

Peacemaking Programs

Peacemaking is a traditional Native American approach to justice that focuses on healing the relationships affected by crime, rather than on assigning blame and determining punishment. Although peacemaking varies across Native American communities, it generally brings people who have been impacted by crime or disorder together with family members, friends, and other members of the community. The goals of peacemaking include resolving the dispute, restoring balance, and healing relationships among those involved.

The Center for Court Innovation runs two programs that have been inspired by this approach: the **Red Hook Peacemaking Program** in Brooklyn, New York, and the **Near Westside Peacemaking Project** in Syracuse, New York.

How does it work?

Referrals

Referrals to the center's peacemaking programs come from a variety of sources, including justice stakeholders such as prosecutors, judges, defense counsel and police officers. The programs accept both first-time offenders and those with prior criminal records. The programs also accept community referrals, such as disputes within public housing, conflicts in local schools, and family and neighbor problems that have not entered the formal justice system.

Requirements for Participation

Participation in the peacemaking programs is entirely voluntary. For criminally-charged defendants, program staff obtain consent from defense counsel to meet with the defendant to explain the peacemaking process. Participants are expected to acknowledge that the harm occurred, even if they disagree about some of the facts or the root causes of the behavior. Parties should be prepared to accept responsibility for their own actions and express a willingness to talk through

the issues in order to prevent future harm. In cases involving victims, the prosecutor is responsible for explaining the process and obtaining the victim's consent to proceed. The victim is invited—but not required—to speak with the program staff in order to make an informed decision about whether and in what capacity to participate.

This program revealed something in the light that I thought would always stay in the dark and this is a good relationship with my mother. Before this program, me and my mother wouldn't speak for days, weeks, even months because of me holding a grudge against her. But now, we may have our little quarrelling and next hour so we would be laughing and talking like nothing happened. So I'm really grateful for this program because even though it took a lot from my personal life, it was worth it. Thank you peacemakers for this wonderful time.

Participant, Red Hook Peacemaking Program

Peacemakers

Community members receive rigorous training to become peacemakers. Over the course of many months, participants learn about peacemaking the justice system, trauma, self-care, and storytelling. Since its inception, the peacemaking programs in Red Hook and Syracuse have provided this free training to scores of community members from diverse backgrounds. Native American trainers play a key role.

I think the peacemaking sessions were a great opportunity to have a group of people help guide you in making better decisions or life choices. My peacemakers helped me understand that graffiti hinders the neighborhood and community. Although I see it as a way of expressing myself, peacemaking has helped me in controlling my impulses.

Participant, Red Hook Peacemaking Program

The Peacemaking Process

Everyone in the peacemaking circle has an opportunity to speak and respond without interruption. The community peacemaker is available to ask questions about the event and its underlying causes, to share their own stories of harm, loss, adversity and success, and to reflect on how the event impacted the community.

During peacemaking sessions, the parties in the circle discuss what the participants could do to heal the relationships damaged in the conflict, provide restitution, or improve their own lives in order to avoid future conflicts. Usually, more than one session is required to resolve the conflict, and between sessions participants commit to taking steps to advance the healing process. Healing steps might include as letters of apology, volunteer work or promises to communicate respectfully, and abstain from illegal activity. The peacemaking process is concluded when everyone—including peacemakers and participants—can reach consensus for a peaceful resolution.

Peacemaking gave me an avenue to understand my daughter and have her understand me. It helped us to learn to compromise. It is the best program I have ever participated in and is the best tool a parent can have.

Participant, Near Westside Peacemaking Project

For More Information:

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