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## A new path to justice, healing for survivors of sexual assault



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On the hard days, when it seemed like no good could possibly come out of the Minnesota Legislature in 2025, survivors and their allies would repeat the words.

*Never doubt.*

They had survived sexual violence. They had an idea that could help other survivors. If they had to push that idea uphill through a divided legislature in a divisive year, that was what they would do.

So they repeated a quote attributed to Margaret Mead like a mantra, to each other and to the bipartisan coalition of lawmakers who rallied to their cause: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Their bill became law Friday, paving the way for a new system of restorative justice in Minnesota.

Such programs offer crime victims an opportunity to meet or communicate with the offender outside the justice system. The new law will give those offenders a reason to cooperate.

Restorative justice programs can give survivors a chance to ask questions, to feel more in control, to get the last word. For offenders who choose to participate, it can be a chance to apologize and to try to make amends.

Few rapists are ever prosecuted, fewer still convicted. Most of the people they hurt will never receive what feels like justice from the justice system.

“The legal system doesn’t work for most sexual violence cases,” said Sarah Super, founder of Break the Silence, who led a group of survivors lobbying for the passage of Senate File 2200. “Ninety-seven percent of perpetrators walk free. Survivors are forced to choose between making a report that almost never amounts to anything – or nothing.”

“This is my justice,” said Sandra Weise, survivor.

Weise reported her assailant, and investigators at the precinct tried hard to bring charges. They couldn’t.

“What I learned was that without direct witnesses or video, he-said, she-said assaults are incredibly difficult to prove,” she said. “The legal burden of proof is not met in most legal cases, just like mine. So then it becomes, ‘Shut up and live with it.’ That didn’t work for me.”

Restorative justice offers another choice. An option that will be there for them, even if the legal system lets them down. Because the legal system usually does.

“Victims are asking for a safe place where they can be believed and have their pain taken seriously,” Super said. “They want answers from the person or people who harmed them.”

Every survivor has their own story and their own needs. What some need is a chance to confront the person who hurt them – the spouse, the stranger, the acquaintance, the friend, the teacher, the pastor.

But for that to happen, Minnesota law would have to change. And that would require a leap of faith during a session where trust was in short supply.

For a restorative justice system to work, Minnesota would have to ensure that any conversations, confessions, apologies made during the process would not be used against the offender in court. Similar provisions protect participants in alternative dispute resolution.

But at first glance, many lawmakers thought the bill looked like a better deal for the criminals than the survivors. Until they listened to the survivors.

“I’ll tell you, I – to this moment – still don’t fully understand it. I don’t understand what you get out of it,” said state Rep. Walter Hudson, R-Albertville, in a May 12 floor speech just before the bill passed the House. “This restorative process, where you sit down with someone and try to reconcile. It’s not my cup of tea.”

However, Hudson said, “What I’ve heard

from survivors, again and again and again, is that it means something incredibly important to them.”

Weise, who owns the Finnish Bistro in St. Paul, left work at least six times and rushed the short distance to the State Capitol to testify.

“We just wouldn’t go away. We just kept showing up,” she said. “Since this bill was passed, it’s all I want to talk about. It was the best therapy that could ever happen.”

The bill passed the Senate unanimously and passed the House, where the balance of power is evenly split, by a margin of 98-36.

The restorative justice bill restored a bit of trust at the Legislature, and that gives hope to state Rep. Sandra Feist, DFL-New Brighton. Feist, the bill’s House sponsor, returned the favor to Hudson by signing on as cosponsor for one of his bills that would increase protections for Minnesotans facing asset forfeiture.

“As much as people think that the public is motivated by anger and rage, when I talk to people in my community, they are inspired and they want to hear about the ways people can work together across the aisle,” Feist said. “I think that is what people want. They want a functioning democracy.”

For some of the survivors who worked so hard for this day, the real work is just starting.

Super is in the process of launching a new restorative justice practice that she plans to call Just People. Weise is eager to help. Restorative justice is for anyone who has been a victim of crime, not just sexual violence; but survivors need a third party to guide the process and communicate with the person who did harm.

“I’m hoping we can build a form of justice and healing here in Minnesota that survivors haven’t had before,” Super said, emphasizing the double meaning of the name. “We are just people. We can *be* just people.”

For more information about Just People, you can email Super at sarah@wearejust-people.org.

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