

Category 2 Proposal Narrative

Burlington Community Justice Center Conflict Assistance Program

A. Description of the Issue

The City of Burlington is the largest community in Vermont. While celebrated as a diverse and culturally vibrant city, extreme socioeconomic and racial disparities and cultural divisions are still prominent and exacerbated by high rates of poverty and substance use. Rates of arrests and criminal incidents in Burlington steadily declined between the mid-2010s and 2021, shifting to annual increases that coincide with the known introduction of xylazine in Burlington. Since then, the greatest increases in police incidents have involved gunfire, larceny, mental health issues, overdose, and stolen vehicles¹. Vermont now ranks as the 13th most impacted state by retail crime in the nation (Forbes Advisor, 2023). During City-sponsored community meetings held this past year to discuss public safety, only one out of over 120 people did *not* mention an increase in crime as an area of concern, and general community safety concerns were identified as the third highest priority in in-person and online surveys (behind housing and homelessness).

The need for supportive services to address the impacts of poverty, substance use, and crime has reached an unprecedented rate. The Burlington Community Justice Center (BCJC), a division of the city's Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO), is the largest of the seventeen CJsCs across Vermont and has served Vermonters since 1988. The BCJC practices restorative justice across twelve programs to constructively address crime and conflict as an alternative to the traditional criminal legal court system. Depending on the program, participants

¹ <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/20240101%20Preliminary%20Year-End%20Report%20for%202023.pdf>

are referred by law enforcement, the state's attorney, by order of a judge, or by self-referral. The BCJC is currently prioritizing upstream, crime prevention work.

Over the last three years, the BCJC developed and implemented a Conflict Assistance Program (CAP). The CAP addresses conflict for Burlington-area residents by providing mediation, conflict coaching, and conflict skills workshops that equip persons involved in conflict with the skills necessary to find resolution through a constructive, skillful, and restorative approach. CAP continues to evolve based on experience and community needs, and it has operated at capacity and with waitlists for workshops since services began. The BCJC's CAP extended into a neighboring CJC as a strategy to better meet the needs of Chittenden County through the collaborative delivery of two workshops—*Exploring Conflict* and *Expanding Conflict Skills*—to over 180 participants in the past two years and hosted two residential community conversations, reaching 27 participants. In addition to workshops, CAP has continued to take direct community referrals for conflict coaching and mediation services. In the past two years, CAP has accepted 55 cases and resolved 50% of those with successful conflict resolution between the parties.

The CAP was initiated with and operates with grant funding while Burlington manages significant financial constraints. The city creatively addressed a \$13m budget deficit for the FY2025 fiscal year without cutting any programs or services and has engaged consultants to identify and quantify opportunities to increase revenues that will reduce the use of one-time funds (e.g. grants) for programs and services that must be sustained and appropriately funded to do so, including CAP. While the city and its interagency partners are facing this financial crisis head-on, an injection of funding through the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) will allow the BCJC to continue building the CAP and offering conflict resolution workshops and assistance that will

reduce and prevent crime and conflict in the greater Burlington area. No sub-awards will be issued with JAG 2024 funds.

B. Project Design and Implementation

The BCJC's Operational Goals identify conflict prevention and resolution services that should be widely offered for community members to self-refer for services. The BCJC's Community Advisory Board – comprised of community members and partner agency stakeholders – supports this goal. The CAP services were identified as a specific need during a community needs assessment with a diverse group of stakeholders, and has since created intake materials, evaluation tools, a case development process, and established relationships with volunteer and professional mediators. Before the CAP initiative, BCJC conflict resolution was solely provided to criminal justice offenders and victims. With feedback from stakeholders and the community and with JAG funding in previous years, the CAP expanded BCJC services to become a public resource for free-to-low-cost training and assistance in addressing conflicts, disputes, and disagreements.

The State of Vermont is grappling with a tremendous backlog of court cases that ballooned since hearings were paused at the onset of COVID-19 in 2020 and did not return to normal operations until 2022. The backlog now approaches almost 3000 cases in Chittenden County. The Chittenden County State's Attorney is working to improve administration by triaging and prioritizing cases with acts of violence as the most pressing to resolve. This leaves substantial gaps in addressing crimes and activities that did not involve violence, and legislators and criminal justice stakeholders are exploring ways to move those cases and to identify other types of crimes that could be diverted from the criminal justice system whenever possible.

The BCJC has long-standing and trusted relationships with a variety of partners including the Burlington Police Department, the University of Vermont Police Services, the Vermont Attorney General's Office, the Vermont Department for Children and Families, the Vermont

Department of Liquor Control, the Burlington Mayor's office, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (our local community action agency), local domestic and sexual violence agencies, agencies specifically serving our immigrant communities, and other community organizations. These partnerships expand awareness of the BCJC's resources and enable consistent communication and collaborative solutions to address the impacts of crime outside of the criminal justice system, including the CAP. In the last two years, CAP staff have cultivated many partnerships with housing non-profits and social service providers, receiving dozens of referrals primarily related to neighborhood residential conflicts.

Over the next four years, CAP will expand the BCJC's conflict assistance services and skills training by improving access for marginalized populations. One barrier to collaboration with refugee and immigrant communities has been the lack of funds for translation services and stipends. With JAG 2024 funding, the CAP will fund a part-time coordinator to administer the CAP and engage Trusted Community Voices (TCVs), the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, the local chapter of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, and the Afghan Alliance. TCVs are part-time employees of the city's Community & Economic Development Office (CEDO) working to enhance community engagement, build trust, and foster dialogue between Burlington's immigrant and refugee communities and local government. A prerequisite to communicating with these networks is offering translated materials and services and compensating participants for their time. JAG 2024 will expand CAP's reach into marginalized communities by removing the financial barrier to translation services and stipends. JAG funds will be leveraged with VT Department of Corrections funds to support prevention and education efforts that promote restorative processes.

C. Capabilities and Competencies

The BCJC is part of three networks of community and restorative justice in the state: as one of 17 CJs funded by the Vermont Department of Corrections, offering restorative justice panels and offender reentry services; as a member of the Vermont Association of Court Diversion and Pretrial Service (VACDP) Programs, 12 agencies which offer a selection of programs serving youth and adults charged with misdemeanor and felony crimes; and as a subcontractor to the VT Department for Children and Families to work with youth in or at risk of being in the criminal justice system through the Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) program. These networks offer a variety of ways to engage at the legislative and programmatic levels. CAP coordinates with these clients, programs, organizations, and agencies to provide education, conflict engagement, and support for case-specific needs.

D. Plan for Collecting the Data Required for This Solicitation's Performance Measures

CAP coordinators have prioritized data collection using Results Based Accountability methods, which identified four to five metrics for each of the services and education components of the program. Two surveys have been distributed, one given to participants after a conflict assistance process, and one given to workshop participants. Direct-referral cases request demographics and collect qualitative data to assess participants' sense of repair, their understanding of their path forward in the conflict, their sense of feeling heard by the facilitator, and whether they feel more equipped to work through conflict. Workshop participants are asked to provide demographics, their level of satisfaction with the workshop, and to describe what was most and least impactful. The program coordinator reviews data monthly and integrates feedback into program operations. Thus, quarterly performance measurement requirements are a seamless process.