

Last summer, an elderly woman received a phone call from the police informing her that several youth had broken into her home while she was away visiting her family. She returned home to find windows and doors broken, the carpet stained, and trash everywhere. She was understandably distraught. Charges were filed against the youth and a trial date was set. Then something unexpected happened. Instead of going to trial and facing felony charges, the youth, their parents and family, and the woman who owned the house met together in a process facilitated by a trained volunteer from the Community Mediation Center of Calvert (CMCC). They talked about what happened, why it happened, how everyone was affected, and how to make restitution. The youth took responsibility for their behavior and listened as the woman explained how she felt violated and scared. Apologies came from the youth and their parents, and an agreement was made for the youth to spend several Saturdays cleaning and repairing the woman's house. At the end of this process, the felony case against the youth was dropped, and the woman felt relieved and hopeful. The woman's property was restored, relationships had been built, and the youth do not have to face a future with a felony on their records. This process is called community conferencing, and it is just one of the conflict resolution services we provide at CMCC free of charge. Unfortunately, interventions like this are not readily available throughout the state and are not fully utilized even where they are available. We need leaders to get behind interventions that bring our youth back into our community in a supportive and positive way rather than lock them away. We need to bring the victim's voice into the conversation about restitution and resolution. Restorative justice interventions like community conferencing do just that. As a community mediator and director of CMCC, I encourage our leaders to learn more about the services our community mediation centers provide to divert youth away from the prison pipeline and to support the use of these services as an alternative to punitive and exclusionary practices.