

SULAH PROGRAM

2021-2022 Report

Prepared March 2022



Prepared By:



Executive Summary

Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) and the Coalition of Muslim Women Kitchener-Waterloo (CMW) embarked on a learning journey together to offer restorative responses to identity-based harm in our community. The result has been an innovative and unique, community-based restorative response to the continuum of identity-based harm that occurs in our community. The following report identifies what we've accomplished to date.

Through the *Sulah* program, we have researched and implemented best practices, nurtured deep connections between *Sulah* and community organizations and cultural groups, offered restorative dialogues, trained and supported restorative dialogue volunteers, and evaluated our work.

Our key learning is that restorative practice has tremendous potential to impact the harm that our community experiences, and to build human connection where there has been only discord. Our work has reinforced for us that people learn and change through building relationships, rather than through punishment. When people experience harm, we will ask them what they need to begin the journey of healing. We have heard that some of these needs are safety, empowerment, recognition, and accountability. Restorative responses can be a crucial service to address these needs, if people voluntarily choose this option and the restorative approach is appropriate.

Our hope is that this report shines a light on the outcomes of our partnership, identifies the need for alternatives to policing and retributive responses to harm, and inspires other communities to consider developing quality restorative services to respond to identity-based harm that are deeply reflective and responsive.

We welcome questions and comments. Please contact us at info@cjiwr.com and we would be pleased to connect with you.

"As a visible Muslim minority with a hijab, I've had some people make some really rude comments, which initially made me very mad... But, now I think there is an option for dialogue... Maybe this person is saying these things not out of malice, but out of ignorance... That is my biggest takeaway from *Sulah*."

- *Sulah* participant

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Introduction to *Sulah*

Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) and the Coalition of Muslim Women Kitchener-Waterloo (CMW) are providing this report to celebrate and report on the work thus far completed in our partnership program, *Sulah*. In just a short time period, *Sulah* has dramatically impacted each of our organizations and offered restorative approaches to assist our community to meet the needs of people impacted by identity-based harm.

While offering so much potential for bridging divides and improving relationships, Restorative Justice (RJ) is not regularly offered to people impacted by hate and identity harm. *Sulah* is innovative and unique. Throughout this project, we have discovered only one other Restorative Justice provider in Canada who has created programming to intentionally engage identity-harm with restorative processes. Even more unusual is a partnership such as ours, where a Restorative Justice organization has partnered with a grassroots organization such as CMW to together offer RJ for Islamophobia, racism and xenophobia.

We would like to thank our funders, including the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Kitchener-Waterloo Community Foundation, and the Anti-Racism Action Program of the Government of Canada.



Government
of Canada



"All those participating in *Sulah* cases (mediators and participants) have the opportunity to better realize the complexity of racism and acts of racism, particularly in understanding the impact our actions have on each other in deeply personal and long-standing ways. There is the potential for a high degree of accountability to each other in having to listen to the experiences of others, and in being vulnerable through sharing your own experiences with those that have caused harm or who you have caused harm to."

- *Sulah* volunteer



Imagine a Just Community

Community Justice Initiatives of Waterloo Region, Ontario (CJI) is a volunteer-based Restorative Justice, peacebuilding organization. Our organization is known internationally for starting the first Victim Offender Reconciliation Program in 1974.

During our 45+ year history, we have creatively and innovatively applied Restorative Justice principles to address needs identified by our community. Our founding was the result of a grassroots movement that sought to build a community to transform harm through dialogue where all voices are heard. We continue that mission today as we seek to inspire safe, healthy, and peaceful communities.

"Our services walk with people, meeting them where they are at."



Coalition of Muslim Women

Kitchener-Waterloo

Founded by a handful of Muslim women in 2010, the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW (CMW) is a federally registered not-for-profit organization with the mandate to empower Muslim women and girls to be leaders and change makers. CMW provides opportunities for personal and professional growth, and leadership and skills development for Muslim women while addressing issues of racism, discrimination and Islamophobia through advocacy, activism, and bridge building. CMW facilitates Muslim women's active participation and engagement in civic and democratic life, tirelessly working toward building a society where Muslim women are valued, engaged, empowered and recognized as leaders.

"CMW is working toward building a society where Muslim women are valued, engaged, and empowered."

Sulah Description

History

The roots for this project stem from a community consultation conducted by Waterloo Region's Crime Prevention Council (CPC) and CMW in November 2018. At that time, it became clear that our region's Muslim population was regularly impacted by harmful and hateful actions from other members of the community, and the report released by CMW and CPC in April 2019 recommended that restorative responses be made available for individuals in the community experiencing Islamophobia and other forms of interpersonal racism. In order to make this recommendation a reality, CMW partnered with CJI.

In July 2020, following receipt of the Ontario Trillium Foundation seed grant, CMW and CJI engaged in strategic discussions. We decided that service would be made available to anyone experiencing one of these forms of discrimination, regardless of their faith. We also decided to rename the program *Sulah* (formerly Together Project) - with the intention that community members might recognize the significance of this word as having meanings of peace, reconciliation and amicable settlement in many languages, including Arabic, Urdu, Turkish and Persian.

Rationale

Sulah has been built on the strongly held belief of each of our organizations that humans do not learn or change through punishment. We believe that healthy relationships build healthy communities. When individuals are impacted by hate, they experience significant harm and suffering, and many have critical needs. Restorative Justice asks people what they need, and we at CJI and CMW assess if our services can meet those needs.

In order to build our *Sulah* program, we engaged in research to build our awareness around best practices for responding to identity harm with Restorative Justice, and spoke with practitioners across the United States and the United Kingdom who have been doing this work.

"The promise of RJ is that inclusive dialogue may be better suited to reducing the harms caused by hate, while simultaneously challenging the underlying causes which give rise to hate-motivated behaviour."

[1] Walters, Mark; *Hate Crime and Restorative Justice: Exploring Causes, Repairing Harms*; 2014 Oxford University Press; xxiv-xxv

Sulah Activities

Through the Anti-Racism Action Plan, CJI was able to fund two Service Coordinators for *Sulah*, and CMW funded the Together Against Islamophobia Coordinator at CMW. The primary tasks involved with offering this program include:

Developing Training Materials

Currently, this includes a 71-page training manual and a 12-hour training program. We continue to assess training needs and to consider adjustments.

Training Volunteers

It is critical that our volunteer facilitators include members of CMW, and of communities impacted by racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. Using our co-mediation model, we engage experienced CJI mediators to join newly trained mediators in doing this work.

Supporting Volunteers

Volunteers are regularly supported through debrief meetings with the Service Coordinator. We have also engaged volunteers in continued learning through multiple Circle gatherings.

Community Outreach

Some of our past and current outreach efforts include CJI's traditional referral source streams; CMW stakeholders (along with ten peer workers from CMW who speak 8 languages); the Waterloo Region Police Service; other service providers that might come in contact with those impacted by hate incidents; and other community leaders (particularly those connected with African, Caribbean and Sikh communities).

Assessing and Responding to Referrals

As the *Sulah* program is new and may not always be clear to other service providers, *Sulah* Service Coordinators liaise with referring partners, explaining the program and discussing the suitability of the referrals we receive.

Facilitating Dialogues

Sulah Service Coordinators sometimes take part in cases as facilitators. In such situations, the staff facilitator will still have a volunteer co-mediator.

Best Practice Considerations

When we come across issues that need to be considered in terms of best practice, we as *Sulah* Service Coordinators collaborate with our CJI colleagues and look to other experts in the field.

Sulah Results

1 Case Referrals and Facilitation

To date, *Sulah* has received 43 referrals and engaged in cases with 127 participants. The issues and types of cases that *Sulah* has engaged with have been quite varied. One powerful aspect of *Sulah* common throughout all cases is the open-hearted listening that we offer to participants. Everyone is given the opportunity to tell their story, and to be heard by our facilitators without judgment.

Participant Feedback

To date, we have collected evaluation forms from 20 participants (1-week post-dialogue). **Highlights of the findings include:**

- When asked if facilitators were respectful throughout the process, 20 of out 20 said yes, and many were very enthusiastic regarding the role that the facilitators had played.
- When asked if they felt the dialogue contributed to increased understanding, 13 of 16 who were asked said yes (the question was not asked where it was not applicable to the circumstances).
- When asked if they felt better about the situation after the dialogue or meeting, 9 out of 12 who received the question said yes.

Sulah participants have also shared with us, in their own words, how they were impacted by the experience:

“I would love to see the work you do more widely known and more widely used, and of course funded, in order to enable that to happen... The work we need to do as human beings to be better and to more justly and fairly engage with the rest of our own community and humanity at large requires us to be willing to invest in these difficult conversations. I see a real need for us to embrace that.”

“I was looking to connect in an emotionally safe way and to understand better, and that’s what happened. The way that the program is set up is really effective, in having meetings with both sides before and after, and having the moderators be present in the conversation – all of that is really important to the outcome.”

Sulah Results

2 Outreach

Since the beginning of the project, *Sulah* staff and volunteers have had meetings with 87 unique organizations - including a total of 958 people. We have focused much of our outreach listening to communities who experience harm. As an organization, we have grown from building connections with individuals and organizations who have knowledge and stories to share.

Another major focus of outreach has been on organizations who often bear responsibility for responding to hate crimes on behalf of the community, including the Waterloo Regional Police Services (WRPS) and the justice system.

This past year, we have greatly strengthened our relationship with WRPS through engagement with their Equity, Inclusion and Diversity (EID) unit, through regular meetings since July 2020 (monthly since January 2021). We have also developed connections with the Wellington County Crown Attorney's Office and the Stratford Crown Attorney's office.

3 Recognition and Influence

In the last year, *Sulah* staff have presented three times to an international community regarding the learnings from *Sulah*.

On June 16, 2021, we presented to 56 members of the international community at an online seminar entitled "Community Mediation and Dialogue Around the World" hosted by Gishurim in Israel. On August 31, 2021, and March 23, 2022, *Sulah* Service Coordinators were featured as guest speakers on restorative responses to hate crime, at annual conferences hosted by the Enhancing Stakeholder Awareness and Resources for Hate Crime Victim Support project, hosted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

We also presented in November 2021 at the Canadian National Restorative Justice Symposium on our learnings and challenges with *Sulah*.

Sulah Results

4 Volunteers

Volunteer engagement has been a major component of the *Sulah* program. Our current *Sulah* volunteer team is a group of 18 quality, trained facilitators who care deeply about impacting our community. To date, our volunteers have given 1,119 hours of their time completing *Sulah* activities.

Volunteers have been involved in training, volunteer Circles, facilitating cases, interpreting for cases, surrogates for cases, coaching newer volunteers in the learning process, outreach to the community through social media, and engagement with *Sulah* staff in outreach planning.

Circle Keeping Training

One highlight of our volunteer engagement is a recent three-week Circle Keeping Training, undertaken by nine of our *Sulah* volunteers (facilitated by CJI staff).

Following the training, each volunteer was given the opportunity to co-facilitate a practice Circle for the CJI community.

For many facilitators and participants alike, these Circles were a deeply meaningful experience - rich in both learning and connection.

Some of the feedback we received from Circle trainees and attendees:

"Circles like these create spaces for a person to engage in self-discovery while also building community. The ability to listen to others and share from the heart invites participants to lay down their defenses so that they can truly recognize their biases and assumptions, as well as their strengths and needs."

"I learned more about myself in the context of mediation and conflict resolution. I reflected on how my story and my experiences impact how I engage with this work. I witnessed the same kinds of reflection from others, and it made me more comfortable to share vulnerable parts of myself."

Media Coverage

<https://youtu.be/T50lQ4rzE-8>

<https://youtu.be/-S6QdbxbCCg>

<https://www.waterloochronicle.ca/news-story/10209241--sulah-to-help-heal-hate-in-waterloo-region-through-dialogue/>

<https://www.kitchenertoday.com/local-news/local-group-granted-provincial-funding-to-establish-program-to-respond-to-hate-incidents-2668849>

<https://www.therecord.com/news/waterloo-region/2020/08/27/muslim-womens-group-receives-provincial-grant-money-to-address-hate-incidents.html>

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/sulah-restorative-justice-hate-crimes-waterloo-region-1.5703877>

<https://kitchener.ctvnews.ca/community-groups-offering-safe-space-to-talk-about-islamophobia-and-racism-1.5082398>

<https://www.waterloochronicle.ca/opinion-story/10332117-how-sulah-helps-us-talk-about-harm-caused-by-acts-of-islamophobia-racism-or-xenophobia/>

<https://www.therecord.com/local-waterloo/opinion/2021/08/18/sulah-restorative-justice-response-to-identity-based-harm.html>

"Listening and being witness to these conversations... I feel a deeper sense of responsibility to sit with how I need to do better."

- *Sulah* volunteer

Looking Ahead

In addition to continuing with the work laid out throughout this report, we envision several other opportunities for *Sulah* to grow. These include:

- Engaging with local organizations to facilitate conversations around identity-based harm in the workplace;
- Partnerships with the field of Countering Radicalization to Violence (CRV), working to support accountability of those radicalized to violence and supporting the needs of those who have experienced significant harm;
- Setting up a training process for peers to support individuals going through our process or otherwise dealing with identity-based harm;
- Offering prevention-focused Restorative Circles within communities at risk;
- Greater outreach within communities (as the COVID-19 pandemic allows) so that community members can hear from us directly about the program;
- Developing partnerships with different communities at risk for identity-based harm (including LGBTQ2+, disability, Jewish, Sikh, East and Southeast Asian, along with continued relationship-building with the Caribbean, African and Black communities).

"There is a lot of unaddressed racialized harm that is happening... This is an ongoing need as we build a more restorative community."

- *Sulah* staff member

Conclusion

As Canada becomes increasingly multicultural and multiracial, identity-based conflict is inevitable. We must establish methods beyond seeking retribution through the justice system. In recognition of this, we are dedicated to finding sustainable funding to continue the work of *Sulah* with our community. As organizations, we are also interested in furthering community-based solutions to community safety. For example, CMW has recently established a hate reporting tool for individuals to document incidents of identity-based harm. We predict that this reporting tool will also encourage more individuals to access *Sulah*.

Our community recognizes that sometimes legal options are not options at all because a crime has not been committed, but there is still harm. *Sulah* interventions can be a safer and non-threatening way to dialogue with community members that leads to a better understanding of relevant issues. Although restorative processes may not eliminate long-standing viewpoints, there is an opportunity for a shift in perspective with respect to those who hold different identities than us or those with whom we are in conflict. This possibility brings our community hope of a more inclusive and safer community for everyone.

"I can't imagine living in a world in which you can't look eye to eye with your next door Neighbour. There has to be a better option than moving out of your neighbourhood or calling the police. There has to be a middle way. What CJI and CMW provide, through *Sulah*, is one such way."

-*Sulah* Staff Member