

Hello, my name is Melinda Venegas. I live in Portland, Oregon. I am writing to express my support for the continued funding of the Criminal Justice Commission's Restorative Justice Grant Program (RJGP). I care about Oregon continuing to fund and expand the Restorative Justice Grant Program.

I will be completely honest, I didn't know about Restorative Justice until my son was arrested for the first time in March of 2022. While he was incarcerated I was invited to a newly formed group called ReGroup which is based on Restorative Justice practices for Re-entry (this group started inside OSP). Here I was given the information of Restorative Justice practices/principles. At one of our meetings two members from Lutheran Community Services NW came and advised our group they were presenting a Restorative Justice Dialogue training for Volunteers. I signed up for the training, and several months later I am now working for them as an RJ Facilitator.

My son's conviction and incarceration took place in Washington. I can't help to think that if my son had the opportunity to participate in Restorative Justice practices and/or dialogue he could have had a different outcome. I also feel this process could've changed things for me because I was also arrested and charged with theft in my early 20's. I can't tell you the shame, and guilt I have carried due to being considered a "criminal" and having to explain to potential employers about my conviction for several years following. It was dehumanizing, humiliating, and demoralizing during the process, and even after many years. I have still carried this shame until this day, however, as of this year I have experienced the most freeing and healing part of my journey in this life because I've had to share my story to advocate for my son during his incarceration and now with the work that I get to do by sharing it with others who are going through similar experiences.

I love the fact that RJ practices involve all parties: the harmed party, the responsible party, and the community, during the process. All parties involved get to have a voice to be heard. RJ practices promote public safety, community, and healing; these are just some of the powerful benefits and moments during this process that as a "whole community" we can learn, heal, and grow from. RJ for the harmed party gives a valuable opportunity for them to know someone is taking accountability, and for healing, having a voice, and empowerment. Whereas, for the responsible party it gives a life changing opportunity to acknowledge, take responsibility and accountability, and work towards repairing the harm that was caused. This leads to wholeness, connection, and unity for all involved parties but also individually. This is how true healing takes place and reduces recidivism. RJ is one of several examples of community based alternatives to prosecution that can be less expensive than the current system. I strongly believe Oregon needs more approaches to harm that don't involve incarceration or conviction and the reduction of recidivism. This is community in action!