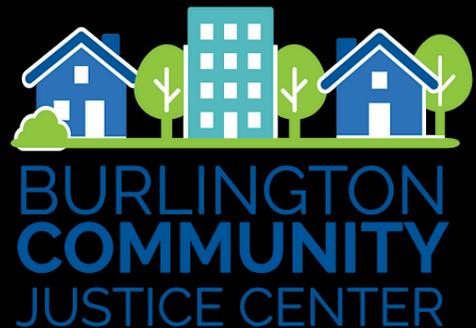


# EQUITY ASSESSMENT REPORT



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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As we begin to emerge from the tumultuous years following the murder of George Floyd and the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, we continue to grapple with how best to address a range of complex issues including ongoing racial injustice, growing post-Covid inequities, and public safety. Against this backdrop, the work of Vermont's Community Justice Centers to provide *restorative responses to conflict and crime as an alternative to traditional criminal prosecution, punishment, and retribution*<sup>1</sup> has never been more important.

The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG) supported the Burlington Community Justice Center (BCJC) on their journey toward becoming an anti-racist organization by conducting an equity assessment which included a survey, interviews, listening sessions, and a document review. These activities focused on both the external impact of the organization among partners, program participants, and the broader community, and the internal organizational culture. There was a special focus on how BCJC's work impacts staff and clients who are BIPOC as well as others who have been historically marginalized or excluded.

Overall, a majority of survey respondents reported feeling welcome (93%) and safe (89%) at BCJC. However, a deeper look shows significant gaps in people's experience with BCJC based on race; for example 58% of BIPOC respondents feel BCJC isn't yet skilled at talking about racism while 41% of white respondents feel that BCJC isn't yet skilled at talking about racism.

Assessment participants identified a strong need to diversify staff and volunteers. In addition, they pointed to the need to continue to build capacity for equity work through ongoing training, improved organizational culture, and more robust systems of accountability. Finally, assessment participants named the tensions inherent in the funding sources and governance structure within which BCJC operates.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [Community Justice Network of Vermont](#)

Given these findings, we recommend that BCJC] focus on the following areas: (1) intentional efforts to diversify the staff and volunteers, (2) building deeper, ongoing relationships with the communities they serve, particularly community members who hold marginalized identities, (3) continuing to build internal capacity through training, (4) internal cultural restoration work, (5) standing up robust systems of accountability by consistently soliciting feedback, standing up a bias incident response protocol, and developing a process for navigating allegations of harm caused by BCJC, and (6) engaging in a meaningful exploration about ways injustices can “pile up” across the system through the analysis of case studies involving participants who hold marginalized identities. A consideration of possible organizational changes is also recommended, for example moving to a co-director model, as well as structural changes, such as a shift in who the organization reports to within city government or a move towards becoming a free standing non-profit organization. These shifts may reduce the tensions inherent in leading restorative justice work while deeply connected with current systems including criminal justice, policing, and municipal governance.

We are hopeful that the Burlington Community Justice Center will continue to make progress to offer a truly restorative, equitable and inclusive approach to public safety as they work to address “the roots and impacts of crime and conflict so that everyone experiences dignity, safety, and justice”

## DATA COLLECTION

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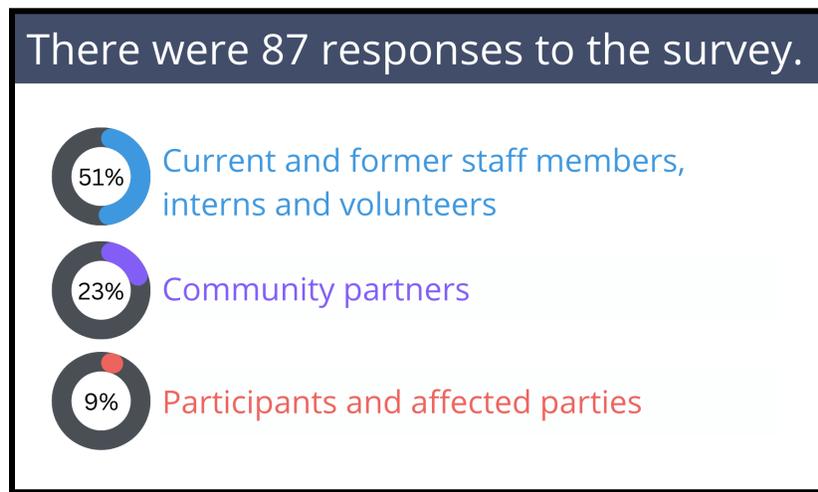
From July 2022 to February 2023, The Creative Discourse Group (TCDG) supported the Burlington Community Justice Center (BCJC) on their journey toward becoming an anti-racist organization. The purpose of TCDG's work with BCJC was to (1) assess the impact of their equity work to date and establish a set of priorities to guide future work, (2) provide consultation and supportive facilitation of a BCJC Equity Leadership Team charged with advancing the work, and (3) take stock of BCJC's current capacity and impacts and identify actionable priorities through an organizational equity assessment. The assessment included a mix of qualitative survey data, interviews to uplift stories, and a document review, and focused on both the external impact of BCJC as well as the internal organizational culture. There was a special focus on how BCJC's work impacts BIPOC and other staff and program participants who have been historically marginalized or excluded.

TCDG engaged 93 unique participants including members of the BCJC staff, volunteers, community members, partners, and past program participants. The data collection process which was designed to uncover the behaviors and activities within BCJC that may be advancing or limiting the organization's commitment to equity and justice as well as to investigate the ways in which BCJC's work is impacting the greater community. There are four main components to the organizational equity assessment that are discussed in this summary of findings: (1) a survey, (2) interviews through both virtual focus group and one-on-one conversations, and (3) a document review.

We want to acknowledge that while efforts were made by BCJC to gain participation from past program participants, there was little engagement in this assessment from this population and therefore their voices are not well represented in these findings.

## Survey

TCDG developed and conducted a self-facilitated, online survey with 87 responses from current and former staff, interns and volunteers (51%), community partners (23%), and past participants and affected parties (9%). Additionally, 26 (30%) of the respondents identified as BIPOC and 30 (34%) of the respondents identified as LGBTQ+.



## Focus Group and One-on-One Interviews

TCDG hosted interviews with the BCJC staff, volunteers, partners, community members, and past program participants. The focus group interviews were designed as 60-minute conversations with TCDG Associates while one-on-one interviews lasted about 20-30 minutes. These interviews allowed assessment participants to share their perspectives on BCJC, its organizational culture, and its work to become more equitable and racially just. TCDG hosted a total of eleven (11) focus group conversations. Three (3) focus groups were held with current staff, one (1) with former staff and volunteers, three (3) with volunteers including a specific group for volunteers who identified as BIPOC and a specific group for individuals who identified as both BIPOC and LGBTQ+, two (2) with people who were either former program participants, family members of former program participants, or interested community members including a group for people who specifically identified as BIPOC, and two (2) focus groups with community partner organizations. In addition to the 11 focus groups, TCDG Associates hosted five (5) individual one-on-one interviews with people who either were not available for a focus group or preferred not to participate in a group conversation.

In addition to these interviews, TCDG engaged in two (2) meaningful interviews with community members who came to us outside of the scope of these official interviews. One of these interviews was with an individual whose minor child elected not to participate in the BCJC program to which they were referred, and one was someone whose immediate family members were program participants on two separate occasions.

### **Document Review**

A review of the BCJC documents was conducted to examine its organizational policies, programs, initiatives, and resources. This review included an indepth look at the BCJC website including the mission, vision, values, and racial justice statements.

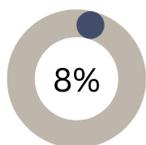
## SUMMARY OF THEMES

An analysis of the survey responses and interview data uncovered four salient themes present across methods and assessment participants. These were centered around (1) structural capacity for racial justice work which includes representation and staff retention and trainings, (2) internal organizational culture, (3) accountability structures, and (4) organizational design. Throughout this summary of themes we have included direct quotes that illustrate some of these key ideas.

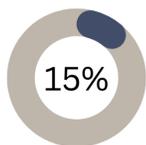
### Structural Capacity for Racial Justice Work

Generally, those interviewed were happy with the racial equity work being undertaken, and 59% of survey respondents felt that BCJC was taking actions to reduce barriers and create equitable and just outcomes for BIPOC and underrepresented clients. However, people expressed frustration with starting and stopping the work and said that it can sometimes feel performative. All groups interviewed expressed a need for BCJC to continue to build its capacity for racial justice work. As expected, people highlighted challenges regarding representation and retention of staff and volunteers and stressed the need for ongoing training around racial justice and anti-racism.

59% of respondents felt the BCJC reduces barriers and creates equitable and just outcomes for BIPOC and underrepresented clients.



8% of BIPOC respondents disagreed



15% of white respondents disagreed

### *Representation and Staff Retention*

Overwhelmingly, across almost all focus groups and throughout many survey comments, people reflected on the lack of racial diversity and representation within the staff and volunteers. The general feeling is that the BCJC staff is overwhelmingly white and people pointed to the need to increase diversity.

Current and former staff members commented on the racial makeup of the staff and leadership team and specifically pointed out that white women in leadership and on the staff are a barrier to engaging with BIPOC communities.

***“Find people who are actually willing to do the hard racial justice work for the BCJC to [get to] a real place of justice not the sh\*t show of well meaning white women it has always been”  
~ Former Staff***

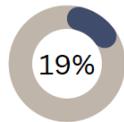
The current selection of volunteers is mostly white women and assessment participants pointed out that the volunteer panels do not reflect the communities they serve. Many staff could point to a time when a person of color had to participate in a panel process where the panel was made up entirely of white people. Volunteers expressed a desire to see people who hold marginalized identities on staff and in leadership roles and not just as volunteers.

***“More staff who are BIPOC and/or have lived experience with the issues the BCJC works on”  
~ Former Volunteer***

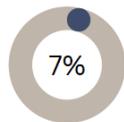
***“More volunteers of color; more deliberate recruitment for diversity”  
~ Current Volunteer***

Finally, many staff members reflected on staff turnover and noted that BCJC lost several Black staff members because of negative interactions with white staff members and supervisors. Staff felt this was hindering the organization's ability to move forward with racial justice work and making this process even more complicated. Staff also indicated the need for more

structural support for staff. Similar sentiments also showed up in the survey responses where only 19% of all respondents and 7% of current staff could identify that BCJC has a deliberate plan to diversify staff.



One-fifth of all respondents said BCJC has a deliberate plan to diversify their staff.



7% of current staff said BCJC has a deliberate plan to diversify their staff.

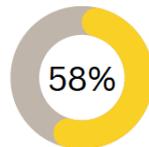
### Trainings

When asked about the skill level of BCJC staff and leaders when talking about race and racism, only 28% of survey respondents felt staff and leaders currently possessed the skills to have these dialogues. More current BCJC staff (93%) answered “no”, “not yet”, or “moving in that direction” compared to former staff (86%). Further, there was a discrepancy between BIPOC and white respondents where a larger percentage of BIPOC respondents felt that the staff and leaders were not yet skilled at having these dialogues.

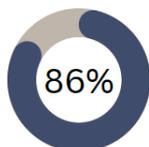
28% of all survey respondents said most BCJC staff and leaders are skilled at talking about race, racism, and how race and racism show up when providing services.



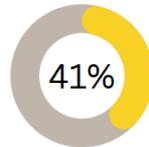
of **current staff** said no, not yet, or moving in that direction



of **BIPOC respondents** said no, not yet, or moving in that direction



of **former staff** said no, not yet, or moving in that direction



of **white respondents** said no, not yet, or moving in that direction

Interviewees and many survey respondents overwhelmingly spoke to the need for more workshops or training on equity, diversity, and inclusion for staff and volunteers and they want to see BCJC have a clear educational plan. Some people were specific in naming the need to start with understanding the context in which the BCJC is operating and specifically to understand structural and systemic racism.

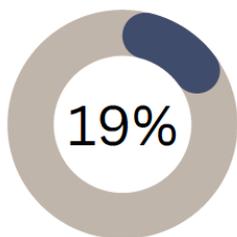
Some staff noted that they felt supervisors need additional training and support in navigating difficult conversations and equity issues. Multiple staff reflected that their supervisor was not skilled in these areas and they ultimately felt unsupported by leadership when issues arose. These sentiments were seen across interviews and survey responses.

***“Our leaders all need to have a thorough understanding of how race, racism, and other marginalized identities are impacted by our services and a basic understanding how these -isms show up in our work and in themselves. This requires a dedication or placing value on this process by all leaders [and] is necessary for us to move forward.”***  
~ Current Staff

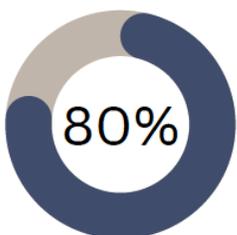
### Internal Organizational Culture

Conversations with interviewees indicated that there is a tension within the organization. Some current staff members suggested that this is stemming from a lack of support from leadership in making amends with a BIPOC staff member when leadership has caused harm. People who have been employed with BCJC for a long time feel a sense that it isn't a safe place to work, whereas newer employees seem to have a different experience. Overall, the disconnect appears to be harmful to the organization. Community partners offered that they would like BCJC to focus on workplace and internal operations and demonstrate equity in the workplace.

***“I want more from CJC [the] management team around addressing their past harms and making a plan of racial equity goals for their group.”***  
~ Current Staff



One-fifth of all survey respondents said the BCJC has a mechanism in place to address concerns about barriers to opportunity and racial inequities in the workplace.



80% of current staff said BCJC does not have a mechanism in place to address concerns about barriers to opportunity and racial inequities in the workplace.

## Accountability and Awareness

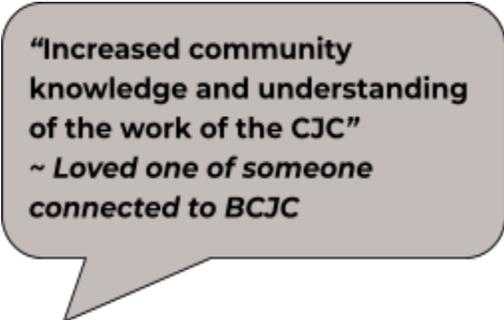
### *Accountability*

In a couple of impactful one on one interviews, TCDG heard detailed reports of harm being done to program participants and real concern about the BCJC process. A key concern had to do with the referral of their cases to BCJC and whether or not this was appropriate given the magnitude of violence in their particular case. In both instances, the responsible party was white and the affected parties were BIPOC. In both of these interviews, the interviewees felt it was an injustice that the case was referred to BCJC because they felt a serious crime had been committed. This sentiment showed up in survey responses as well. In one case where there was concern about a referral being inappropriate, the respondent felt that BCJC exacerbated the problem due to a lack of ongoing support to help victims navigate the situation. Additionally, there were comments demonstrating frustration about referral decisions such as this one from a former program participant, “stop sending serious crime to BCJC, it is not an appropriate venue”.

Questions also arose as to what the BCJC should do if they or the process actually perpetuates harm and injustice. Interviewees felt this was especially important to examine as the organization's mission is explicitly about creating justice.

### *Awareness*

Many people talked about a lack of awareness about what BCJC does and how it interacts with the public and its partners such as BPD. Generally there was a desire for broader awareness about the work that BCJC does. Interviewees and survey respondents felt that BCJC should increase its marketing and communications efforts as well as its community engagement.



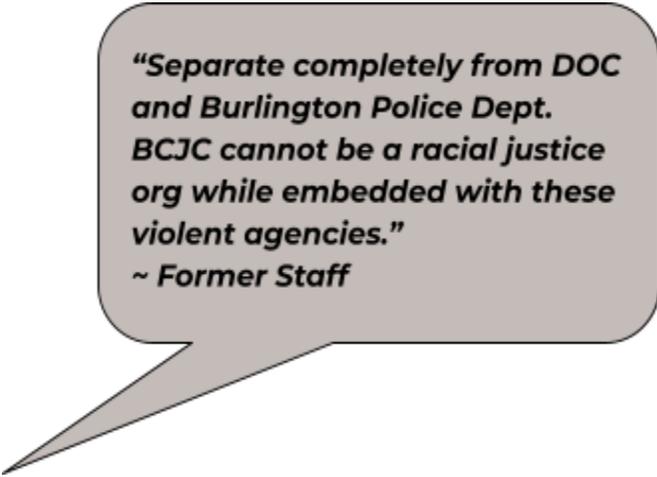
**“Increased community knowledge and understanding of the work of the CJC”  
~ Loved one of someone connected to BCJC**

### *Feedback and Reporting*

Current BCJC staff expressed a need to create multiple pathways for real feedback from program participants. Volunteers indicated that BCJC could improve their awareness of community dynamics by providing more opportunities for feedback from participants. Some volunteers also indicated a need for training on how to record and respond to complaints from program participants. They noted that while they feel BCJC has been improving the complaint process, they expressed concerns that people would feel intimidated and targeted if they made complaints.

### **Organizational Design**

Throughout both the interviews and the survey there was much discussion about the organizational structure of the BCJC. In particular, people expressed concerns about the funding and organizational placement of the BCJC. Staff felt that both funding streams and policies/policymakers on the state level prevent their equity work.



**“Separate completely from DOC and Burlington Police Dept. BCJC cannot be a racial justice org while embedded with these violent agencies.”  
~ Former Staff**

Multiple people suggested that BCJC be embedded under the City of Burlington's Racial Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (REIB) office to create some distance between this work and the police department. Multiple staff also felt that their "hands are tied based on funding" primarily from the Department of Corrections, and noted the need for more diverse funding.



***"Clearer divisions between BPD and BCJC. I've had experiences in the past with the cop liaison where the approach to survivor support felt more rooted in the carceral system than in social justice and community support."***  
***~ Community Partner***

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### **Improve Recruitment and Retention Practices to Increase Diversity in Staff and Volunteers**

It is important for BCJC to improve its hiring practices and include intentional hiring and volunteer outreach that targets people of the global majority and people who hold other marginalized identities. BCJC should develop a plan that sets intentional targets (%) for and equitably compensates staff and volunteers so that they accurately represent the community. Additionally, it is necessary for BCJC to be proactive about improving retention through ongoing work to be an equitable and inclusive place where marginalized staff and volunteers feel a sense of belonging.

### **Develop and Execute a Plan for Intentional Community Engagement and Relationship Building**

BCJC should develop and execute a plan for intentional community engagement. This would allow BCJC to build meaningful, lasting relationships with a diverse group of people. BCJC could create a plan to engage with new and existing volunteers on a regular basis for the purpose of building a sense of community and authentic relationships that extends beyond specific activities (for example panels) and when it makes sense, across programs. Further, BCJC should make a plan to go where people are (such as diverse church communities, the Richard Kemp Center, and specialty food markets serving the immigrant population), to let them know about BCJC, to share plans to diversify panels and staff, to report areas where BCJC has fallen short and hopes to improve, and to gather input about what people want or need to feel like they would step forward to participate in panels.

Finally, BCJC should increase website transparency about funding sources and the tensions inherent in working towards more just and anti-racist models of justice while at the same time engaging in necessary relationships with organizations like DOC and BPD that are a major source of referrals and funding.

### **Ongoing Education and Training for Staff and Volunteers**

While the BCJC team has received training by the City of Burlington's Racial Equity Inclusion and Belonging office (REIB), it would be important to provide additional training for staff to improve outcomes for participants. Some areas of focus for this training should include understanding the historical context and relevant Vermont statistics, deep individual and organizational anti-racism work, and best practices for equitable and inclusive community engagement.

BCJC should also undertake an analysis to better understand how injustices pile up in the system and the complex layers of harm that occur as people go through the system. An approach to this could be to use case studies to analyze how this has happened at BCJC and then develop strategies to address this.

### **Organizational Culture Restoration Work**

It is important for BCJC to do deep work to uncover the current and past issues of racism within their team. In particular, they should have open and bold conversations about the history of the organization, including the loss of BIPOC staff, where leaders take some accountability and talk openly.

These challenging conversations must be grounded in ongoing relationship building within the team. We encourage conversations that include staff in the exploration of the vision of the organization to ensure BCJC's work is guided by a strongly held shared vision which can encourage people to feel a sense of ownership and commitment and encourage them to step up for the work of the more difficult conversations.

### **Stand up Robust Accountability Systems**

Throughout this organizational equity assessment, it became clear that there is a need to develop and implement robust systems to improve BCJC's ability to consistently evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. There is also a real need for BCJC to hear concerns and understand and address harm in their work. Three areas where BCJC should focus include more

robust systems for soliciting and receiving feedback about their work, the creation of a bias incident response protocol, and a plan for navigating allegations of harm caused by BCJC or its process.

### *Solicit Feedback*

Consistently receiving feedback would greatly improve BCJC's awareness of the successes and pitfalls of their work. The organization should firmly commit to a practice of ongoing data collection and assessment. One way the organization can do this is to create a short survey accessible both on paper and online. Additionally, these opportunities for feedback from program participants should be offered immediately following engagement with BCJC programming. Questions could include how well participants felt they were treated, or if they experienced panels where people either looked like them or shared similar lived experiences. Identity and demographic questions should also be included so that BCJC can disaggregate the data to better understand any patterns or inconsistencies in experiences. Finally, BCJC should routinely convene staff quarterly or semi-annually to review data trends from ongoing feedback, build on successes, and co-create equitable and inclusive action steps to address challenges.

### *Bias Incident Response Protocol*

BCJC should stand up a bias incident response protocol so all people, including program participants, staff, volunteers, and partners, that experience or become aware of an act of bias or racism within the BCJC system have a clear way to report it and hear back from the organization with steps to repair harm. Key elements of this protocol should include a Bias Incident Response Coordinator and a team to help navigate incidents as they arise, a mechanism for receiving the information, and a policy for taking actions. BCJC should work with a qualified leader to support protocol development to ensure it is crafted in a way that offers outsider support and considers best practices.

### *Navigating Allegations of Harm by BCJC*

As an organization whose primary focus is to create alternative pathways to justice, it is important for BCJC to handle allegations of harm caused by BCJC with utmost importance. BCJC should develop and implement a plan for addressing harm to ensure that the organization's work to achieve justice for all community members is supported. Again, BCJC should work with a skilled leader to help the organization consider tough questions about itself, make space for the stories of those previously harmed by the organization's actions, and create and implement a bold plan moving forward.

### **In Depth Analysis of the Structure to Uncover Barriers to BCJC's Racial Equity and Justice Work**

There are roadblocks within our structures that inhibit equitable and just outcomes for citizens. It would be important to evaluate BCJC's relationship with all its partners, including the Burlington Police Department (BPD), Attorney General's office (AGO), and the Department of Corrections (DOC), to understand how these relationships impact the ability to achieve racial justice in BCJC programming. This analysis would help the BCJC make explicit commitments to dismantle these barriers.

One important step in this process would be to unpack the referral process to understand how cases are referred to BCJC and BCJC's role in deciding whether to accept or reject a case. Specifically, BCJC should investigate data on referrals disaggregated by race and other identities to understand how people involved in a violent case would be referred to BCJC. BCJC should raise questions about what bias may be present in the referral process, and how cases are considered when they involve incidents of racism?

BCJC should review specific case studies involving marginalized populations, especially BIPOC and LGBTQ+ participants, and focus on how both their actions and the way the system functions perpetuates inequities and injustice. BCJC could also look at rates of criminal referrals for white people committing crimes against BIPOC people and the rates of referrals for BIPOC people who commit crime. Similarly, BCJC could look at rates of referrals for white

people for low level offenses and cases where BIPOC people with low level offenses were not referred to BCJC.

As program participants don't always have a say in whether they participate in a BCJC program, this work is imperative because it would be an egregious outcome if people do not have a say and are mandated to participate in a BCJC program and subsequently experience harm while engaging in the program.

BCJC should also explore collaborations with other organizations that are doing racial equity work (especially the REIB office) to uncover systemic and structural barriers, and navigate what it would mean to collaborate more closely to achieve racial equity and justice.

#### *Explore an Organizational Redesign*

As there was much conversation about the positioning of BCJC within CEDO and its relationship with partners such as BPD, AGO, and DOC, it would be important to explore the possibility of a department repositioning. This would involve a deep process to understand power, partnerships, policy, and funding implications. One specific possibility to examine is repositioning that would place the BCJC under the leadership of the REIB office. BCJC should explore positioning that could disconnect them from a direct hierarchical relationship with the municipality all together.

Some Vermont CJs sit inside of city government while others are free standing non-profits. As is mentioned above, BCJC is positioned as a department within the City of Burlington, not as a free standing non-profit organization. It would be important to investigate the implications, benefits, and challenges of these different models of governance and to consider whether it would be advantageous to shift the way this model is actualized in Burlington.

Finally, BCJC should explore a leadership model that positions two leaders at the helm of the department (Co-Directors). A co-director model creates the opportunity for a racially/ethnically diverse team of co-leaders, diversifying both talents and identities, to support organizational capacity around racial justice.

## CONCLUSION

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The work of Vermont’s Community Justice Centers has never been more important. The Burlington Community Justice Center has an opportunity to continue to build their capacity to hold this work in ways that are equitable, inclusive and just, for their staff, partners and program participants, and especially for BIPOC community members and people who have been marginalized. Given the interdependence of BCJC with systems that have a history of injustice, this is a challenging journey.

To meet the challenge in a way that builds on the strengths of the organization a range of recommendations are presented. There are immediate opportunities to continue to build capacity and shift practices and processes through training, cultural restoration work, and community engagement. There are opportunities to diversify staff and volunteers and to stand up accountability systems. Finally, BCJC and their partners have an opportunity to engage in the difficult and necessary work of exploring possible organizational and structural shifts that acknowledge the deep injustices that persist in our public systems and to look for innovative ways to transform how BJCJ organizes and carries out its work.