



## Dane County Department of Human Services

Interim Director – Astra Iheukumere

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## DANE COUNTY'S COMMUNITY RESTORATIVE COURT CELEBRATES 10 YEARS

*Impactful Alternative to Traditional Justice System Marks Anniversary*

This fall marks 10 years since Dane County's Community Restorative Court (CRC) was first introduced in the county budget. CRC is an innovative way to expedite misdemeanor cases and provide an alternative to the traditional justice system. This approach holds respondents responsible, often with community service and restitution. It also provides human services support when appropriate. Victims are given a voice, and community participation is essential. Respondents do not have a CCAP entry and receive no formal charge if they complete their agreement successfully.

CRC is designed for young people 17 to 25 years old who have committed a misdemeanor crime or have received a municipal citation in Dane County. Some eligible misdemeanors and citations include simple battery, disorderly conduct, obstructing an officer, theft, and criminal damage to property. In 2023, over 280 respondents participated in CRC, and 86% were able to complete their repair harm agreement.

"The Dane County Department of Human Services is incredibly proud of the impact CRC has had on our young people and the Dane County community over the past decade," said Interim Director Astra Iheukumere. "Each year, we are able to divert hundreds of young people away from the traditional justice system and give them a chance to repair harm and move forward. We appreciate the community leaders who championed CRC from the very beginning and helped make the program what it is today."

A respondent is offered the opportunity to participate in CRC if eligible and referred by a criminal justice partner. The respondent has to accept responsibility for their actions and be willing to participate in the restorative justice process. CRC staff act as restorative justice practitioners and meet with both the victim and the respondent separately to discuss the incident. The respondent,

victim, and peacemakers (trained volunteers from the community) meet in the circle process to create an agreement outlining steps the respondent will take to repair harm.

This collaborative approach to community justice was launched in south Madison in the spring of 2015, after years of research and extensive engagement with the community under the leadership of Dane County's subcommittee on racial disparities. Studies have shown that a restorative justice approach can resolve cases more quickly, reduce recidivism, and generate more satisfaction and feelings of fairness on the part of victims, respondents and, most importantly, the community at large.

"Congratulations to the Community Restorative Court on 10 years of restorative justice in Dane County, a milestone that represents not only the progress we've made toward greater equity in the criminal justice system but also the power of collaboration," said Colleen Clark Bernhardt, Director of the Dane County Office of Justice Reform. "This achievement is a testament to our united purpose and commitment to building a fairer and more inclusive community."

Community involvement is a primary component of CRC. Peacemakers are volunteers who participate in four trainings over a two-week span. Peacemakers learn about the restorative justice process and how they can contribute to their community and the young people CRC serves. This is also an opportunity to support the victims of crime to help repair harm. Once trained, peacemakers participate in circles that last 60 to 90 minutes.

"Each circle is conducted with care, compassion, and accountability," said Dustin Arnold, who has served as a peacemaker in CRC for one year. "The program gives me the opportunity to connect with my community and invest in the next generation. Each circle is a new story with a new lesson, but most importantly, each circle is a chance to wrap our arms around this community and remind them that we care."

Those interested in learning more about CRC and/or signing up to become a peacemaker can visit: <https://www.dcdhs.com/Children-Youth-and-Family/Community-Restorative-Court>.

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Video on CRC Anniversary & Testimonials:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM5oVeXTXao>

Video Testimonials w/o Background Music:  
<https://countyofdane.sharefile.com/public/share/web-s22740def40d2466bba94d9a3929a25f1>