

Resource

Restorative Justice Listening Sessions and House Meetings

When setting out to establish this restorative justice diversion (RJD) program in your community, it's important to understand what folks in your community know about restorative justice (RJ), what they may already be doing that is related to RJ, and how they envision RJ fitting into their lives.

A common principle in restorative justice is “inquiry before assumption,” so with that in mind, a great way to know what folks are thinking is to simply ask and listen. The following is a guide for holding listening sessions and house meetings in your community that are focused on gauging what is already known or being done around restorative justice and what people hope for the future.



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What

Listening sessions can come in the form of community meetings that are open to the public or scheduled visits to groups of people that are already meeting, such as high school or college classes, faith-based gatherings, neighborhood meetings, etc. Depending on the size of your audience, small group discussions or a single open forum format can be used. Planning is essential for a listening session, especially when it's not clear how many folks will be in attendance.

House meetings are typically much smaller meetings that take place in people's homes. If your organization has a relationship with residents interested in hosting a house meeting, you can work together to plan when these meetings will take place and who will be invited. While a community member is hosting the meeting by opening their doors to friends, families, and neighbors (of their choosing), your organization should handle logistics and any costs associated with a house meeting, such as food, materials, or extra seating.

Often, a larger listening session can lead to individual attendees becoming interested in helping out and reaching out to your organization about hosting a house meeting. Similarly, a series of house meetings can be held in an effort to promote a larger upcoming listening session, so be sure to consider how each of these types of meetings can be used to reach out to an even larger population.

Why

It should be noted that many people have not heard of restorative justice or may know very little about it, so consider doing a brief opening presentation to introduce your organization, restorative justice principles, and why you're interested in developing an RJD program. Just make sure that the majority of your meeting is spent listening to folks and not talking at them (i.e. spend no more than 30% of your meeting time speaking and no less than 70% listening). You are there first and foremost to learn about the wisdom that already exists in your community. Finally, do not make promises that you cannot keep. Make it clear to folks how their input will and will not be used and have concrete next steps or follow-up plans, when applicable, that attendees can count on moving forward.

There are three goals of these meetings:

1. To raise awareness about what you are doing in a manner that builds community and promotes relationship building, honest, and transparency
2. To ask community members, partners and allies about their thoughts, hopes, and concerns about restorative justice in general, and the possibility of an RJD program specifically
3. To accurately record their responses in a way that respects everyone's humanity, dignity, and privacy and when requested, upholds anonymity and confidentiality

When developing questions and exercises for these meetings, we strongly encourage you to collaborate with others in the community to brainstorm and create some questions or activities that could be used during listening sessions and house meetings.

The following is a list of suggested questions/exercises. You will not be able to go over all of these questions in a single meeting; pick three or four that are most important to your community. You can also customize these questions as much as possible or come up with a completely new set of your own:

- Begin with asking folks their names, gender pronouns, where they're coming from, and the reason for why they are in attendance. Model this by going first (i.e. "I'm Sandra, my pronouns are she/her/hers,...")
- Consider incorporating an exercise or time for reflection early on in your discussion, such as the following:
 - ◆ Draw a picture of what justice looks like to you (provide paper and markers)
 - ◆ Make a movement with your body that signifies what justice feels like to you. Everyone mimic that movement before going on to the next person in the circle.
- What do people already know about restorative justice? What have they heard?
- How is justice perceived in the community?
- When was a time that you experienced justice and what created that experience?
- What are folks' vision of liberation and justice?
- What unmet needs could restorative justice help fill?
- Do people harmed currently have an opportunity to ask questions about what happened to them?
- Are mental health facilities currently available to assist people harmed and youth that have harmed others?
- Are there groups that do not have sufficient access to institutions and services?
- Is law enforcement perceived as approachable or trustworthy? Are there perceived differences in how some community members are treated?
- Are young people who have harmed others treated in a manner that takes into account their developmental needs and lived experiences?

How

Depending on the size of your space, audience, and how much time you allot for your meeting, a listening session or house meeting can take many forms, such as:

- **Community Building Circle:** Consider using a circle format for house meetings, small listening sessions, or breakout groups during meetings with large audiences. Circles are great ways for folks to form or strengthen relationships with each other and to share their individual thoughts perhaps more deeply than is possible in other types of discussions. Note taking or other forms of capturing information are not common in circle, so be sure to inform participants before a circle begins how their responses will be recorded and how they can prevent their information from being shared, if that is their preference.
- **World Cafe:** Incorporating elements of graphic recording, community building, and creative expression, the world cafe format can be a useful exercise, particularly for larger groups made up of folks with few or no pre-existing relationships. The [World Cafe website](#) contains instructions and tips on how to do this exercise.
- **Surveys:** Inviting people to a community event and then requesting that they fill out a survey is also a good way of gathering community input, though it will not be as accurate of a reflection, as there is typically little room for folks to express themselves on a survey. Consider using this quantitative method alongside the more qualitative methods listed above.

Whether you're holding a listening session or house meeting, always try to provide the following.

- **Food and beverages** that are culturally appropriate and can accommodate a variety of dietary preferences and restrictions; consider reaching out to local restaurants and asking them to donate food for your events. Try your best to make sure there is enough for everyone and that folks are able to easily take home leftovers, if they choose.
- **Language interpretation and translation:** Try to know ahead of time if there will be folks in attendance who need interpretation services or translated materials. This is something you can ask when inviting people to ensure your meetings are linguistically accessible as possible.
- **Accessibility:** Take care to have your location be accessible, whether or not you are expecting folks who have access needs different from your own.
- **Childcare:** Consider making your meetings family-friendly and if possible, offering free childcare on the premises.
- **Fun!** These meetings should be as interactive and fun as possible. Consider incorporating movement, music, and visuals that are inclusive and accessible to a large audience. Have a series of icebreakers and energizers on hand to keep folks motivated and engaged.
- **Gratitude**—appreciations and opportunities for your organization to give thanks to all that planned, attended, and facilitated the meeting, as well as opportunities for folks to appreciate each other are essential in any listening session or house meeting.

When

Listening sessions and house meetings should take place several times over the course of at least 3-9 months at a variety of times of day to ensure that the opportunity to attend and participate is extended to as many community members as possible. When choosing the times and dates of these meetings, keep in mind the following:

- **Weather:** Is it very hot or cold, rainy or snowy? How will this affect the likelihood of folks coming out to your meetings or how easily accessible they are? If summer or winter weather in your area tends to be extreme, consider holding meetings during multiple seasons of the year.
 - **People's general availability:** What time of day are folks most likely going to be available to attend a meeting? A lot of people work during the hours of 9am to 5pm on weekdays, but not everyone. Be sure to hold morning, afternoon, evening and weekend meetings to accommodate as many schedule types as possible. Also, be aware of federal or religious holidays and times during which people may be out of town, such as long weekends or during winter holidays.
 - **Keep in mind other events** happening in your community to avoid double booking. Another reason to look into other events is to consider reaching out to organizers of those events and asking if you can provide flyers or even speak briefly to their audience about your upcoming listening sessions or opportunities to host house meetings.
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Where

As mentioned above, house meetings can take place in homes or other places of residence and listening sessions can take place in a variety of locations throughout your community such as churches, recreation centers, senior or youth centers, schools, colleges, restaurants, parks, libraries, community clinics, partner organization spaces, etc. Variety and accessibility are key, so spread your meetings out widely throughout the communities whose input you are seeking and consider the following:

- **How easy or difficult is it to get to the location:** Is it easily accessible on public transportation or on foot; is there sufficient parking and is it free or affordable; does the space meet accessibility guidelines to all spaces associated with your meeting; most importantly, is this location near the communities whose input you most want to have?
 - **The location's hours of operation and any restrictions** or requirements the location may have that could limit accessibility or your ability to hold the meeting the way you'd like (e.g. with food and beverages available to all, movable chairs and table, connections to a screen, projector, speakers, music playing, etc.)
 - **Social implications of a location:** Are there any folks who may not feel welcome or safe at this location? For example faith-based buildings may make some people uncomfortable, for their own religious or other personal reasons. Likewise, locations near or inside law enforcement buildings may also make some folks unsafe or uncomfortable attending.
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Who

These meetings are meant to gather input from folks in the communities where your program will be operating and that are directly affected by issues such as mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, over-policing, criminalization, stigmatization of formerly incarcerated people, and many, many other forms of state violence, oppression, and institutional racism. It's also important to hear from other organizations and groups that do, or want to do, similar work.

Using a variety of tactics to find, reach out, and invite people to your meetings is key to having authentic community representation. Meetings should be as inclusive as possible so that audiences can reflect the diversity of the communities you support. At every listening session and house meeting, look around the room and ask yourself, "who is not here that should be, and why?" When planning a future meeting, be sure to make an effort to reach out to those whose voices you have not yet heard. Finally, do not rely on a single method of invitation. The following are some common ways to engage community:

- **Social media** may be helpful for inviting youth, young adults, or other tech savvy community members, but not everyone is on Facebook, Twitter, or SnapChat or has regular access to the internet. Nonetheless, tweets and Facebook event pages are good ways to let folks know about your meetings and track RSVPs.
- **Flyers, handouts and posters:** Many businesses or community-based organizations may allow you to post a flyer in their window or display a stack of handouts at their venue. Just make sure that you track where you did this and include all pertinent info for your meeting (time, date, location, your contact information) on printed material. Never post people's home addresses or phone numbers and limit flyering to invitations for listening sessions only.
- **Canvassing:** Talking to folks on the street or by going door-to-door is a great way to build relationships and let people know about your meetings. Consider high traffic areas and what times of day most folks are out and about or, in the case of door knocking, most likely to be home. Also consider canvassing on the day of your meeting and invite folks on the spot that are passing by your meeting location.
- **Pre-existing gatherings:** Reach out to your community partners and allies and request 5-10 minutes to speak and pass around a sign up sheet at their next event. Classrooms are another great place to speak to a pre-established audience; just make sure that your visits to schools are all pre-planned and approved.
- **Word of mouth:** Encourage folks to tell their friends, family members, and neighbors about these listening sessions or meetings. Likewise, ask your community partners and allies to invite those already in their networks, and consider asking organizations to commit to bringing a specific number of attendees to each meeting.