alberta Justice and other sources to develop an Indigenous RJ provincial network.***
2. Many stakeholders remain unaware of this project due to inadequate communications/outreach connected to limited resources. ***It is recommended that resource personnel be secured to handle all communication updates and email distribution lists, develop promotional materials and an interactive website/use of social media, schedule virtual and in-person engagement meetings, maintain a record of this initiative, take meeting minutes, and coordinate in-person forums.***
3. Indigenous peoples include First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples. Given the commonalities associated with oppression and systemic racism, the involvement of racialized practitioners is mutually beneficial. Still, the disproportionate representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system and children under the care of child and family services undeniably requires this project to focus on addressing this statistic. ***It is recommended that a provincial non-political, neutral entity be formed/funded for continuance, and this project, initially named MIRC (Metis, Indigenous, and racialized communities) be called Alberta Indigenous Restorative Justice in Action (AIRJA).***
4. Meeting in person is a culturally relevant engagement method for forming supportive relationships where people feel comfortable sharing stories and insights about service delivery, training, and support. ***It is recommended that a provincial gathering be held annually or biennially (every two years) to share information about culturally relevant services, build relationships, and promote collaborative action with formal authorities to advance the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP.***
5. Developing culturally relevant skills-based restorative justice (peacemaking) training must be a priority. This work is labour-intensive, and meaningful involvement from Indigenous trainers, practitioners, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers is necessary. Exploring the possibility of working with a post-secondary or other training institution to develop this type of training would be advantageous. ***It is recommended that funding be explored from different sources to design culturally relevant RJ training and certification of peacemaking facilitator skills and competencies in a highly supportive service delivery model to achieve intended outcomes—address the cycle of violence connected to unresolved intergenerational trauma.***

CLOSING COMMENTS

In closing, we appreciate everyone who has contributed by lending a hand, sharing wisdom and experiences, providing guidance, and dedicating time. This level of response affirms stakeholder commitment to developing sustainable Indigenous RJ services seamlessly integrated within the social justice system.

Advancing the truth and reconciliation process is a collective responsibility. Therefore, we shall maintain an open-door policy that welcomes participation from First Nations, Metis, Inuit, and racialized communities and allies at any stage throughout the life of this project.

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