



OFFICE OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY ATTORNEY

John J. Choi

March 20, 2023

Representative Sandra Feist
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard
409 State Office Building
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Senator Bobby Joe Champion
95 University Avenue West
Minnesota Senate Building, Room 3401
Saint Paul, MN 55155

RE: Support for House File 46/Senate File 55: Creation of an Office of Restorative Practices

Representative Feist, Senate President Champion, and Members of the House and Senate:

For the past four years, we have embarked on a bold effort, together with system and community leaders from our most disproportionately impacted communities, to (re)imagine justice for youth in Ramsey County. Our goal is to share power with those most impacted by involvement in the justice system to respond more restoratively by better addressing underlying contributors to justice involvement and connecting young people to resources to help them succeed in life and prevent harmful behavior from recurring. Having access to statewide resources of up to \$500,000, as envisioned in this bill, will enable us to create the local infrastructure to advance restorative practices in communities across our state.

Although the purpose of the youth justice system was legally designated as rehabilitation, in reality, its practices have too often modeled the adult system with a primary focus on administering consequences, without fully recognizing and addressing the unique developmental needs of youth. It also results in collateral consequences of justice involvement that extend far beyond the courtroom, limiting future growth opportunities for our youth, which only increases the likelihood of future justice involvement, making our communities less safe.

This does not mean there should be no accountability for harmful behavior, but that meaningful accountability is best achieved through relationships and giving a young person the opportunity to make things right. We know from brain science that human brains are not fully developed until around the age of 25 and that punishing youth traps their brains in their brainstem, in fight/flight/freeze mode, unable to access their cortex where their brains can develop empathy, learn and grow. This importance of relationships with young people is not only borne out by brain science, but lifted up by members of our community, through their observations and lived experiences, as being fundamentally essential.

In addition, we know traditional system approaches have produced unacceptable racial disparities with respect to which young people are referred to the justice system, and the types of responses they receive. Our data shows that Black and Indigenous young people are referred, and re-referred, to the justice system at rates many times greater than their proportion of the population.

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As leaders in the justice system, we can improve our responses by embracing restorative practices, which provide opportunities for meaningful accountability, including repairing harm caused, and promoting healing for everyone involved. We can better respond to harm and do right by victims by improving our responsiveness and engaging the people who have been impacted most by the harmful behavior - the parent/caregiver, victim/survivor/s of harm, and community representative - for their perspectives to inform our decisions.

We are committing to sharing power with our most impacted communities, in co-designing and (re)imagining justice for youth, in decision-making through a collaborative review process, and in responding to harmful behavior in our community through community-based accountability that better serves victims, youth and their families.

It is high time for our state to take leadership to promote restorative practices across the education, child welfare, and justice systems. **I have witnessed firsthand the power of restorative practices and I strongly support House File 46/Senate File 55.** By creating a statewide infrastructure of resources and support, it will enable us to partner with our communities to ensure our public systems respond more restoratively, more compassionately, and more effectively to improve the lives of the residents we serve and enhance safety and wellness in our communities. Please join me in supporting this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John J. Choi".

John J. Choi
Ramsey County Attorney