



STATE OF ILLINOIS  
CIRCUIT COURT OF COOK COUNTY

**Restorative  
Justice  
Community  
Courts**

# **Restorative Justice Community Court**

*A Restorative Approach to Crime & Conflict*

**Participant Handbook  
Guidelines and Program Information**

Honorable Timothy C. Evans, Chief Judge

***“Welcome to the Restorative Justice Community Court, where healing is the goal rather than punishment, and the quest for justice becomes a collective effort.”***

– Honorable Timothy C. Evans,  
Chief Judge of the Circuit Court  
of Cook County, Illinois



The Restorative Justice Community Court Participant Handbook, Guidelines, and Program Information booklet was created and issued by:

The Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois  
Office of the Chief Judge

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## Circuit Court of Cook County RJCC Event Photos



## Restorative Justice Community Court

### Participant Handbook Guidelines and Program Information

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## What is Restorative Justice?

Restorative Justice is an alternative form of justice rooted in the belief that repairing harm, building empathy, and restoring relationships is a better way to prevent, deter, and respond to crime. In restorative justice, offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their criminal actions and expected to be accountable for the harm they caused. In addition, restorative practices look past criminal behavior to educate offenders on how to acquire tools, resources, training, and skills needed to reintegrate into the community in a meaningful and contributory way.

Restorative Justice also emphasizes the importance of elevating the roles of victims and community members through active involvement in the justice process.

## What is the Restorative Justice Community Court (RJCC)?

The Restorative Justice Community Court (RJCC) is the first court of its kind in Cook County and has adopted peace circles as the resolution process for criminal cases for adults. Restorative justice empowers the community to create solutions to repair the harm caused by crime and conflict. For every case, the RJCC brings together the person charged, the person harmed, and community members in a confidential conversation in a peace circle.

The RJCC will help reduce criminal convictions, which can create a barrier to individuals participating fully in their families, the workforce, and other aspects of society.

## Restorative Justice Community Court Mission, Goals, and Values

The Restorative Justice Community Court serves the community. RJCC offers deferred prosecution to eligible individuals, who successfully resolve their case through the use of peace circles and other restorative practices to address and repair the harm of their criminal behavior. This process allows offenders to be accountable for their criminal activity, victims to express how a crime affected them, and an agreement to be reached between them about how to repair the harm.

These community courts decrease convictions, increase public safety by reducing crime and teaching peace practices, empower community leadership, and restore trust between the community and the government that serves them.

Restorative Justice is based on four values: encounter, accountability, inclusion, and reintegration.



## Who Qualifies?

- Individuals 18-26 years old
- Have been charged with a non-violent felony or misdemeanor
- Live in the neighborhood assigned to the court
- Have a non-violent criminal history
- Accept the responsibility for the harm caused

## What is Required of the RJCC Participant?

The person charged must do the following:

- Be willing to accept the help offered by completing the Repair of Harm Agreement.
- Actively participate in all RJCC processes, including pre-circle work and peace circle meetings.
- Appear at the court meetings as scheduled.
- Notify their case manager, case worker, or court coordinator about any change of address, phone number, or employment status.
- Complete all of the requirements of the Repair of Harm Agreement created in the peace circle, which may include community service, job training, counseling, restitution, or paying for damages.
- Maintain communication with their case manager, peace circle keeper, or court coordinator.

## The Repair of Harm Agreement

The Repair of Harm Agreement (ROHA) is an agreement by all members of the circle that describes the steps necessary to repair the harm caused by the crime. The ROHA is a result of a consensus decision made by all participants in the circle. Methods to repair the harm are individually tailored, and may include, but are not limited to:

- An apology letter
- Restitution to the victim or the community
- Community service or counseling
- Goal setting for education or employment
- Reconnect with family
- Re-integration into the community, etc.

The goal is to complete the ROHA within 6 to 18 months.

## How Will the Person Harmed Benefit?

The person harmed will have the opportunity to express how and why they were hurt by the crime and directly ask the person charged for what is needed to heal from the incident. The person harmed will have the opportunity to express their pain, be heard, and actively work towards recovery.



## Restorative Justice Community Court Procedure

- Welcome by the Court – at the first appearance, the judge and RJCC personnel welcome the participant and briefly orient them to restorative practices and responsibilities.
- Orientation – conducted by a staff member or court coordinator who explains the process and expectations.
- Pre-circle interview / conversation with peace circle keepers.
- Schedule the first peace circle within two-weeks from the day the acceptance is given to the court.
- Peace Circle Process, which will take between 3-5 weeks or longer if needed.
- The Repair of Harm Agreement as a result of the peace circle process.
- Participants are working on their goals listed in ROHA with assistance of case managers.

## Challenges

Completing the Repair of Harm Agreement (ROHA) will require work and a change of behavior. It could be challenging at first. Orientation with a staff member or court coordinator is designed to explain and help court participants understand the rules and requirements of RJCC. When the Repair of Harm Agreement is created, the participants should start working on it. If within the first two months, the court participant has not started working on the completion of the ROHA, the court staff will initiate our early warning procedure. If there is no evidence of completing the ROHA for the next month after the early warning, the RJCC Judge will decide if the court participant will be able to continue in the program.

## Services

The Restorative Justice Community Court will work with local community organizations, colleges, and social service organizations to provide all court participants with opportunities to complete the Repair of Harm Agreement. Court participants will be advised to use the treatments and programs under the supervision of their case manager and provided by local service organizations.

## Community Involvement

Empowering local communities to respond to their own conflicts meets the needs of the restorative process.

Members of the community are trained by the RJCC to participate in peace circles and create the Repair of Harm Agreements. They also provide support to both the person charged and the person harmed.

The role of the community in restorative justice is crucial, as it provides support, accountability, and a sense of belonging for those involved. Community members who serve in RJCC peace circles are helping participants take responsibility for their actions, addressing underlying issues that contribute to crime, promoting accountability and transparency, and contributing to more effective outcomes and healing for all.



## Graduation

Once all the requirements of the Repair of Harm Agreement are completed, the person charged will be eligible to have the case dismissed and graduate from the Restorative Justice Community Court. Graduation is a time to celebrate. All graduates will be invited to the RJCC graduation ceremony and encouraged to speak about the program experience.



## Conclusion & Important Reminders

The Restorative Justice Community Court will be held once a week to hear non-violent cases and determine a path to recovery, community reintegration, and a successful future. The goal of the Restorative Justice Community Court is to bring young people back into the community, repair harm, and move down a different and better path. All the goals listed in the Repair of Harm Agreement are individualized to the needs of a particular participant.

The restorative approach is a chance to start over with a positive attitude and an achievable vision of success in the future.

*Court participants must abide by the following guidelines:*

- ✓ Be respectful to all Case Managers, Court Officers, and Staff.
- ✓ Accept the assistance that is offered to complete the ROHA.
- ✓ Schedule peace circles as soon as possible.
- ✓ Start working on Repair of Harm Agreement requirements right away.
- ✓ Dress for success.
- ✓ Stay positive for a successful program completion.
- ✓ Progress and success depends on you.

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