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ARLINGTON COUNTY ESTABLISHES “HEART OF SAFETY”, ITS FIRST EVER RESTORATIVE JUSTICE JUVENILE DIVERSION PROGRAM

ARLINGTON, VA – Restorative Arlington, the Office of the Commonwealth’s Attorney (OCA), and the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court Services Unit (CSU) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) establishing Heart of Safety, Arlington County’s first restorative justice diversion program for youth and young adults. Heart of Safety is aimed at promoting safety, healing, and accountability.

Through the Heart of Safety program, both persons harmed and persons responsible for harm in Arlington and the City of Falls Church will be able to participate in a process that centers their needs, addresses accountability, and offers both individual and community healing. Heart of Safety will provide an alternative option to prosecution in certain misdemeanor and felony cases in which both the respondent(s) and person(s) harmed voluntarily agree to resolve the case through the restorative justice conferencing process (RJCP). The respondent(s), or the individual who caused harm, must be 26 years old or under at the time of the incident.

“Heart of Safety embodies the priorities and interests of our community and is in full alignment with best practices in restorative justice diversion,” said Kimiko Lighty, Executive Director of Restorative Arlington. “We are grateful to be able to offer this long-awaited option for people who have been harmed in our community.”

Cases identified and referred to as appropriate for Heart of Safety, will go through a rigorous restorative justice conferencing process (RJCP) overseen by a trained facilitator and consisting of four stages: first, the facilitator informs potential participants of the process and allows them to determine if they consent to remain in the process; next, the facilitator carries out individual conversations with both the respondent(s) and person(s) harmed to listen to their experiences, establish their individual needs, and determine when they are ready for a joint meeting; next, should the parties agree, the facilitator helps them draft a mutually agreed-upon written restoration plan; and lastly, the facilitator follows up with participants to ensure they are satisfied and that the restoration plan has been completed. If the RJCP is unsuccessful in resolving a case, the Office of the Commonwealth’s Attorney retains the option of initiating prosecution.

“Restorative Arlington’s Heart of Safety program will provide a great new option for diverting some youth from the traditional court process,” stated CSU Director Earl Conklin. “It is an alternative model that has proven successful for both the youth and those who have been harmed.”

“Punishment often makes the problem worse, particularly when it arises from unmet basic needs, a lack of skills, or a history of trauma in young people,” said Arlington resident and co-founder of the Coalition for Trauma Informed Schools, Juliet Hiznay. “Heart of Safety facilitates communication and enables community members to identify root causes of harm while developing meaningful solutions in response to these harmful acts.”

“Mass incarceration is one of the greatest civil rights injustices of our era,” stated NAACP Vice President Mike Hemminger. “The implementation of this research-based program will surely have life changing results for those who have interactions with our current punitive legal system.”

“I have seen how the legal system traumatizes people with punishment, which is different from accountability, while the needs of the people affected by their actions have gone unmet,” remarked Liane Rozzell, who started the Restorative Arlington initiative during 2020 while on loan from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Through Heart of Safety, people will have a chance to take real accountability through acknowledgement, remorse and repair, including becoming people who won't repeat that harm.”

“I see restorative practices as effectively changing the mindset around how victims and those who harmed them interact in a way that brings healing to both parties,” said Arlington resident and Arlington Civic Federation President, Allan Gajadhar. “More importantly, it does so in a way that does not perpetuate the harm with punishment and revenge cycles that perpetuate the underlying socioeconomic contributors to harmful behaviors.”

“At the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we are committed to improving community safety so that all children, youth, and families have the opportunity to thrive,” explained Jaquita Monroe. “Arlington’s Heart of Safety aligns with positive youth development principles and focuses on reducing the disparities we see in justice systems across the country. We’re pleased to have supported the development of this program and we look forward to seeing great results.”

Commonwealth’s Attorney Parisa Dehghani-Tafti stated, “Heart of Safety is about survivors’ rights, youth rehabilitation, and crime prevention; for survivors, it’s the peace of mind of taking charge of their recovery; for young people, it’s a second chance to make right what they did wrong; and for the community, it’s an investment in crime prevention.”

The establishment of Heart of Safety represents the culmination of two years of hard work led by Restorative Arlington and thousands of volunteer hours on behalf of system partners, victims of crimes, formerly incarcerated persons, and community stakeholders, including teens and young adults.

Restorative Arlington is actively working with Arlington Public Schools (APS) to sign a separate MOU that creates a referral pathway to allow schools to directly refer students to Heart of Safety. Establishing this pathway will allow schools to hold students who have caused harm accountable while preventing them from entering the criminal legal system entirely.