



Non-Law Enforcement  
Restorative Justice  
Addressing Domestic  
and Sexual Violence:  
Evaluation Results from  
The CHAT Project Pilot



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Project Description

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The CHAT Project (Collective Healing and Transformation) is a community-based, non-law enforcement restorative justice project addressing domestic and sexual violence. Located in California's Bay Area in Contra Costa County, the collaborative project conducted a pilot implementation with 9 diverse organizations from January 2018 to June 2021. The goals, principles, and community stakeholders reflect the project's commitment to most impacted communities: BIPOC, immigrant (including undocumented immigrants), LGBTQ+ communities, children and elders, Deaf and hard of hearing, disabled, poor and economically oppressed communities.

## Background

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Restorative justice has been recognized as one of the most promising approaches to address and prevent domestic and sexual violence and other forms of community violence. However, years of collaboration between the anti-violence movement and law enforcement have focused attention on the police rather than the community for solutions to violence. The CHAT Project joined together to create a local adaptation of restorative justice with the support of a team of committed leaders including primary trainer/co-creator, sujatha baliga, who brought extensive experience in restorative justice implementation with youth in pre-charge felony diversion programs and adults in situations of domestic and sexual violence. Mimi Kim brought years of experience with community-based, transformative justice interventions to domestic and sexual violence. Susun Kim initiated the project, aware of the need for restorative justice and longstanding relationships with organizational partners. Chelsea Miller served as the Project Coordinator, bringing all of the pieces together.

## Project Stakeholders

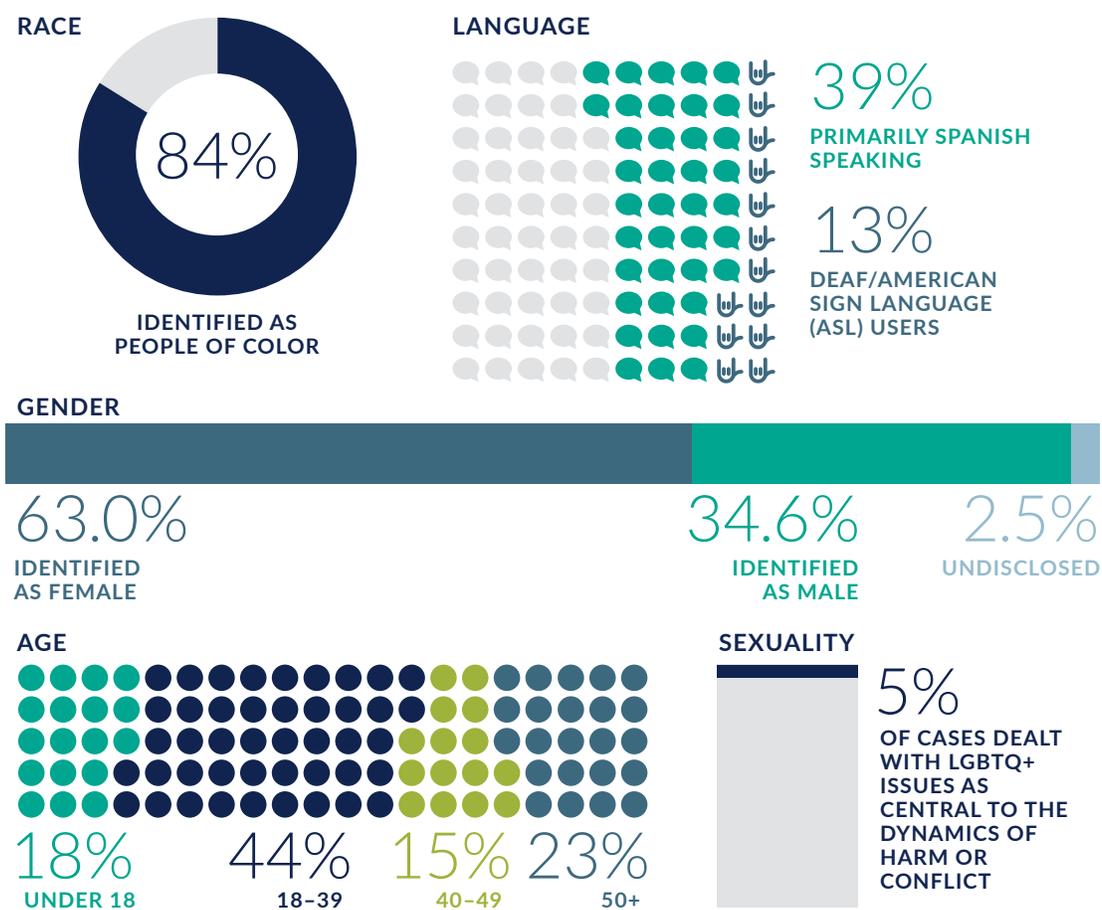
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### 9 Organizational Partners

- Community Violence Solutions
- DeafHope (STAFFED PARTNER)
- Contra Costa Family Justice Center (PILOT LEAD)
- The Latina Center (STAFFED PARTNER)
- Narika
- Rainbow Community Center
- Rubicon Programs (STAFFED PARTNER)
- RYSE Youth Center
- STAND! For Families Free of Violence

# Participants

During the 2.5-year pilot period, The CHAT Project served 40 cases or groups for a total of 93 individuals.



# Project Goals

Project goals spanned micro level to systemic change through the creation of:

- Restorative, collective model for violence intervention, recurrence reduction, and prevention
- Non-police, non-law enforcement alternative to criminalization
- Community-based grassroots option
- Expanded organizational and countywide capacity
- Possibilities for replication or relevance to others

# Principles of The CHAT Project Restorative Approach

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- Meets needs and goals as identified by the survivor(s) of violence
- Uses collective compassion, care, and connection rather than isolation and punishment
- Builds the capacity of the social network of survivors (and people who have caused harm) to provide support, safety, and the prevention of future violence
- Encourages the accountability and transformation of the person who has caused harm
- Supports and relies upon the wisdom of our communities' youngest to oldest members in an intergenerational approach
- Aligns with the cultural values of the diverse communities that make up Contra Costa County – especially BIPOC; immigrants (including undocumented immigrants), LGBTQ+ communities, children and elders, Deaf and hard of hearing, disabled, poor and economically oppressed communities

## Evaluation Design

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During the pilot period, the evaluation collected survey and interview data from participants, circle keeper trainees, and organizational leaders from partner organizations. Evaluation findings are also based upon extensive hours of observation of case review meetings.

## Key Findings

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### **Domestic violence is complex.**

Opening up a restorative process moved us beyond a binary notion of domestic violence. What we discovered was that each situation of harm was often embedded in a lifetime of harm and abuse, not only for survivors but also for the other family members and friends who are close to them. Intergenerational violence often became apparent – sometimes motivating change so that violence would not continue into another generation. As one circle keeper described it:

*We live in this world where you're wrong, you're right. And I think that's what our movement has become. You're right, you're wrong. You're bad, you're good. You're a batterer or you're a victim. So what the nonviolence work continues to illuminate is, wow, it's not so clean. It's not so black and white. And when we start telling the truth...we all have the capacity to cause harm.*

### **Care and compassion are key.**

Underlying our project has been a commitment to compassion, care, and connection rather than isolation and punishment. This is a fundamental characteristic of restorative justice and a principle we have carried throughout our work. It is exemplified in the reflection from one of our participants.

*Being human is more important than being professional.*

## **Restorative practice: The importance of preparation.**

While compassion as circle keepers is key, the restorative process requires careful preparation. Circle keepers entered collective dialogues with a clear agenda that had been co-created with the participants, knowledge of possible areas of tension (including one's own areas of bias and triggers), and strategies to address difficult issues.

*[The process] seemed really good to me. Without imposing an order, we were prepared for this. The circle keeper explained really clearly how the process was going to go, and so everything about the process was developed in a very orderly way...there was an environment of trust that was created.*

## **Open and honest communication: fostering trust building.**

Having difficult conversations is central to restorative processes. Much attention focused on how to achieve the best conditions. Again, preparation was critical in building trust. But so was having spaciousness of time and leaning on methods or guidelines to disrupt usual power dynamics.

*We had tried to have conversations in the past...but our ego and our anger and our just talking over each other, it just never worked out. Having the circle keepers there and even the interpreter [who] blend in perfectly. I feel like that was super, super helpful because we were able to say what we needed to say, but we had to think about how what we were going to say was going to come out. It wasn't just like a reaction of emotion. Everyone took a second to breathe.*

## **Circles are an all-day event.**

Circles were often between 5 and 8 hours long. They were spacious times that everyone set aside – to open with ritual (of the participants' choosing), bring children in respectfully, open with inviting questions, move to challenging topics, give opportunities for deeper understanding, consider plans and commitments, and close.

*I thought the fact that it was going to be super, super long, we felt it was really long and I thought that that was going to be hard to get through. But, you know, we had a break, we had snacks...People were able to go outside when they needed to.*

## **Children: Central to intergenerational change.**

The inclusion and centrality of children have been integral to the restorative approach we have been developing. While this may be welcome and natural to some families, for others it has felt inappropriate or unnecessary to bring children into what can be viewed as adult problems. Some circle keepers also struggled with this as it may have been the first time they included children in their work.

*For me it was really important. Even the little one was participating. And the older one also had the chance to express himself. He talked about a few things that maybe he didn't feel comfortable expressing at home, but he did in the circle. And we all listened to him. And this was important because they felt like they belonged, that they have the right to be there and the right to express themselves... For the older one, I think he has assimilated a lot of what happened there, and I think his behavior has changed a lot.*

**Leaning on the wisdom of our youngest and oldest members.** Circle keepers were asked to ground their work with families and other collective groups in the principles and methods of restorative practice to elevate the innate wisdom of participants. One circle keeper shared the process:

*The first time we met, my co-keeper had recorded...had written down two or three quotes from the person and said, "I just want to repeat back to you what you said," which was very powerful, right for the person to hear her own words. And she said, "I said that?" And so then after we really talked and I said, "why don't we have a space to intentionally write that sort of thing down that we can then hand to that person so they can see it in writing." So it's their own innate and intuitive sense and wisdom, which I really like because I think often we don't hear our own words repeated back to us. We just talk and think, "Oh, whatever." But then when people say, "you said this," it's like, wow.*

## **Learning edge: Domestic and sexual violence and circles.**

The pilot project opened new understandings of domestic and sexual violence. During this period, we did not conduct as many accountability circles as we had initially imagined – that is, circles that bring survivors and those who had done harm together in a face-to-face meeting. While this remains an option and a learning edge, survivors of domestic and sexual violence needed and requested a variety of processes and gatherings. They were not necessarily motivated by the goal of safety as is often assumed in anti-violence programs, but also asked for truth telling with friends and family, wanted to improve communication in those relationships disrupted by violence, and wanted to co-exist more peacefully – in families often living in multigenerational households. One participant who originally thought she would meet with her former partner who had caused harm – instead found that her primary work needed to be with her own parents.

*So you know, the concept of it felt good, like maybe the circle is going to save everything. We're actually going to be able to have at least a good conversation, even if, you know, the decision wasn't for us to move forward together or anything like that. But going through the process, it was very clear that that wasn't going to happen...I need to look out for myself and work on the way that I showed up in that relationship. And I wasn't going to be able to do that if I stayed. So [the process] definitely contributed to help me see what I needed to do is to take care of myself.*

## **Skills transferred to homes and communities.**

One central goal of the project was to create a restorative approach that was easily passed on to families and community members. We found that the circle process was something that appealed to families and, in its most basic form, gave some ritual and method that people could adapt within their own relationships. One family continued to use the circle process to resolve many problems:

*We set the time, the date, and we asked everybody if that time is OK for everyone. We make an agenda. The person who called the meeting makes the agenda. We read a passage of the Bible as one of the values each one of us has. And then we go into the things that we would like to talk about. We let each one of us give respect or [share] whatever problem we have. It can be economic. It can be mental, emotional. Whatever it is, we all contribute to that.*

## **The importance of training.**

During the pilot period, The CHAT Project held two sets of trainings, each taking multiple days – moving into deep personal waters while also guiding circle keeper trainees through principles, values, and methods of restorative processes. The CHAT Project was supported by the decades of experience of sujatha baliga and Mimi Kim. Other restorative justice practitioners including nuri nusrat and Mikayla Waters-Crittenton filled out the team. With Cohort 2, Chelsea Miller, who had by then worked with several participants and developed what was becoming our restorative justice project, contributed to the

training. As many circle keepers were new to the approach, we took training very seriously and benefited from expertise in a still emergent field. Opportunities for modeling and apprenticeship by experienced practitioners were particularly instructive but had not been significantly structured into the pilot training.

### **Organizational capacity remains a challenge.**

The intensity, length, and depth of the restorative justice training and the challenges of scheduling across two co-circle keepers and potentially multiple participants stretched circle keeper capacity and organizational capacity. Most circle keepers had other job responsibilities and were challenged by scheduling what were often multi-meeting processes.

### **Centering language access.**

The multilingual nature of the community and, hence, the project required crossing over English, Spanish, and American Sign Language in order to meet a greater expanse of the diverse communities that make up Contra Costa County. DeafHope was critical to language access to the Deaf and hard of hearing community. As one circle keeper trainee said:

*For me, starting from a place of total commitment to a multilingual space has been beautiful and critical and felt as a very real thing. Anything that happens after that doesn't really matter when you have that base commitment.*

However, the project had a harder time meeting the needs of Spanish speaking Latinx participants who made up 39% of the participants. During the pilot period, the project did not have enough Spanish speaking restorative justice trainers to meet the needs of monolingual Spanish speaking advocates interested in learning to become circle keepers. Hence, the building of Spanish language capacity was hindered despite efforts to increase access. This continues to be a need.

### **Keeping safety front and center.**

Safety remained front and center throughout the project. Multiple questions about safety were embedded into every aspect of the evaluation. Circle keepers continuously checked for safety, and safety was considered during case meetings. The evaluation captured point-in-time ratings of safety in an effort to monitor safety and changes over time. However, the evaluation did not ask how participants perceived the way in which the restorative process either increased or decreased safety. Thus far, these checks alerted circle keepers to safety concerns and provided adequate safeguards.

### **The impact of COVID-19.**

As with all of us, this pilot project was disrupted by COVID-19. For an approach reliant on the intimacy of in-person dialogue, COVID-19 presented an incredible and ongoing challenge. Referrals stopped at the beginning of the pandemic. The project staff continued to support existing clients via phone or Zoom with some limited in-person contact as protocols shifted.

As The CHAT Project learns from the pilot period and moves into its implementation phase, it is starting with the achievements and lessons learned from its pilot phase. The evaluation recommendations echo the key findings and add explicit next steps to The CHAT Project. The pilot phase has established the foundation for a more informed implementation phase and gives us grounding for improved training, collaboration, staffing, and restorative practices with our most important resources, survivors, and all of us impacted by domestic and sexual violence.

# Non-Law Enforcement Restorative Justice Addressing Domestic and Sexual Violence: Pilot Evaluation Results from The CHAT Project

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