

# OPINION: Victims Should Get to Meet with the Offender to Participate in Crime Resolution

*Mike O'Connell and Joe White*

Everyone agrees that individuals who cause harm to others should make amends for what they've done. Victims of crime deserve to feel justice has been served in their cases. Judges and prosecutors work very hard to ensure that justice is served in every case and we take that search for due process and a resolution very seriously.

For a long time, punitive sentences like probation and fines were the only tools judges and prosecutors had at our disposal to make offenders right their wrongs. However, sometimes these unfortunate acts serve as great opportunities for young people to learn from their mistakes and promote a positive behavior change.

Restorative justice provides a facilitated process to allow individuals harmed by wrongdoing to meet with the offender so they can negotiate their own resolution outside of the traditional justice system. It allows victims and offenders to participate fully in the resolution of the crime and work to find a solution that makes amends and transforms negative situations into learning experiences, benefiting both parties in the long run. The program is voluntary and begins with a facilitated meeting between the two parties. The person harmed can explain how the offense impacted them and what needs to be done to make up for previous mistakes.

Both parties work together to determine a course of action that allows persons who caused harm to not only fully understand

the gravity of their actions, but also make amends for what they have done. For instance, a young person who breaks into a convenience store and steals money from the cash register might pay the stolen money back to the store owner and work at the store for a certain number of hours to remedy his or her actions.

Persons harmed who we have worked with in the past as part of the Restorative Justice Program are glad they participated. By working with offenders to ensure they accept responsibility and work through the restorative process, they often tell us that they feel a sense of closure and healing.

One of these individuals was a woman named Robin. Going through the restorative process proved to be what both individuals needed to move forward.

"Sometimes, people just need someone to say, 'It's okay — I understand, and I forgive you,'" she said. "[Restorative justice] is a great process for people who need to communicate and resolve things in a fair way."

When asked what would have been the outcome if restorative justice was not an option, Robin said, "We both would have walked away with never knowing the possibilities."

## **Restorative Justice Saves Money**

By engaging directly with the people they harmed, offenders better understand why their actions have real-life consequenc-

es. According to data made available by the Administrative Office of the Courts, offenders who participate in Restorative Justice programs are more than 50% less likely to commit a future crime.

Additionally, this program saves communities significant tax dollars. According to Volunteers of America, every case resolved through restorative justice outside of the court system saves an average of \$48,000 per case. By utilizing restorative justice, we are not only making our communities safer, but we are also practicing sound fiscal decision-making.

As county attorneys, we recognize our duty to uphold law and order in our communities. While punitive measures have traditionally been our primary tool, restorative justice has emerged as a promising alternative, offering a path to healing and accountability for both victims and offenders.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of our justice system, it is important to keep what is best for our communities at the forefront. By using programs like restorative justice, our communities benefit and come out stronger.

*Mike O'Connell serves as Jefferson County Attorney. Joe White serves as Clay County Attorney.*

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