January, 2026

Dear Friends and Partners,

As we step into a new year, we're pausing to reflect on the work, relationships, and impact that we shaped in 2025. I am proud of the work we have undertaken over nearly 15 densely packed years. In early 2011, I stepped into the role of Executive Director of the Institute (IPSSJ) with the aim of supporting community well-being through socially just methods. Since then, we have grown into an organization offering four distinct programs, all rooted in the belief that we belong to one another and that we all do better when we do right by each other.

In 2025, each of our programs reached important milestones. Our team of 17 dedicated staff and interns contributed to projects that address trauma, support healing, promote accountability and positive identities, and open pathways for people and communities to realize their full potential. Thank you for reading through the following highlights that offer a snapshot of our work.

Established in 2012, the **Community Restorative Justice Hubs (RJ Hubs)** are a community-led collective dedicated to healing and strengthening neighborhoods most impacted by violence, trauma, and systemic inequities. At its core, RJ Hubs work to keep young people from ending up in the court system, streets, or prisons.

Today, eight organizations collaborate to advance this mission, collectively serving more than 50,000 community members. Under the leadership of RJ Hubs Community Manager, Karlyn Boens, this work has gained renewed momentum. As a collective, we have translated shared learning into action, developing three new approaches that advance restorative justice philosophy and the trauma-informed practices at the heart of our work, and continuing our work with youth:

Expanding Communication: A new monthly RJ Hubs newsletter, ***The Gathering***, is strengthening connections across hub organizations and partners by sharing resources, insights, and opportunities for collective learning. Past issues are available at rjhubs.org.

Leading Restorative Dialogue: The **RJ Hubs Campfire Series** convenes virtual gatherings centered on restorative dialogue, community safety, healing, and shared learning through RJ Hubs-led conversations. Recorded sessions are available on the RJ Hubs YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/@RJHubsChicago

Developing a Hybrid Leadership Academy: The 2026 **RJ Hubs Learning Collective** marks a new hybrid learning and leadership academy for community-based restorative justice organizations. The inaugural cohort includes eight Chicago-based organizations and two out-of-state partners who will engage in a six-month learning experience designed to strengthen organizational and community-level restorative justice practices.

Youth Leadership and Policy Influence: The **Youth Advisory Board** continues to create opportunities for young people and emerging adults to shape juvenile justice policy in Illinois. This work is supported by leader Denishe Mberi as an extension of RJ Hubs' broader commitment to youth-centered systems change.

IL-CHEP
ILLINOIS COALITION FOR HIGHER ED IN PRISON

The **Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (IL-CHEP)** was founded more than a decade ago by in-prison educators across Illinois to expand access to high-quality college education for incarcerated people. In 2021, the coalition secured funding to support paid staff and asked IPSSJ to serve as its home institution—stewarding the work while helping to strengthen and expand the network. Under the guidance of team lead Flor Esquivel, the IL-CHEP team has accomplished the following over the last year:

Unprecedented Growth in Prison-Based Higher Education: In 2026, Governors State University, Illinois State University, and Southern Illinois University will each begin offering college programming in Illinois prisons. IL-CHEP supported this work through sustained collaboration with more than 50 university partners statewide. Launching three new prison education programs in one year is unprecedented in Illinois and reflects a significant expansion of access to higher education for incarcerated people.

Provided Student Services and Advising: Through personalized advising, we supported approximately 300 people as they navigated postsecondary education pathways (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs), financial aid options, GED and TABE testing, access to educational materials, barriers within correctional facilities, and reentry and employment planning.

Held Strategic Convenings: ILCHEP facilitated over 60 events and coalition meetings during this calendar year, engaging over 2,500 people. These events include alumni events, college and career readiness workshops for incarcerated people, FAFSA/PELL funding overviews for prospective university partners, and meeting with partners. Several meetings were held between the coalition and governmental agencies such as leadership within the Illinois Department of Corrections, and the Lieutenant Governor's office.

CHOICE

Fostered Healing Through Community Healing of Inside Community Educators (CHOICE): This peer-led program creates space for incarcerated people to unpack their own trauma while listening deeply to others and offering mutual support. Rooted in trust, reflection, and collective care, CHOICE fosters environments where healing is practiced together.

The program is a replication of the long-standing CAVE model, which has operated successfully at Danville Correctional Center for more than 12 years. In 2025, CHOICE expanded for the first time into three downstate facilities with limited access to programming: **Murphysboro Life Skills Center, Pinckneyville Correctional Center, and Menard Correctional Center**. All programming was led by Regional Coordinator Quianya Enge. See coverage of the program: https://www.adler.edu/news/first-cohort-of-peacemakers-graduates-from-choice-a-trauma-informed-initiative-inside-illinois-correctional-facilities/

Over the course of the year, CHOICE achieved the following:

- **Engaged 86 unique participants across three prisons** through a total of 96 sessions, with more than 96% of participants completing at least half of their scheduled sessions, demonstrating strong commitment and sustained engagement.

- **Delivered 288 hours of trauma-responsive, peer-led programming,** across participating prisons.

- **Assisted eight people in stepping into facilitation and leadership roles**, guiding group discussions and outreach centered on living with integrity through the program's *seven core commitments*: shared governance, social learning, nonviolence, social responsibility, open communication, growth and change, and

emotional intelligence. These principles are explored weekly and increasingly integrated into participants' daily lives over time.

"The most meaningful thing I learned in this class is the meaning and importance of the seven commitments that we are required to practice, and I learned how being committed to these make me a better person and more positive in all aspects of my life."
– CHOICE Participant, Pinckneyville Correctional Center

HEALING BEYOND HARM

Healing Beyond Harm (HBH) is a restorative justice program dedicated to crime survivors as they navigate their healing journeys. HBH centers survivor choice and dignity through its Apology Letter Bank, which allows people who have caused harm to write letters of accountability to those impacted by their actions. The program also offers accompaniment for survivors who choose to communicate with the person(s) who caused harm. HBH operates across community settings, work release centers, prisons, courthouses, and online.

Over the past year, under the leadership of HBH Coordinator Christine Weil, the program achieved the following:

In-Depth Survivor Support: Thirty-five crime survivors engaged in hours of individualized, trauma-responsive engagement as they explored healing pathways available to them, 11 of whom received sustained case coordination, including referrals to additional services tailored to their needs.

Outreach and Training: HBH reached more than 350 people through presentations across agencies, classrooms, and community spaces, increasing awareness of restorative justice approaches for survivors. In addition, 51 people participated in intensive restorative justice training in law school and community settings.

Expanding Access to the Apology Letter Bank: To broaden access across Illinois, HBH designed multiple formats for the Apology Letter Bank, including prison-based, virtual, correspondence-based, and in-person models ensuring participation was possible across a wide range of settings and circumstances.

Facilitating Harm-Dialogue Healing Processes
When survivors chose to engage in dialogue with the person who caused harm, HBH

facilitated a carefully mediated series of meetings designed to center safety, accountability, and healing for all involved. Documentation from one such process is included below:

The{restorative process] brought tremendous peace to [the crime survivor]. She knew nothing about the man responsible [for killing her sister in a drunk driving accident] because he didn't have a trial, he took a plea. [The survivor] made assumptions about the man such as having an uncontrollable drinking habit and getting in trouble in prison, therefore needing to be transferred to so many institutions. Through the process she found none of these assumptions were true. She describes listening to his answers as shattering the anger she felt for him. Her latest letter to him, delivered from HBH staff, was one of complete forgiveness. She even admitted that she became an alcoholic when her sister was killed but, after the restorative encounter, she will seek assistance to stop her own drinking.

Quintana Last Mile Scholarship (QLMS)
Established in 2021 through the generosity of an ongoing donor, the Quintana Last Mile Scholarship (QLMS) has awarded $117,000 to 18 incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, resulting in 21 total awards since its inception. These funds have enabled recipients to complete 21 Bachelor's and Master's degrees, removing financial barriers at a critical final stage of their educational journeys.

QLMS awardees have gone on to serve in high levels of government, work within foundations, become educators and violence-prevention practitioners, and, in one notable case, earn recognition as an Obama Fellow. We are proud to support scholars as they continue building lives of leadership, service, and impact within their communities.
https://www.adler.edu/news/applicants-sought-for-the-quintana-last-mile-scholarship/

Staffing: In addition to the exceptional team leads named throughout this report, we wish to recognize the talented and dedicated staff whose expertise makes this work possible. Dani Nesi and Mika Bona in project data and evaluation; Noemi Roman on the IL-CHEP team; and Nia Smith in compliance and program management.

We also want to thank our seven interns who support all aspects of our work. IPSSJ continues to attract talented students year after year, and their energy, curiosity, and commitment meaningfully strengthen our capacity and reach.

Special Honor: Last summer I was awarded the Mother Helen Sinclair Award on the occasion of Independence Day for Returning Citizens in Chicago. I was honored to receive the award, which recognizes a lifelong commitment to justice, healing, and the

liberation of those impacted by incarceration. Helen Sinclair was a fierce advocate for justice, healing, and community empowerment on Chicago's West Side. Her legacy lives on in those who carry her vision forward, building safer and more compassionate communities.

Funding: We are deeply grateful to the funders who have invested in our work over many years. The Fry Family Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Paul Angell Family Foundation, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, and Adler University have been steadfast partners, enabling us to build stable programming that supports lasting transformation across our communities.

In addition to foundation support, government funding has played a significant role in sustaining our work. In 2024, IPSSJ received $874,000 from the Illinois General Assembly, allowing us to expand both staff and programming. This fiscal year, however, funding decreased to $374,000 due to reductions in federal dollars. In response, Assistant Director Matt Barrington and his team have significantly expanded their efforts to identify new funding sources and pursue grant opportunities.

We remain grateful to the organizations and government agencies collaborating with us to sustain this work, including the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Justice Advisory Council of Cook County, and the Office of Mayor Brandon Johnson.

I conclude this year-end report with a heartfelt **thank you**! We at IPSSJ are grateful for your partnership, your investment, and your belief in what we are building together. Over the past 15 years, it has been a privilege to do work that is both meaningful and transformative. We are honored to be in this exhilarating, liberating work with you.

Happy New Year!

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