

An ode to volunteers: reflections on community response through restorative practices before and after COVID-19

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In response to the Notes from the Field by Ian Marder and Meredith Rossner, we would like to reflect on the ways in which our organisation responded to, and found meaning in, the COVID-19 pandemic from a restorative justice point of view. Longmont Community Justice Partnership (LCJP)¹ is a community-based, non-governmental organisation (NGO) providing restorative justice in Longmont, Colorado, USA.² For over 25 years, LCJP has innovated with, and among, various facets of the Longmont community in striving to fulfil its mission: 'LCJP builds community through collaborative and inclusive restorative practices and gives people the opportunity to heal and create justice in their community and the world'.

In a typical year, law enforcement partners refer approximately 300 victims and offenders to LCJP. During the COVID-19 pandemic our programme saw a drastic decline in referrals, yet still managed to serve 101 victims and offenders.³

Of a total of 48 conferences in 2020, LCJP conducted 38 digitally using the restorative justice videoconference method we developed in response to the pandemic.

Our city, Longmont, has a fast-growing population of 97,000, located near the larger university town of Boulder. Geographically, it lies in the Boulder and St. Vrain Valleys, on land with a rich carrying capacity that was the homeland of Ute, Northern Arapaho and Cheyenne people before white settlers displaced them. Immigrants from Mexico, Japan, and migrants from around the USA have settled here, many with deep roots in agriculture. The people of Longmont today reflect the divide between privilege and poverty in a thriving multicultural centre. The community of Longmont has a history of racial inequality, which we were suddenly reminded of with the murder of George Floyd and the galvanisation of our nation's ongoing racial justice movement. Voices from this movement

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1 To learn more about LCJP and our community work visit: www.lcjp.org.

2 See also a previous article in this journal referring to LCJP: Pointer and McGoey (2019).

3 To see a full analysis of LCJP's grammatic data, visit: <https://outreach.penlink.com/lcjp/>.

directly influenced and informed our process of discerning how to respond and become more aware, skilled and practised.⁴

1 The why and the how

LCJP's long-standing partnership with police means that our staff have unique insight into the world of our local law enforcement. When challenges arise, first responders are the ones that rush towards the open wound, drawing close to the conflict centre without second thought. Watching the Longmont Law Enforcement community move through each stage of the pandemic with a commitment to making responsive, timely adaptations inspired LCJP staff to work diligently to see that we adapted our processes in order to further empower our community to widen networks of support and keep processing cases – thus increasing community safety – throughout the pandemic. To be honest, the idea of shutting down our programme never occurred to our staff. We never stopped to consider *the why*; we just plunged into *the how*. The pandemic allowed LCJP to lean into a new kind of discomfort and continue serving our community in – what was at the time – unimaginable ways.

Because the core organisational value, and practice, of LCJP is *relationship*, the answer to the initial 'how' question was simple. 'How will our community respond? Together.' It was a natural answer. With resolute determination from the outset, our questions shifted from 'will we, do we, can we?' to 'how can we'? We asked questions like, how can we uphold safety on Zoom? How can I invite others to use their strengths in this process? How can I see this problem differently? In those first days and weeks of the pandemic lockdown, our staff did what we do best: we connected to the community from a place of curiosity. Knowing the challenge that lay ahead, we relied on a strengths-based approach to build the new platform. Many volunteers, who identify themselves as empathic, voiced their concern about the digital process, asking, 'Will this work?' We freely admitted that we were experimenting and invited every part of our community into the digital construction process.

2 The learning community

To make videoconferencing possible, we needed to invite people from many backgrounds and levels of technical skill to learn together. Volunteers are an integral part of our case development process. So we quickly planned a scaffolded approach to training to include as many staff and volunteers as possible in our digital learning community.

In the Spring of 2020, volunteers and LCJP staff came together for a series of ten weekly connection circles held over Zoom. Our intentions were to build

4 To hear a panel of Longmont leaders speak about our community's history with race and social justice visit: <https://www.longmontcolorado.gov/Home/Components/Calendar/Event/40026/814?backlist=%2Fdepartments%2Fdepartments-e-m%2Fmuseum>.

relationships and to break the isolation of the 'stay-at-home' order. As we began videoconferencing, it also became clear that these connection circles were a critical practice ground for volunteers (and staff) to learn how to engage in relationship-building work together online, to learn Zoom and test their webcams, microphones and internet connections. Volunteers had differing levels of need for the frequency of connection but agreed that practising and being together was supportive to their learning, as can be seen in these comments:⁵

It is such a different environment, and I was really happy to see that connection and laughter still prevail, strongly!

I enjoyed getting to know some of the other volunteers and connecting with others at this time. I found [it] nourishing.

Might be because I'm still at [the] beginning of [the] learning curve, but I find these helpful in practicing group communication skills. Especially efficient communication, being precise and concise. Also just [the] opportunity to stay connected.

With these circles as the first step, we continued to build the scaffolding that would allow us to make the transition to videoconferencing as inclusive as possible to our 70 volunteers. After the initial exposure, the next skill was videoconferencing. First, we developed videoconferencing training for facilitators and community members. Next, we developed two 'how to' advanced skills trainings to practise how to speak about the impacts of crime and conflict and how to ask questions to reduce bias. These were more nuanced and refined skills than we have ever trained our volunteers on before, usually relying on time and experience to teach these lessons. The feedback from our Learning Community is a reflection of the time we are in and the newness of this material:

It was good to interact with other volunteers and staff, even on Zoom. I like the idea of applying the informed question technique to other areas of my life as well, like relationships, where I have more personal stake that can lead to more biases and conflict.

The idea of asking informed questions will be very helpful, although I think it will still take some work for me to consistently distinguish curious versus biased questions.

Having more information and practice in asking questions will help me, as a community member, feel like I have more to contribute to a conference and to have more confidence in participating.

When we accepted that it was necessary to train via video, we found we could make space for more leadership and practice spaces for volunteers, improving the whole LCJP Learning Community. Exactly two months after the programme's

5 All quotes are direct feedback provided to our organisation from community volunteers.

office door closed, the first – fully volunteer-led⁶ – digital restorative justice process took place, owing to the commitment and willingness of community volunteers.

3 Adventure mindset

Cultivating a Learning Community among our volunteers is rooted in our organisational values of growth and inclusivity. LCJP's training pedagogy invites volunteers to see themselves, and all others, as lifelong learners and to approach the restorative justice process with curiosity. At LCJP, we call this approach to learning and self-discovery the *adventure mindset*. When we approach each and every restorative justice process as a discovery, learning becomes an inevitable by-product. In beginning to use videoconferencing, volunteers shared their experiences of noticing certain features of a participant's home environments (flags, paraphernalia, indications of privilege and poverty) that confirmed or challenged their presumed assumptions and implicit biases. Through courageous conversations, volunteers and staff challenged, and supported, each other in naming implicit biases.⁷ We asked volunteers to hold intentional space to ensure that every voice can be received with curiosity and appreciation, furthering inclusivity and connectivity.

The LCJP staff is committed to decentralising power structures by practising the adventure mindset and viewing ourselves as part of our Learning Community. These values-based attitudes towards the restorative justice conference process training are a microcosm of our larger programmatic response to the pandemic. Just as the facilitation team utilises the shared wisdom of one another in the restorative justice process, our volunteer community, as a whole, intentionally approached the global pandemic with an adventure mindset founded in caring connection.

4 Equity

The earliest days of the pandemic amplified inequalities. As it continued, the inequalities grew in number, in our awareness and in our communities. At LCJP, in the spring of 2020, we were finding ways through inequality every day. This meant unequal access to the internet, devices, spaces to speak safely and privately, and the technological fluency required to effectively engage online. These inequalities led our community of staff and volunteers to find new intersectionality across age, education level, employment and race.

6 A distinguishing feature of LCJP is that we entrust volunteers with independently leading RJ processes. Volunteers engage in a year-long scaffolded training programme in which they learn the necessary skills to support their full independence as restorative justice facilitator. This foundational training support was a critical component of volunteers' ability to take on the challenge of digital facilitation.

7 For more information on implicit bias, visit <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/>.

As Longmont residents witnessed the murder of George Floyd in the news, we were reminded of our own history from 1980,⁸ when a newly trained police officer, who was later acquitted, killed two unarmed Latino men. This event changed our police force and our city, resulting in a florescence of social justice organisations, to meet the demand for police accountability.⁹ LCJP's founding and that of many other NGOs can be traced back to this moment.

With recognition that restorative justice must include racial justice, thanks to the work of practitioner-activists in Oakland, CA, such as Fania Davis, we therefore find ourselves squarely in the middle of the anti-racism movement and our partnership with police. In holding this complexity, we seek to understand each other, move into community (even online) and celebrate through listening and sharing our perspectives and experiences.

LCJP has always had training in equity and diversity, but the events of 2020 showed us we had to do much more. Beginning in September 2020, our volunteers and staff engaged in intensive anti-racism learning through texts such as *Race & restorative justice* (Davis, 2019), and *Colorizing restorative justice* (Valandra & Yazzie, 2020). We have committed to monthly learning and discussion of how to apply anti-racism directly in restorative justice and our organisation. The pandemic has been an opportunity to consider every kind of justice and inclusion opportunity.

Each year, LCJP holds an appreciation party, serving dinner and celebrating restorative justice with an open invitation to join the party. Police, volunteers, community partners, friends and family all come together. This year, we had the opportunity to consider how to bring these groups together again and be inclusive of the challenging conversations we began about anti-racism and police partnerships. To honour this coming together, we had two speakers working in divergent roles within the criminal justice system: a prominent public defender, followed by a local police officer. Their messages centred on the promise of restorative justice in the current moment and demonstrated the capacity restorative practices have to hold tension so that opposing perspectives can be heard. We invited volunteers and officers to write messages of appreciation to each other and, with the help of a volunteer committee, turned the messages into a gift sent by mail. The ability to recognise and engage volunteers and officers in this kind of work with each other has been one of the most positive outcomes of the pandemic. We have increased the ways people can give their time and skill at LCJP at a time when you might assume participation would go in the other direction. Here are some examples of these messages:

I was consistently impressed with your ability to honestly share your feelings and experiences. Your participation made this group more meaningful for me.

8 To learn more about this history visit: <https://teachbocolatinohistory.colorado.edu/primarysource/crowds-bid-farewell-to-victims-citizens-trace-incidents-roots-1980/>.

9 El Comité [www.elcomitelongmont.org] was the first of these NGOs and still continues its social justice, immigrant rights and police accountability mission today.

You are seriously bringing it. I could feel your vibe the second I met you ... Keep bringing that into the world, sister. You are much loved and respected by all of us. I feel lucky to be in your circle.

Your input as a community member has been so thoughtful and heartfelt. I really value the wisdom, care, honesty and dignity you brought.

Your sense of humor adds a lightness to what can often be a tense conference. This reveals to the responsible persons and their families that our police officers are approachable, human and willing to help. It was and continues to be a great pleasure and honor to work with you in any restorative justice capacity.

At the time of the writing of this article, LCJP is celebrating its one-year *Digiversary* – an event that recognises our first fully volunteer-led restorative justice videoconference. Reflecting on our pandemic response now, we feel tremendous admiration for our Learning Community who never shied away from the pandemic challenges – our connections supported digital adaptations towards equity, while curiosity and adventure mindset made it possible to implement restorative justice videoconferencing.

References

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