

Volunteers of America
Restorative Justice Program in Southeastern Kentucky
Year Five Evaluation Report
July 1, 2024 - July 31, 2025

Prepared For:

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Executive Summary

Overview

The Volunteers of America Restorative Justice Program (VOA RJ) aims to keep youth out of the criminal justice system by focusing on behavior change through making amends rather than using sanctions as punishment. Through facilitated conferences, victims and individuals accused of committing non-violent crimes agree on solutions to address wrongdoing and take responsibility for their actions positively. The VOA RJ program in southeastern Kentucky started in 2020. This report reviews data from years one through five.

Evaluation Method

The program evaluation, conducted by Erin Stevenson and Stephanie Saulnier at Eastern Kentucky University, uses deidentified data collected by VOA RJ staff as they work with youth in the program. The report includes a longitudinal view of the program from year one to year five. Data includes demographics, types of charges, case status, victim information, and behavioral health scores to assess program effectiveness. Case vignettes provide a narrative picture of the youth who benefit from participation in VOA RJ. The report includes a review of a random sample of case notes, a cost analysis for VOA RJ, and a recidivism snapshot with FY23 VOA RJ cases.

Key Outcomes

American Community Survey Data (2023) for the participating counties in Congressional District 5 highlight a region of southeastern Kentucky where over one-third of the youth live below the poverty level, and about 4 in 10 children are being raised by their grandparents. Kids Count Data (2024) reflects a region where youth ages 10-19 continue to be involved with juvenile justice at high rates.

In FY25, 35 individual cases were referred to VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky. Of those cases, 85% identified as male, 92% were white non-Hispanic, and 52% were ages 14-15. Over half of the youth (52%) had more than one charge against them at the time of their referral to the VOA RJ program.

A random sample of case notes (deidentified) was reviewed by the evaluators. These case notes highlight challenges faced by VOA RJ staff which required persistent communication efforts, creative contact methods, and repeated coordination in order to complete a case.

Restorative justice cases require on average 36.1 contacts with the victim, family, and offender. It takes an average of 5.8 months to work through the process and close an RJ case.

Through an agreement with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) matching recidivism data has been provided for youth in VOA RJ. The FY23 recidivism snapshot from the southeastern Kentucky program indicates there is a lower incidence of reoffending among youth who completed the RJ conference compared to those who did not complete it. Among youth participants in the VOA RJ program from FY23, 75.5% did not receive any new charges in the following 24 months.

Detailed examples of the program's impact on individual youth are shared in case vignettes.

Volunteers of America

Restorative Justice Program in Southeastern Kentucky

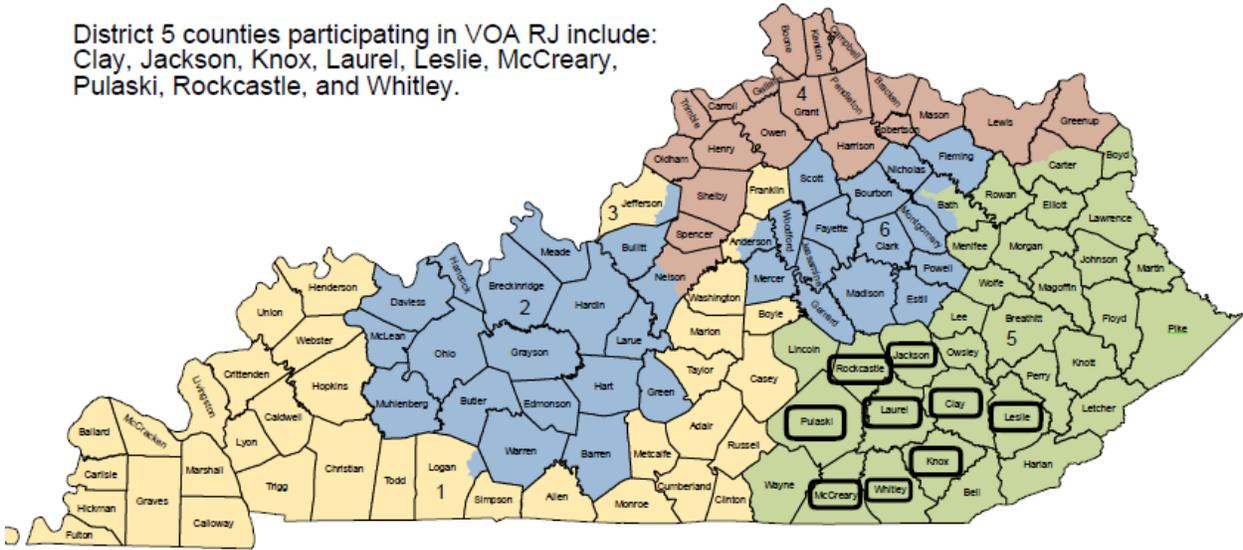
Year Five Evaluation Report

Introduction & Overview

The Volunteers of America Restorative Justice (VOA RJ) program began a pilot diversion program in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2011. Based on the strong positive outcomes from this pilot, the program was duplicated in 2020 to serve counties in four southeastern judicial districts (shown in [Figure 1](#)). These counties were chosen for several reasons, including high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and juvenile detention.

Figure 1.
Kentucky Congressional Districts

Congressional Plan (C1278B01) became law January 20, 2022, with enactment of Senate Bill 3.



In [Table 1](#), data about youth and families are displayed from [Congressional District 5](#), which includes the nine counties that participate in VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky (i.e., Clay, Jackson, Knox, Laurel, Leslie, McCreary, Pulaski, Rockcastle, and Whitley). American Community Survey Data (2023) for the participating counties highlight a region of southeastern Kentucky where over one-third of the youth live below the poverty level, and about 4 in 10 children are being raised by their grandparents. In this district, 37% of families have children under 18 years of age. About 32% of households with children receive SNAP benefits.

Table 1. Children & Families in Kentucky’s Congressional District 5 ^a

Variables	District 5	Statewide
2020 Census Population	738,680	4,526,150
Families with Children under 18	73,010 (37%)	466,990 (40%)
Households with Children under 18 Receiving SNAP	30,620 (32%)	122,850 (22%)
Children Living Below 100% of Poverty Level	52,740 (34%)	209,030 (21%)
Grandparents Raising Grandchildren	10,000	52,520

^a2023 American Community Survey Data

Based on Kentucky Youth Advocates (2024) data, the rate of youth incarceration across the state of Kentucky was 17.4 per 1,000 youth ages 10-19 between 2021-2023. Among Congressional District five counties participating in VOA RJ, the rate of youth incarceration is highest in Knox County at 21.7 per 1,000. This is followed by the rates per 1,000 youth in Leslie (12.3), Laurel (12.1), Whitley (10.9), Pulaski (8.4), Clay (8.1), and McCreary (5.3). It is lowest in Jackson County, which reports no youth incarcerations during this time period, and only 3 per 1,000 in Rockcastle County.

In **Table 2**, data on youth involvement with the juvenile justice system in VOA RJ counties in southeastern Kentucky is displayed. Of the 8,771 youth in Kentucky who were diverted to alternative programs instead of juvenile court, 7.34% were in the VOA RJ region in southeastern Kentucky (KYA, 2025).

Table 2. Youth Population and Diversion by County

	Population 0-17 ^a	Diverted from Juvenile Justice ^b	Public Offenses ^c	Status Offenses ^c
KY	1,015,912	8,771	13,597	3,575
District 27				
Knox	7,071	75	122	39
Laurel	14,405	149	220	45
District 28				
Pulaski	14,553	124	174	56
Rockcastle	3,403	19	31	--
District 34				
McCreary	3,719	82	62	69
Whitley	9,511	149	233	82
District 41				
Clay	4,229	34	62	-
Jackson	3,022	12	17	-
Leslie	2,201	-	10	-

^aU.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates.

^bKentucky Youth Advocates (KYA). 2025. Count of youth diverted from juvenile justice in 2023.

^cKentucky Youth Advocates (KYA). 2025. Count of youth charged by type of offense in 2023.

Whitley County had the highest number of youths with public offenses at 233, compared to only 10 in Leslie County. Whitley and Laurel tied for most youth cases diverted from court to restorative justice programs at 149 each, with Pulaski county close behind at 124 cases.

Examining the two primary categories of charges, Whitley County had the highest count of public and status offenses. Public offenses are charges that would be a crime if committed by an adult. Status offenses are charges that would *not* be a crime if committed by an adult.

The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) is responsible for operating the Kentucky court system, which includes 412 elected justices, judges, and circuit court clerks. VOA RJ has worked with the AOC to obtain recidivism data displayed in the final section of this report.

Purpose of Restorative Justice

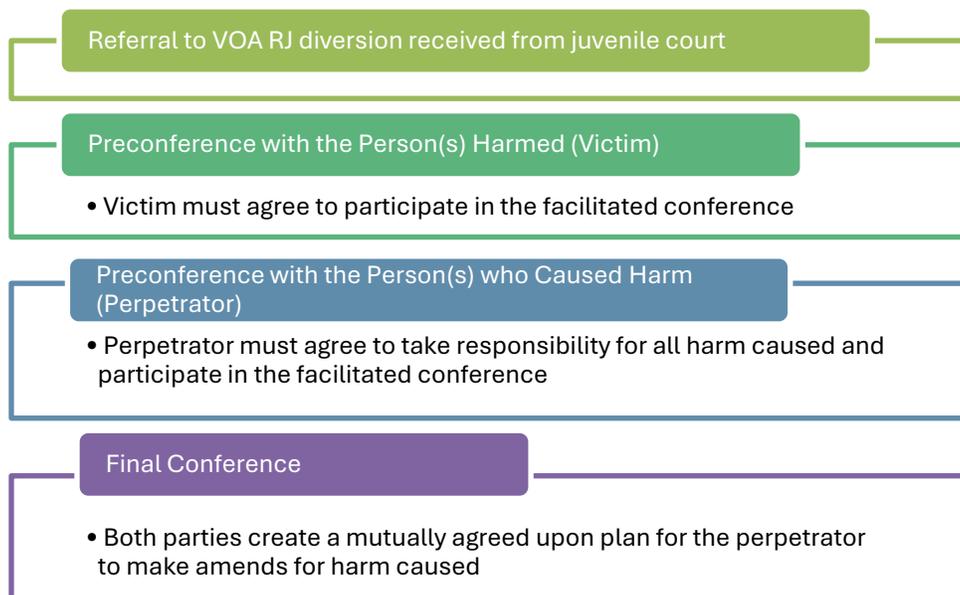
The primary goal of restorative justice diversion programs is to address youth offenders' negative behaviors and guide them toward positive social interactions, including accepting responsibility for their actions and making amends for harm caused (VOA, 2023). This would ideally prevent the young person from further involvement in criminal activity. We know this is not always possible, though there is research that the RJ process does reduce recidivism rates.

Research on the Impact of Restorative Justice Programs on Youth Behaviors

Several recent research studies examined the impact of Restorative Justice programs on youth behavior. They all found that program participation reduced rates of reoffending and improved outcomes for the victims (Flora et al., 2025; Petrosino et al., 2019; Strang et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2016). In studies that directly interviewed RJ program participants, **data indicate that perpetrators and victims both benefit from participation** (Gaffney et al. 2021; van Mastrigt et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2017).

To be eligible to participate in the RJ process, the youth who caused harm (offender) must accept responsibility for their actions and willingly participate in the conference process. Similarly, the ones who were harmed (victims) must also agree to participate in the RJ process (See Figure 2 Illustration). Thus, we should note that it may be these samples only include youth already inclined to make amends and who are empathetic to those they harmed, while youth without these qualities self-select to remain in the justice system.

Figure 2. Restorative Justice Conference Process



Conferencing between the offender and victim helps the offending youth accept responsibility and agree on ways to remedy harm caused by the youth. This builds a sense of self-worth and confidence in their ability to correct mistakes and maintain belonging in a community. The youth gain a stronger sense of empathy through the RJ conferencing process which may also help reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2021; Kuehn et al., 2014).

Kentucky passed Senate Bill (SB) 200 in 2014 aimed at reforming the juvenile justice system.

One of the primary goals was to improve youth outcomes through increased use of diversion programs and community resource access like VOA RJ provides for youth. Vidal et al. (2020) evaluated diversion efforts like restorative justice programs after SB 200 implementation in April 2014. Youth diversion went from 40% to 60% with 104 more youth being diverted from the criminal justice system after SB 200.

Case Status Overview

Pending Cases

Cases that are pending are those who have not completed the meetings involved in the restorative justice conference process. They may be waiting on decisions by the involved parties to participate in the conference process or the cases may be in the process of completing the required meetings.

VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky has noted in discussions with the families, schools, and organizations involved with a case that there are sometimes issues with their values around punishment. Some families, judges, or communities believe criminal punishment is preferable over restorative justice. Further education including sharing the results from the VOA RJ program could be important to increase community awareness and acceptance of restorative justice as an alternative to the juvenile justice system.

Final Case Conferences

The final conference is between the offender and the victim. This takes place within 30 working days of receiving the case referral by VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky. During the final conference, the victim and the offender discuss and agree on how the harm may best be reversed, reduced, or resolved. This decision becomes the final conference agreement. The agreement may contain requirements like community service work, actions of restitution, written letters of apology, and/or repairs made to damaged property. This negotiation of an agreement takes time. The parties listen and discuss with each other the best options and are guided in the process by a trained VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky professional facilitator.

Open - Monitoring Cases

VOA RJ cases remain in open-monitoring status until all agreed-upon terms have been met. When the parties feel that restitution has been made, the facilitators hold a discharge planning meeting. At this meeting, they develop an aftercare plan to encourage continued positive behaviors and connect individuals with ongoing resources in the community. A case goes into monitoring once the final conference is completed. The final conference agreement is monitored until all terms have been met, then the case is closed.

Closed Cases

It is ideal to close a case upon successful completion of the final conference agreement. Some cases return to court and are closed without completing the RJ process. Other cases might be

closed because the offender and/or victim fail to attend the conference and contact with them is lost. The southeastern Kentucky RJ staff attempts to maintain contact and encourage participation with all youth referrals in order to successfully complete a conference.

Role of Victims in VOA RJ Cases

The VOA RJ staff collaborates with the victims who are also referred for mediation conferences. The victims include individuals, or they may be representatives of groups, organizations, or businesses that were harmed by the youth offender. The victims must agree to participate in the conference process for the case to proceed. If the victims do not agree, then the offender must go back to court, and the VOA RJ case is closed.

The victim perspective is an important part of the restorative justice approach. Listening to the victim in a mediated conference can help the offender understand how their actions affected another person or group in the community. This kind of understanding can be essential for behavior change. The victim has an opportunity to be heard and this can be healing. They also get to hear the “why” behind the offender’s action and build a better understanding between both parties.

Year Five Evaluation Plan for VOA RJ in Southeastern Kentucky

The program evaluators examined year five demographic information, case referral counts and sources, behavioral health screening data, charges against youth, and satisfaction survey data. When appropriate, comparisons are made with data from prior years of the southeastern Kentucky VOA RJ program.

This report also includes recidivism data provided by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), a cost analysis, and case vignettes that depict actual restorative justice cases and how the process impacts the lives of youth and their families. **Appendix A** includes an explanation of evaluation data and sources, including survey questions.



Characteristics of Referrals

In Year Five, between July 1, 2024, and July 31, 2025, a total of **35 cases** were referred to the VOA RJ program in southeastern Kentucky. In **Table 3** the characteristics of youth referred to VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky are displayed by comparing years one through five. The number of referrals

increases substantially from 13 in year one to 62 cases by year four, and a slight drop to 35 referrals in year five. This may indicate a decrease in criminal activity, particularly among youth, which mirrors national data trends (Lantz & Knapp, 2024; Lopez & Boxerman, 2025).

Characteristics of the participants include more males being referred to the program across years. In southeastern Kentucky, the population is primarily white, non-Hispanic, and this is reflected in the VOA RJ youth demographics. Over the past three years, the group of 14-15-year-old participants has made up the majority of cases.

Table 3. Characteristics of Youth Referred to VOA RJ Southeastern Kentucky Years 1-5

	Year One 2020-2021 (n=13)	Year Two 2021-2022 (n=21)	Year Three 2022-2023 (n=51)	Year Four 2023-2024 (n=62)	Year Five 2024-2025 (n=35)
Characteristics	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Gender Identity					
Male (cisgender)	61.5% (8)	57.1% (12)	58% (30)	64.5% (40)	82.9% (29)
Female (cisgender)	38.5% (5)	42.9% (9)	42% (21)	35.5% (22)	17.1% (6)
Race/Ethnicity					
White	84.6% (11)	95.2% (20)	94% (47)	93.5% (58)	91.4% (32)
Black	--	--	4% (2)	3.2% (2)	8.6% (3)
Multi-Racial	15.4% (2)	4.8% (1)	6% (3)	3.2% (2)	--
Hispanic-Latino	--	--	1.9% (1)	1.6% (1)	--
Age Groups					
11-13 years	38.5% (5)	19.1% (4)	39.2% (20)	27.4% (17)	22.9% (8)
14-15 years	15.4% (2)	33.4% (7)	33.3% (17)	45.2% (28)	51.4% (18)
16-17 years	46.2% (6)	47.6% (10)	25.5% (13)	27.4% (17)	25.7% (9)
Judicial District					
District 27: Knox & Laurel Counties	53.8% (7)	14.3% (3)	3.9% (2)	21.0% (13)	31.4% (11)
District 28: Pulaski & Rockcastle* Counties	-	--	--	1.6% (1)	42.9% (15)
District 34: McCreary & Whitley Counties	23.1% (3)	14.3% (3)	58.5% (30)	48.4% (30)	17.1% (6)
District 41: Clay, Jackson & Leslie Counties	23.1% (3)	71.4% (15)	35.3% (18)	30.6% (19)	8.6% (3)

NOTE: *District 28 was added in year four.

Charges Against Referred Youth

Youth are referred to the program because they have been charged with a minor offense by their local court system. While most youth only had one charge against them at the time of the referral, many had more than one charge. **Table 4** includes the percentage of youth charged by violation types in each year of the VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky program. The largest percentage of charges in year five was for terroristic threatening (22.9%). This was followed by assault (20.0%) and criminal mischief (20.0%) charges.

The final row includes the percentage of youth with more than one charge against them at referral to VOA RJ. In year five, over half (52%) of the youth were charged with multiple violations. National juvenile crime rates have decreased about 14% since the pandemic (Lantz & Knapp, 2024). The lower number of referred cases to VOA RJ may be an indication of this trend in Kentucky.

Table 4. Percentage of Youth Charged by Type of Violation

Charge or Violation	Year One (n=11)	Year Two (n=21)	Year Three (n=51)	Year Four (n=62)	Year Five (n=35)
Arson	15.4%	4.8%	--	--	--
Assault	46.2%	52.4%	35.3%	54.8%	20.0%
Burglary	30.8%	4.8%	--	1.6%	8.6%
Criminal Mischief	46.2%	9.5%	2.0%	11.3%	20.0%
Criminal Trespassing	15.4%	--	2.0%	--	--
Disorderly Conduct	7.7%	4.8%	--	6.5%	14.3%
Distributing Obscene Material	--	--	--	3.2%	--
Fleeing or evading police	--	--	--	--	14.3%
Habitual Truancy	7.7%	--	7.8%	6.5%	--
Harassment	15.4%	47.6%	13.7%	22.6%	14.3%
Impersonating a public servant	--	--	--	--	2.9%
Indecent Exposure	--	--	--	1.6%	--
Menacing	7.7%	4.8%	--	3.2%	2.9%
Possession of Marijuana		--	--	--	2.9%
Public Intoxication	15.4%	--	7.8%	3.2%	2.9%
Receiving Stolen Property	--	--	--	1.6%	8.6%
Resisting Arrest	7.7%	--	2.0%	--	--
TBUT on all others \$500	6.9%	4.8%	--	1.6%	14.3%
Terroristic Threatening	15.4%	19.0%	5.9%	11.3%	22.9%
Video Voyeurism	--	--	--	1.6%	--
Wanton Endangerment	--	--	--	1.6%	--
Weapon on School Grounds	46.2%	--	2.0%	--	5.7%
Had Multiple Charges	30.8%	42.9%	9.8%	21.0%	51.4%

Behavioral Health Screenings

When youth are referred to VOA RJ services, the first case session includes having the young person complete a questionnaire called the GAIN Short Screener (GAIN SS). The GAIN SS is a screening tool that assesses the potential risk for a behavioral health disorder. While this screener does not replace a more comprehensive assessment, it is an effective tool to evaluate who is likely to have behavioral health challenges that need to be addressed (Dennis et al., 2006). These might

include anxiety, depression, ADHD, cognitive processing issues, and other mental or physical health concerns.

Scores from the GAIN SS can range from 0-14, with a 1-2 indicating a “moderate” need for further behavioral health assessments. A score of 3 or higher indicates a “high” need for further assessment and intervention.

When a youth scores at the 3 or higher level, a more detailed assessment is completed by staff, and referrals are made as appropriate. For example, youth may be referred to providers at Cumberland River Comprehensive Care Center, White House Clinic, or Baptist Health Trillium Center. Examples of referral services include individual counseling services (i.e., trauma, anger management), parental counseling services, and family counseling. In addition, staff provide information to families about other services that may be able to help them with their household situations, like SNAP, Medicaid, or the Michelle P Waiver.

GAIN SS scores are displayed in **Table 5**. Looking at the percentage of youth who need further assessment based on their GAIN SS score, we see a trend downward from 70% in year one to about 53% in years four and five. This may be due to increased mental health treatment efforts to support youth across the U.S. (CDC, 2024).

Table 5. GAIN SS Behavioral Health Screening Scores – Percent by Year

Screening Score	Year One (n=10)	Year Two (n=18)	Year Three (n=42)	Year Four (n=62)	Year Five (n=15) *
0	--	5.6%	11.9%	29.0%	13.3%
1-2	30.0%	27.8%	26.2%	33.9%	--
3-5	40.0%	33.3%	26.2%	19.4%	46.7%
6-10	10.0%	27.8%	26.2%	30.6%	6.7%
11-15	20.0%	5.6%	9.5%	3.2%	--
Need Further Assessment (score 3+)	70.0%	66.7%	61.9%	53.2%	53.4%

*20 youth did not have GAIN screening scores.

Social Support Indicators

Youth need to have support they can count on to help them cope with life challenges and complete high school. Unfortunately, juvenile offenders may lose social support when they are placed in detention for a variety of reasons, like harming close family or friends, drug use, community shunning, and rejection by school peers (Zwecker et al., 2019). Having good social support is linked to positive self-esteem and pro-social behaviors that are important for academic success and career plans as they reach young adulthood (Anthony et al., 2010). Participating in an RJ conference instead of being held in detention may increase positive social support for youth.

For youth in the VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky program, social support was measured by a series of questions asked of offenders before and after participating in the VOA RJ program. Participation is voluntary and thus not all participants agreed to complete the survey questions. The goal is for participants to have increased their perception of positive social support from friends, family, mentors, healthcare professionals, and others in the community after participating in the RJ program.

The RJ staff work with the youth and their families to ensure their basic needs are being met by connecting them to resources for food, transportation, clothing, and shelter. They connect them with physical and mental health services in their communities and tutoring or mentoring in the school system. Building these connections for the youth within their own counties and communities is important to help increase their social support.

Table 6 includes social support data from participant surveys completed by offenders and victims. Items that have a slight dip from pre to post survey include relationships with family, friends, and co-workers. This fits the research indicating that juvenile offenders may feel a slight decrease in positive support after an incident has occurred as they are realizing the impact their actions may have on others.

Table 6. Social Support Pre-Post Conference Survey - Percent “Yes” Responses by Year

During the past 30 days, did you have the following kinds of social support?	Year One		Year Two		Year Four		Year Five	
	Pre (n=4)	Post (n=4)	Pre	Post (n=6)	Pre (n=19)	Post (n=62)	Pre (n=3)	Post (n=78)
1. A professional counselor or other health provider to talk to...	50%	25%	-	50%	52.6%	59.7%	66.7%	76.9%
2. Friends or colleagues from other companies or schools you could talk to without worry about things getting back to others are work or school...	25%	100%	-	100%	84.2%	87.1%	100%	85.9%
3. People at work or school you could talk to about day-to-day things...	75%	100%	-	100%	89.5%	96.8%	100%	94.9%
4. People at work or school who could help you get your assignments done...	75%	100%	-	100%	94.7%	93.5%	100%	96.2%
5. Family members or closer partners you could talk to or rely on....	100%	100%	-	100%	100%	96.8%	100%	98.7%
6. Friends you could just hang out with and not talk about work or family issues...	75%	100%	-	100%	94.7%	91.9%	100%	98.7%
7. A legal hobby or activity that you enjoyed and did for yourself...	100%	100%	-	100%	94.7%	100.0%	100%	93.6%
8. Someone you felt like you could talk to about needs and emotions...	75%	100%	-	100%	94.7%	96.8%		96.2%
9. Someone you felt could help you figure out how to cope with any problems you were having or might have...	75%	100%	-	100%	94.7%	96.8%		94.9%

NOTE: In year two, only post-conference surveys were completed. Individual social support data were not available for Year 3.

Satisfaction Survey Results

To measure satisfaction among participants in the VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky program, the evaluators developed a brief survey. The questions focused on three areas: 1) Satisfaction with the facilitator of the restorative justice conferences, 2) Perception of social support among participants, and 3) Overall conference satisfaction. [See Appendix A for the full data collection instrument.]

The VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky staff provide the opportunity to complete the survey. They clarify that responses are confidential and that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers.

Facilitator Satisfaction

There were originally five questions on the survey about the facilitator’s role in the conferences; this was reduced to one question in year five to limit data collection burden on clients and staff. Respondents including offenders and victims were asked to rate each question from “strongly agree” with the statement to “strongly disagree” on a 5-point scale.

Satisfaction survey responses regarding facilitators are compared from year one to year five in **Table 7**. Overall, the results are very positive regarding the facilitation of RJ conferences following guidelines, being clear about rules, being fair, and giving everyone an opportunity to speak and feel respected. In year five, the majority of respondents felt the facilitator treated everyone with respect.

Table 7. Facilitator Satisfaction Survey Responses by Year

Questions	Year One (n=7)	Year Two (n=12)	Year Four (n=62)	Year Five (n=52)
1. The facilitator explained the ground rules for the meeting in a way that I understood.	100%	100%	98.4%	--
2. The facilitator was fair to everyone at the meeting.	71.4%	100%	98.4%	---
3. The facilitator let everyone have their say.	71.4%	100%	98.4%	---
4. The facilitator guided the meeting well.	100%	100%	100%	---
5. The facilitator treated everyone with respect.	100%	100%	100%	86.5%

NOTE: No satisfaction data were available for Year 3. Fewer questions were asked in Year 5.

VOA RJ Conference Satisfaction

Originally there was a series of 15 questions at the end of the survey to measure overall conference satisfaction with VOA RJ; this was reduced to 5 questions in year five to limit data collection burden on clients and staff. Respondents including offenders and victims were asked to rate each statement based on their personal experience. The scale for measurement ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” on a 5-point scale.

Satisfaction ratings from year one to year five are displayed in **Table 8**. The percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the satisfaction questions are shown here.

Overall, the ratings are very positive with high satisfaction on all items. It is important that youth feel heard, respected, and able to share their perspective safely in the RJ conference. This data indicates the VOA RJ program in southeastern Kentucky has been successful with this goal.

Table 8. Conference Satisfaction – Percent who Agree or Strongly Agree by Year

	Year One (n=7)	Year Two (n=12)	Year Four (n=60)	Year Five (n=52)
1. My concerns and questions were treated seriously.	71.4%	100%	95.0%	82.7%
2. I felt pressured.	28.6%	-	8.3%	---
3. I felt safe.	71.4%	100%	95.0%	80.8%
4. I was scared to say what I felt.	14.3%	-	6.7%	---
5. I was listened to carefully.	71.4%	100%	91.7%	---
6. I felt involved in how the conference was run.	85.7%	100%	93.3%	---
7. I was treated with respect.	100.0%	100%	98.3%	---
8. I understood what was going on during the conference.	100.0%	100%	98.3%	---
9. I had the opportunity to share my point of view.	71.4%	100%	95.0%	82.7%
10. I had a voice in how the group decided to handle the offense.	71.4%	100%	95.0%	---
11. I got to hear other points of view on what happened.	100.0%	100%	95.0%	71.2%
12. I feel like the conference gave me some closure.	85.7%	100%	91.7%	---
13. I am responsible for my actions.	85.7%	100%	95.0%	---
14. I feel satisfied with the outcome of the conference.	85.7%	100%	96.7%	78.8%
15. I would recommend restorative justice to others.	71.4%	100%	95.0%	80.8%

NOTE: No satisfaction data were available for Year 3. Fewer questions were asked in Year 5.

One young person commented: “It [RJ Conference] was better than I thought. It was actually not too bad... gave me time to change in that amount of time and move on to do better.”

Another stated, “I’m glad we were given this option. I hope all is worked out.”

Case Reviews

A random sample of 18 VOA RJ case files was pulled by VOA RJ staff. The cases were deidentified and shared with the evaluators. These files were reviewed to assess the number of contacts, case status, and to identify common themes.

Contacts & Communication

For youth in the VOA RJ program in southeastern Kentucky, the cases reflect an **average of 36.1 contacts**, with a minimum of 14 contacts and a maximum of 70 contacts per case.

When examining the duration of each case, the **average length is 5.8 months**, ranging from a minimum of 1 month (for pending cases) to a **maximum of 8 months**, which includes bi-weekly follow-up contacts after the final case conference has been completed.

Staff have to collaborate with Course Designated Workers (CDW) and court staff, families, step-families, foster parents, guardians, and school personnel. Additionally, they must find and schedule appropriate meeting places that are easily accessible for the youth and families. This

might be the local library or the local recovery center spaces. The space must feel secure and comfortable for the family to meet with the VOA RJ staff.

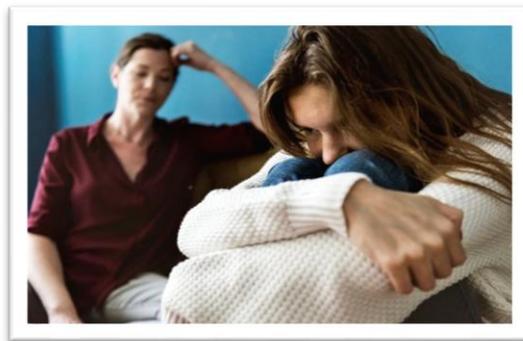
Basic Needs & Resource Access

The VOA RJ staff reported providing support to meet a variety of youth and family needs outside of the conference format. There were multiple instances of **youth needing clothing** and of families in need of **food resources**. Conference meetings were frequently cancelled or rescheduled due to car trouble and lack of **transportation access**. Similarly, cases were held up because of communication issues like victim or offender phones no longer being in service, returned UPS mail, bounced emails, or phone messages not being returned.

Summary

This brief review of cases highlights the challenges faced by VOA RJ staff as they work to coordinate conferences and resource connections for youth and their families.

The picture painted with the random case reviews is one of repeated contacts, rescheduling, changing communication tactics, and persistence required of the VOA RJ staff in order to complete a case with a young person and their family.



VOA RJ Cost Analysis for Southeastern Kentucky

VOA collected data from various agency administrators to examine the cost of juvenile court system staffing compared to costs for VOA RJ programming. In **Table 9** these data are displayed by type of juvenile detention or diversion service. When comparing the costs for VOA RJ staffing with those of other programs listed in the table, several key differences are noted.

VOA RJ staff costs are about \$2 more than CDW staff and about \$5 less than Department of Juvenile Justice staff costs.

The costs of secure detention, Group Homes, and Youth Development Center Costs are higher. These costs reflect daily staff salary costs and exclude housing or food expenses for the youth housed in these locations. The secure detention center cost is \$600.70 per day, leading to a total cost of around \$16,281.90 for a 27-day average length of stay (ALOS). In comparison, the VOA RJ staffing costs do not reflect a per-day analysis but show overall program costs.

If we extrapolate from this data, one VOA RJ staff person in southeastern Kentucky has a case load of about 10 youth per month. Staff work 8 hours/day, 5 days/week for an average of 30 days/month. Thus, a monthly salary for VOA RJ staff covering the 9-county region would equal about \$5829.60. Split across 10 youth, this **averages \$19.43 per day for services to one VOA RJ youth.**

A similar calculation with a case load of 10 youth for CDWs is \$17.79 per day, and for DJJ staff, it is \$24.20. The table reflects Group Home costs at \$556 per day and Youth Development Center costs per youth at \$631.90 per day.

Comparing these costs to the other staffing options in the juvenile justice system, it is considerably more cost-efficient to use VOA RJ services in southeastern Kentucky.

While VOA RJ staff salaries are competitive, they remain lower than DJJ staff and only slightly higher than CDW staff costs.

Table 9. VOA RJ in Southeastern Kentucky Cost Analysis Data

	2020*	2021*	2022*	2023**	2024**	2025**
VOA RJ Staffing						
Avg Hr Salary	\$18.17	\$18.72	\$19.22	\$19.71	\$24.29	\$24.29
JJ/Court Program	\$1,144.90	\$1,179.25	\$1,210.57	\$1,241.83	\$1,530.31	\$1,530.31
ATD Program						
CDW Staff						
Avg Hr Salary	\$16.92	\$17.23	\$19.78	\$23.41	\$23.91	\$22.24
JJ/Court Program	\$1,065.94	\$1,085.32	\$1,245.86	\$1,474.87	\$1,506.17	\$1,400.89
ATD Program						
DJJ Staff						
Avg Hr Salary	\$18.27	\$19.43	\$21.38	\$25.96	\$29.37	\$30.25
JJ/Court Program	\$1,151.24	\$1,224.23	\$1,346.65	\$1,634.27	\$1,850.48	\$1,906.00
ATD Program						
Secure Detention Staff Cost/Day						
2024 ALOS 27 Days	\$600.70	\$16,281.90				
Group Home Staff Cost/Day						
ALOS 4 Months	\$556.52	\$66,782.40				
ALOS 6 Months		\$100,173.60				
Youth Dev. Center Cost/Day						
ALOS 4 Months	\$631.90	\$75,838.00				
ALOS 6 Months		\$113,742.00				

*Note the Department of Juvenile Justice has staff in Laurel and Whitley counties only.

**Note the Department of Juvenile Justice has staff in Laurel, Pulaski, and Whitley counties only.

Recidivism Snapshot

Overview of Data Analysis

With an agreement between VOA and the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) we are able to review recidivism data for youth who were charged and given diversion to the restorative justice program. First, VOA staff provide AOC with a list of youth referrals from the prior year (i.e., name, date of birth, charge, referral ID). Next, AOC's Department of Information & Technology Services Research and Statistics staff match the IDs with their dataset to provide recidivism information for the VOA participants. Finally, VOA deidentifies the data and sends the information in a secure password-protected file to the evaluators. The goal is to examine the long-term outcomes of VOA RJ on participant behavior.

This snapshot includes data from FY23 participants. It is important to note these data are simply a snapshot of information gathered at one point in time for evaluation.

About Referrals in this Snapshot of VOA RJ Youth in Southeastern Kentucky

- This dataset includes 52 individuals who were referred to the VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky program between July 2022 and December 2023.
- Referral counties for individuals in this snapshot include:
 - District 27 includes 5 cases
 - District 28 includes 0 cases
 - District 34 includes 29 cases
 - District 41 includes 18 cases
- From this group of individuals, all but one of the youths completed the RJ program successfully.



Types of Charges Among Youth Referred to the VOA RJ Program

In order to be eligible to participate in the southeastern Kentucky RJ Program, youth must have committed non-violent, non-sexual offenses. Youth must also agree to take responsibility for their actions by pleading guilty to the charges. They must also agree to participate in the southeastern Kentucky RJ Program which includes a mediated conference with the victim, a discussion of how their actions harmed the victim and/or community, and a plan for making amends. Once the plan has been achieved, the case can be closed and is considered successful.

In Kentucky, the two major categories of criminal charges are felonies and misdemeanors. Minors are also charged with violations like harassment or status offenses like truancy.

Felonies are the most serious crimes. Capital offense felonies include murder. Other types of felonies range from the least serious class D to the most serious class A felonies. Charges are based on the severity of the impact of the crime and include burglary, theft, forgery, armed robbery, stalking, rape, assault, and criminal trespassing, among other things.

Misdemeanors include class A and class B charges. Charges range by severity and include trespassing, forgery, selling a firearm to a felon, prostitution, resisting arrest, public intoxication, menacing, and harassment, among other things.

Violation charges among youth focus on harassment of others.

Status offenses are related to the person being a minor (under age 18 in Kentucky). Truancy from school, purchasing alcohol, possessing nicotine products, being out of control, running away from home/shelter, and other actions that would not apply to an adult are considered status offenses.

Charges Leading to VOA RJ Referrals

Comparisons were made between youth who completed the RJ southeastern Kentucky program and those who went back to court instead of participating in an RJ conference in FY23. These are data matched by AOC with data from VOA RJ staff, deidentified, and shared with the evaluators. Reasons that youth are referred to VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky include status and public offenses. **Table 10** includes the types of charges that led to the referral of a young person to RJ diversion instead of being called to appear in juvenile court.

Table 10. Summary of FY23 Charges Leading to a Referral for VOA RJ

	Completed RJ Successfully (n=49)	Declined to Participate in RJ (n=3)
Types of Charges	Count	Count
Misdemeanor A	60	5
Misdemeanor B	35	2
Felony A	--	--
Felonies B, C, D	16	2
Violations	25	3
Status Offenses	--	--
Total Charges	136	12

NOTE: Individuals may have multiple charges. [z-score =-1.04; SE =1.118; p = .299]

To compare youth referred to RJ in FY23 by the number of charges against them, we used a z-test of proportions. Among those who went on to complete VOA RJ compared to those who declined participation in VOA RJ, there were no statistically significant differences in the proportion of charges. This indicates the charges leading to a referral to southeastern Kentucky RJ were similar among both groups.

New Charges After Being Referred to VOA RJ

Successful Completion of VOA RJ

Among the forty-nine participants in VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky who completed the program and were included in this **FY23 snapshot, thirty-seven youth (75.5%) had acquired no new charges** according to the AOC data in the 24 months after completing VOA RJ. Only twelve participants had acquired new charges (24.5%). Examining the severity of these recent charges, most of the youths had similar severity of charges, while two youths had more severe charges.

Non-completion of VOA RJ

Among the three youths in FY23 who did not complete VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky, all had recent charges in the 24 months after their referral. In this snapshot, one youth had worse charges, while the other two youth had similar severity of charges. Of the youth who completed VOA RJ conferences, 12 had new charges in the next 24 months.

If we do a rough comparison, there are, **on average, 1.58 new charges per youth who completed VOA RJ**, and almost double, with **2.33 per youth who did not complete the program**.

These data reveal that participation in the VOA RJ program may reduce the severity of charges and thus recidivism rates over time. These results align with other research indicating diversion programs benefit youth, improve social behaviors, and decrease recidivism (Petrosino et al., 2019).

Case Vignettes

VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky is committed to addressing every case referral with thoroughness and care. The team actively identifies underlying issues that often include mental health and substance abuse challenges, and deficits in their ability to meet daily basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. The VOA RJ staff connect individuals with nearby community resources needed to support the perpetrator, the victim, and their families.

The following three case vignettes are examples VOA RJ staff have shared based on the real-life stories of youth and their families in the program (names and details have been adapted for privacy). These narratives demonstrate the significant and positive impact restorative justice has on the lives of youth, their families, and the community.



Case Vignette 1

I had the opportunity to work with a young client referred to our Restorative Justice Program after being charged with Terroristic Threatening, 3rd Degree. The incident involved threatening and alarming text messages sent to a peer, which prompted a report to the school resource officer. This case raised red flags regarding the client's mental health and emotional stability.

Our team quickly assessed the client's needs and prioritized linking them with mental health services to ensure both accountability and safety. Throughout the process, the client engaged in counseling and demonstrated improved emotional regulation and communication skills. They also remained committed to completing their diploma early through Penn Foster.

The client participated fully in the Restorative Justice process, completing the Pre-Conference, Assessment, Case Plan, Final Conference, and Monitoring stages. During the final conference, the client acknowledged the harm caused by their actions and collaborated on a plan to move forward, which included:

- 1) Continued engagement with mental health services; and
- 2) Completing educational goals and developing a post-graduation plan.

The client took responsibility and showed meaningful progress. This client's journey highlights the ways early intervention and wraparound support can help young people redirect their energy and rebuild trust.

Case Vignette 2

This case involved a teenage client charged with Strangulation, 2nd Degree (Domestic Violence) after an incident involving the client's mother. The client acted out physically during a dispute and was reported to have applied pressure to the mother's neck during the altercation. Property was also damaged in the home.

While the offense was serious, our team looked beyond the behavior to the root causes — including emotional regulation, impulse control, and communication breakdowns within the household. The client was referred to mental health and psychiatric services and also introduced to Jituzu, a secure online platform to help client's manage appointments and to increase ease of therapeutic engagement. In addition, we encouraged the young person to become involved in community-based activities to build new habits and reinforce positive daily structure.

The client completed all stages of the Restorative Justice Program and participated in developing a meaningful agreement during the final conference. This included:

1. Ongoing counseling and mental health follow-up; and
2. Exploring entrepreneurship and business development as a long-term goal.

The client shared that the program helped them feel more grounded and opened their eyes to a better path, one where they could eventually become a business owner. Watching this client shift perspective reminded me of the power of choice, and how accountability paired with support can create the foundation for positive growth and lifetime changes for youth.

Case Vignette 3

I worked with a youth who was referred to the Restorative Justice Program after being charged with Burglary, 3rd Degree, and Criminal Mischief, 1st Degree. The client, along with peers, unlawfully entered an old storefront being used as storage. Multiple items were damaged, including ceramics and art supplies, with a total reported damage of approximately \$2,500. Two victims were identified. The business owner and the property owner expressed a desire for accountability from the teenager.

The youth admitted to the offense and expressed remorse during the Pre-Conference stage. Our team referred them to counseling and worked with community partners to help them complete community service hours that felt relevant and reparative. Over time, the client shared that the experience helped them reevaluate their relationships and the people they surrounded themselves with, leading them to seek healthier friendships.

They included:

1. Completion of community service hours; and
2. Continued engagement with supportive services and mentoring.

This case highlighted how meaningful accountability, when paired with the opportunity to repair harm, can lead to deep personal insights. It reminded me that even in moments of poor judgment, young people have the capacity for growth and change when given the right support.



Discussion

The VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky program spans four judicial districts and nine counties which include seven Circuit Court judges. These judges hear civil matters involving more than \$5,000, capital offenses and felonies, divorces, adoptions, termination of parental rights, real property title disputes, and contested probate matters. Circuit judges serve eight-year terms. VOA RJ builds a relationship with these judges, attorneys, schools, and other local professionals to educate them about restorative justice and its role in helping youth stay out of the justice system.

It is important to understand the elements that may influence the region where these judges preside. For example, U.S. Health Services and Resource Administration (HRSA, 2024) codes these districts as 100% rural geography. This means they are significantly far away from urban population centers and include cities having less than 50,000 residents. In rural communities, the resources

can often be spread miles apart and may only be accessible in other counties, making it hard to connect with necessities like healthcare or education. Rural economic challenges include limited infrastructure funds for internet, road maintenance, and business growth that could help strengthen job opportunities in the area (Daley, 2020).

Understanding this is important when comparing VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky to other VOA RJ programs in the state. The rural culture and community are often tight-knit, with multiple generations of families living in the area. This provides a rich history for each community as well as shared norms and values. It has been the case for some referrals to VOA RJ in southeastern Kentucky that the victim or offender chooses not to participate, preferring to let the court system decide their consequences. Rural communities have learned to take care of each other while monitoring shared norms and values that are upheld by all their members (Daley, 2020). When a young person causes harm in a rural community, it is often handled by local authorities at school, church, or in court. Thus, fluctuating referral numbers for the rural counties may be influenced by local values and perspectives on restorative justice compared to juvenile courts. Continued education and research on the positive behavior changes for youth involved in VOA RJ is encouraged.

Limitations

While the report shows short-term outcomes related to recidivism and charge severity, there may be a lack of comprehensive longitudinal studies assessing the long-term effectiveness of the VOA RJ program on youth behavior and community integration over several years. The report does not address the outcomes for victims involved in the restorative justice process. Understanding their perspectives and experiences could provide a more complete view of the program's effectiveness.

Since the report primarily focuses on quantitative data regarding charges and recidivism rates, more qualitative research on participants' perspectives would help assess the emotional and psychological impacts of restorative justice. Further data is needed to understand the factors contributing to variations in recidivism rates among participants who complete the program, particularly between those with differing backgrounds or types of offenses.

Conclusions

This report evaluates the Volunteers of America Restorative Justice (VOA RJ) program in southeastern Kentucky's Congressional District Five. Data includes individuals aged 10 to 18 who were diverted from juvenile court between July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025. The findings comparing years one through five of VOA RJ reveal several encouraging trends. Among those who completed the program, 75.5% did not receive any new charges during the follow-up period, suggesting the program may be effective in reducing recidivism. In contrast, youth who did not complete the program had a higher average number of new charges.

VOA RJ takes a comprehensive approach, aiming to address underlying challenges such as limited access to basic resources, mental health care, and substance use treatment. Overall, the report indicates that participation in the program may help reduce both the severity and frequency of future charges. These outcomes are consistent with broader research supporting the value of diversion programs in promoting positive youth development and reducing involvement with the justice system.

Appendix A: Overview of Evaluation Elements for VOA RJ

VOA and the program evaluators established a core evaluation framework to be used across all its programs. This framework provides a structure for examining the program's processes, successes, and areas for improvement as they work to achieve the VOA RJ goals. Information is collected by VOA staff regarding the applicable standards from the evaluation framework. Data include demographics, satisfaction with services, social support perceptions from clients, and recidivism data as available. Descriptions of surveys and data are provided for each of the three areas evaluated for VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky – Demographics, Client Satisfaction, and Recidivism.

1. Demographics

The VOA RJ staff reports annually to the program evaluators a deidentified dataset that includes demographic variables. Information is collected by VOA RJ staff from clients at referral intake and is kept in a secure database. Data shared with the evaluators include:

- Demographic Questions (excludes specific client name or school for confidentiality)
- Basic client characteristics such as sex, race, average age, county, grade level
- Number of clients referred, and number of clients served
- Referral source (CDW, Juvenile Court, District Court, Circuit Court, DJJ, School District or Schools)
- Referral reason (Charges, Behavioral Issues)
- Global Assessment of Individual Needs Short Screener (GAIN-SS) behavioral health screener indicating the child's level of need for further assessment and resource referrals

2. Client Satisfaction

After completion of the restorative justice conference process all participants, except Community Representatives, should complete the satisfaction survey. Satisfaction survey data are collected by RJ staff either with a hard copy of the tool or through a QR code for clients to complete the survey online. Hard copies of completed surveys are collected and put in a sealed envelope and mailed to the main VOA office for input into the appropriate database. Southeastern Kentucky RJ uses the following surveys to evaluate services.

The survey questions are provided here and include:

Part 1: Restorative Justice Program Satisfaction Questions

Part 2: Conference Satisfaction Questions

Part 3: Social Support Questions

Part 1: Restorative Justice Program Satisfaction Questions

Instructions: As part of the conference, you just completed, we would like you to answer some questions about your experience. There are no right or wrong answers, so choose the answer that is closest to what you really think or feel. Your responses will be kept confidential. This survey will help guide the restorative justice program and improve it for other people so please answer each question as thoughtfully and honestly as possible. Thank you for sharing your perspective.

Rate your experience with the facilitator here today by rating each statement from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Please read every question carefully and choose only one answer for each question. If you don't find an answer that fits exactly, use the one that comes closest.

Facilitator Satisfaction Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The facilitator explained the ground rules for the meeting in a way that I understood.					
2. The facilitator was fair to everyone at the meeting.					
3. The facilitator let everyone have their say.					
4. The facilitator guided the meeting well.					
5. The facilitator treated everyone with respect.					

Part 2: Conference Satisfaction Questions

Instructions: Rate your personal experience during the restorative justice conference by rating each statement from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Please read every question carefully and choose only one answer for each question. If you don’t find an answer that fits exactly, use the one that comes closest.

Conference Satisfaction Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. My concerns and questions were treated seriously.					
2. I felt pressured.					
3. I felt safe.					
4. I was scared to say what I felt.					
5. I was listened to carefully.					
6. I felt involved in how the conference was run.					
7. I was treated with respect.					
8. I understood what was going on during the conference.					
9. I had the opportunity to share my point of view.					
10. I had a voice in how the group decided to handle the offense.					
11. I got to hear other points of view on what happened.					
12. I feel like the conference gave me some closure.					
13. I am responsible for my actions.					
14. I feel satisfied with the outcome of the conference.					
15. I would recommend restorative justice to others.					

Additional Comments: Describe anything else you would like to say about the restorative justice program or about how this case was handled.

NOTE: Facilitator and participant surveys were adapted from Ministry of Justice (2017) and Bradshaw & Umbreit (2003).

Part 3: Social Support Questions

The social support questions are first administered prior to the initial pre-conference meeting and then again with the Restorative Justice Program Satisfaction Survey to measure changes in connections to positive supports.

Instructions: Think about your experiences during the past 30 days. Did you have the following kinds of social support? Please answer each question by checking yes or no.

Statement	Response
1. A professional counselor or other health provider to talk to...	Yes No
2. Friends or colleagues from other companies or schools you could talk to without worrying about getting back to others at work or school...	Yes No
3. People at work or school you could talk to about day-to-day things...	Yes No
4. People at work or school who could help you get your assignments done...	Yes No
5. Family members or close partners you could talk to and rely on...	Yes No
6. Friends you could just hang out with and not talk about work or family issues...	Yes No
7. A legal hobby or activity that you enjoyed and did for yourself...	Yes No
8. Someone you felt like you could talk to about needs and emotions...	Yes No
9. Someone you felt could help you figure out how to cope with any problems you were having or might have...	Yes No

NOTE: Social support questions were adapted from the Full Global Assessment of Individual Needs (GAIN) Interview (<https://chestnut.app.box.com/v/GAIN-I-Materials/file/63671479297>) page 82, item GSSIE12c. Changed from “past 12 months” to “past 30 days” measure (Dennis et al., 2006).

3. Recidivism Data

The data on recent charges or incidences of referred behavior within one year of case closure are included as recidivism data. These include:

- New offense or incidence of referred behavior for a referred individual who completed restorative practice within one year of case closure
- New offense or incidence of referred behavior for a referred individual who did not complete restorative practice within one year of case closure.

Starting in February 2024, data are provided annually by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) for VOA RJ southeastern Kentucky diversion clients. The de-identified results are shared with the evaluators for analysis in the annual report. This report includes data from prior years.

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