

TOP STORY

## Justice, reimagined: How a local program helps incarcerated people heal

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Lynsey Pursell-Kadlik helps facilitate Restorative Learning Dialogues at the Cheshire County jail in Keene — a program she once participated in while incarcerated there. Pursell-Kadlik said the program’s values and practices “clicked” with her, and she has continued to use them since her release.

Ethan Weston / Sentinel Staff

Picture a circle of chairs. In them, eight women in orange and blue jail-issued jumpsuits listen intently to the one who is speaking. When she’s finished, she invites someone else to chime in. They talk about their lives, their communities and their goals.

It’s a “learning dialogue,” but the learning happening here isn’t like that in a classroom. The facilitators don’t have a strict curriculum or agenda. It’s also not like group therapy, where a mental health professional works with multiple patients at once. Instead, all the participants are learning from each other and their stories, and working together to “co-create the space and practices needed to be in right relationship with ourselves, each other, and our world,” as one flyer for the program puts it.

Once, Lynsey Pursell-Kadlik was one of those women in a jail-issued jumpsuit. When she went to jail in September 2023, she had no idea what a turning point it would be in her life. She had been struggling with addiction and mental health for about 20 years and had previous interactions with the criminal justice system. But this time was different.

She signed up for a Restorative Learning Dialogue hosted by Cheshire County Restorative Justice initially just to have something to do, she said. Pursell-Kadlik, 37, “clicked” with the practices and values of the program, and has carried them with her since her release. She’s now a trained facilitator, helping to lead one of the restorative learning groups in which she previously participated.

During sessions, participants sit in a circle and take turns reflecting on prompts provided by the facilitators, Cheshire County Restorative Justice Director Patrick Heneghan and volunteer Leaf Seligman. Topics include developing a healthy self-concept, acknowledging responsibility, expressing genuine remorse and reconnecting with community. The goal is to promote empathy and accountability and reduce recidivism.

Restorative justice is an approach that shifts the focus from punishment to repair. It’s a philosophy on the rise across the country, but it’s still rare to find a restorative justice program operating inside a jail.

Studies have shown that people participating in restorative justice programs are more likely to comply with restitution and less likely to reoffend. A Vermont Department of Corrections study using data from 1998-2005 found people on reparative probation, which involves a process of restorative conversations with community members and in some cases the victim of the crime, had a 23 percent lower chance of reoffending than their peers on traditional probation.

At Cheshire County jail in Keene, the program fits in with an overall emphasis from leadership on dignity, respect and treatment.

Cheshire County Department of Corrections Superintendent Doug Iosue said about 80 percent of the jail population has underlying substance use disorders or mental health problems. When those issues are treated and people have a chance to recover, criminal behavior tends to go away, he said.

For him, Pursell-Kadlik is an “amazing example of what’s possible.”

### **Restorative stories**

Participating in the restorative dialogues felt “humanizing,” Pursell-Kadlik said.

The Restorative Learning Dialogues are an eight to 10-week program focused on repairing relationships with self and others.

It’s unusual in jail to have a safe place to share stories and be vulnerable, Pursell-Kadlik said, but this program provided that.

When she completed her three months in jail, Pursell-Kadlik was offered a choice between residential rehab and Behavioral Health Court. Behavioral Health Court provides an alternative to the traditional justice system for criminal court-involved individuals with severe and persistent mental health disorders, including substance use disorders. Pursell-Kadlik asked if she could do both.

The practices of the restorative learning circle traveled with Pursell-Kadlik to a 30-day residential rehab facility in Manchester. There, she started coming up with her own prompts and inviting other residents into conversation. Those conversations were new to many of those women, Pursell-Kadlik said — “a piece of something we didn’t normally have.”

She left her stay there with a pile of letters from residents, thanking her for those conversations.

### **People helping people**

After two decades of addiction, Pursell-Kadlik is turning a new leaf.

“I knew how to be that for so long,” Pursell-Kadlik said of her life in active addiction. Support from her family, Heneghan and others has helped her turn things around. Now, her focus is on using that experience for good. “How can I benefit people like me?”

When she returned to the Keene area earlier this year, Heneghan helped Pursell-Kadlik connect with volunteer opportunities through N.H. Food Bank’s mobile pantry, the Keene Elm City Rotary Club’s library book sale, Home Healthcare, Hospice and Community Services’ Butterfly Release Day, and Cooper’s Crossroad’s Pathways to Resilience program.

She jumped into community involvement with both feet, even while one ankle still sported an electronic monitor. She’s also earned perfect attendance in Behavioral Health Court. But she wanted to do more. She remembers earlier this year telling her case manager she wanted to use her story for good. She’s now had the opportunity to do that by serving as a member of the

Pretrial Services Planning Work Group, a community-based group seeking to secure a Department of Justice grant for a county pretrial services and diversion program.

Most of the people in that working group are law enforcement, probation officers, attorneys and social services workers, Pursell-Kadlik said. They all bring expertise in their field, but she brings a different kind of expertise — lived experience.

She's using that experience, too, in her new role as a co-facilitator for learning dialogues in the jail. So far, she's volunteered at about four sessions with a group of eight incarcerated women.

As a facilitator, Pursell-Kadlik said she's still learning from those women, even as they learn from her.

It's not unprecedented to have formerly incarcerated people volunteer with programming at the jail, Superintendent Iosue said, but no one who was so recently incarcerated there had ever been allowed back in to work with current inmates.

It was an exception he was willing to make for Pursell-Kadlik, who he said "has done extremely well" and is "a very unique example."

"She's in such an ideal place to impact other inmates," he said, because she so recently walked in their shoes.

Pursell-Kadlik said as someone who has been to jail herself, she has clear vision to see inmates as whole people.

That's a vision she and Heneghan said they wish more people on the outside shared.

Heneghan said hesitation to hire those with criminal records can make things difficult for returning citizens, especially when it comes to looking for work.

When she walks into a store, Pursell-Kadlik said she doesn't want to be seen as "Lynsey with the felonies." "I'm just Lynsey," she said. "I'm not as bad as my worst thing."

### **A success story**

Heneghan described Pursell-Kadlik as open, honest and, most of all, as someone who continues to show up and do the work, even when it's hard.

She entered Cheshire County jail charged with five felony counts of drug sales. She had a history with the criminal justice system and had struggled with addiction for decades. On paper, things didn't look good.

But by the end of her case, Pursell-Kadlik's efforts earned her the respect of community members, who provided letters of support at her sentencing, and an agreement with the prosecution to lower her felony convictions to misdemeanors after five years if she continues to do well.

"I'm committed to being better than I was yesterday," Pursell-Kadlik said.

In a letter of support filed in court, Heneghan said he believes her ability to continually show up for herself and her community stems from "her motivation, determination, and commitment to learning how to exercise her power in a manner that nurtures the healing process."

For judges and prosecutors who remain skeptical of restorative justice, Pursell-Kadlik said she'd ask them to "take a step back and look at it as 'this person is a person ... what can I do to help them?'"

At a visit to Cheshire County jail in November, Iosue and Director of Programs Capt. Greg Koziara told Sentinel reporters the jail's leadership aims to foster an environment of mutual respect, where everyone is treated as a fellow human.

He said that ethic was long championed by former warden Rick Van Wickler. When Iosue stepped into the role in 2020, he emphasized his commitment to the philosophy and to continuing to evolve to better meet the needs of people with substance use disorders and mental health problems.

"I couldn't have asked for a better jail," Pursell-Kadlik said, laughing.

In her previous interactions with the justice system, she said, "no one ever stopped and said, 'Lynsey, what can we do to help you?'" The support and opportunities she's taken advantage of through restorative justice and Behavioral Health Court have been pivotal in her rehabilitation, she said.

"If the criminal legal system gave more of these opportunities ... there would be less recidivism, and more healing," Pursell-Kadlik said.

Iosue said those opportunities are a “win-win” for the participants and the criminal justice system. Because so much of crime stems from substance use disorders and mental health problems, he said, “it just makes a lot of sense to provide treatment and recovery support.”

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