

Statement from the St. Joseph's Orphanage Restorative Inquiry December 14, 2020

"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." (Maya Angelou)

Overview: The [St. Joseph's Orphanage Restorative Inquiry](#) (SJORI) was launched in April of 2019 to understand and document the events of the St. Joseph's Orphanage through the voices, experiences, and stories of those most impacted (former residents); and then facilitate inclusive processes of accountability, amends-making, learning, and change. SJORI is guided by a set of restorative principles and values that inform all of our work.

SJORI is an [Initiative](#) of the [Burlington Community Justice Center](#), a division of the Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO) of the City of Burlington. [SJORI is supported](#) by an Advisory Team comprised of agency stakeholders, victim advocates, and restorative justice practitioners. The Advisory Team meets monthly to advise and support the consultant in the development of the Inquiry. SJORI has been funded by a grant from the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services (VCCVS) and matching/In-kind funds from the Burlington Community Justice Center/City of Burlington.

To date, SJORI has connected with thirty-one former residents of the Orphanage to both listen to their stories and experiences, and understand their needs and requests. Since March of 2020, more than half of these former residents have chosen to attend weekly group meetings that take place online. The weekly meetings have supported the group in building relationships with each other; finding comfort and solace in their shared experiences as survivors of the Orphanage; and articulating and approving their collective goals for the Restorative Inquiry. These goals include:

- 1) Face-to-face meetings with leaders from these named institutions: the Sisters of Providence, the Catholic Diocese of Burlington, Vermont Catholic Charities and the State of Vermont child protection services. We want an acknowledgement that what we say happened to us did indeed happen, and a sincere apology.
- 2) The above-named Catholic entities shall demonstrate the depth of that apology by a) creating a fund to pay for the healing therapies of any former orphanage resident who requests it, b) releasing all records related to the operation and supervision of St. Joseph's Orphanage and c) providing all and complete family records, no redactions, to any former resident who requests it.
- 3) The Vermont State Legislature, upon reading the report, a) acknowledges the harm we experienced, and b) to better protect vulnerable people of all ages who face abuse of any kind, work with us to enact laws that remove the Statute of Limitations for physical and mental abuse.
- 4) Make public the St. Joseph's Orphanage Task Force Criminal Investigation Report, so the public is informed a) about the horrors that went on at St. Joseph's, b) that it was

covered up by The Catholic Diocese for decades, c) what may still be hidden remains unknown, and d) encourage any individual who worked for or lived at the orphanage that has testimony to add, to please come forward.

Former residents are also taking part in a number of other Restorative Inquiry initiatives, including: a [participant-informed history](#) of the Orphanage; an effort to establish a monument/healing space for the countless children who passed through and were impacted by the Orphanage; an [ongoing Writers' Group](#); and an upcoming oral history project in collaboration with the Vermont Folklife Center. Each of these initiatives was started at the request and inspiration of former residents.

Next Steps: With the release of the St. Joseph's Orphanage Task Force Criminal Investigation Report, we are now entering the next phase of the Restorative Inquiry. Although there will be no criminal charges stemming from the Orphanage's egregious harms and coverup, the lack of prosecution does not absolve our collective responsibility. In fact, an honest and reflective reckoning is long overdue.

The Restorative Inquiry will facilitate this reflection and reckoning through a series of dialogues and events. These include the following:

1. **Responsible Institutions Engagement:** Several former residents have requested the opportunity to sit down with representatives from the institutions who had direct responsibility over the operation and supervision of the Orphanage. The former residents want the opportunity to share the enduring memories and impacts from the Orphanage, and have their questions answered. The former residents also want to be acknowledged, believed, and met with genuine remorse and willingness to make amends.

SJORI invites the following institutions to come forward and meet this request of the former residents: Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington; Vermont Catholic Charities; and Sisters of Providence, Montreal, Quebec. (Representatives from the Vermont Department of Children and Families [formerly Department of Social Work] have already taken up the invitation and are moving forward in a collaborative spirit.)

2. **Legislative Engagement:** From the beginning of the Inquiry, the former residents have clearly expressed that they want to ensure that the harms they experienced at the Orphanage never happen again to another vulnerable child. SJORI has reached out to a group of Vermont legislators to begin a dialogue with former residents and collaboratively explore potential changes to laws and statutes that will help prevent future harms, including changing statute of limitations in civil court for physical abuse.
3. **State and Community-Based Agencies Engagement:** Many of the participants in the Restorative Inquiry were placed at the Orphanage by the State of Vermont. The former residents want to ensure that future children are never again placed in harmful environments by any agency that is charged with caring for vulnerable children and families. SJORI is planning a January meeting

between representatives from the Department of Children and Families and former residents to share experiences and wisdom, and explore the parameters of this value-driven work.

4. **Community Engagement:** Responsibility for the failures of St. Joseph's Orphanage extend beyond the institutions that directly managed and supervised the former child center. The Orphanage functioned with explicit community consent and support, and was celebrated for its work of 'caring for homeless and dependent children'. In order to set the record straight, SJORI is working with the former residents on a number of initiatives that will ensure that their truth-telling stories and experiences are memorialized and shared with the public.

Each of these engagements seeks to: acknowledge, validate and learn from the experiences of the former residents; respond to their needs and requests; and work to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again. We invite vested parties and the broader public to meaningfully engage in this work. With these efforts, we have one more opportunity to finally honor this last generation of 'orphans' who through tenacious resilience and a firm sense of justice, have come forward to speak their truth.

If you would like to learn more about the Restorative Inquiry, go to:

<https://www.stjosephsrj inquiry.com/>

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