

Anika Bowie

My focus for several years has been on the lives of families, especially those with young children impacted by the criminal justice system. I want us to be more aware of the collateral consequences that impact everyone's lives when non-violent crimes are given prison sentences. I want more people to understand how difficult it is for returning residents to redeem themselves after their sentence is served. These are individuals who often do not have the power, agency, or resources to best represent themselves.

It is part of my mission — as the daughter of someone who was incarcerated for a non-violent crime — to improve our system of support and advocacy. I believe we need to

decriminalize marijuana use and allocate equity funds to restore the lives of families negatively impacted by drug laws and racial profiling practices. I believe we can do a better job supporting families, rather than separating them in the courtroom — which serves no one in the long run.

To be a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable society, we often look at race, gender, and sexuality as a spectrum of protected classes. Yet the convicted individual is unprotected, and our government's laws disenfranchise families for several generations. More than 53,000 Minnesotans are currently on felony probation or parole — without the right to vote, secure housing, or the ability to find sustainable employment.

Neighborhood Justice, Dispute Resolution Center, and the city of St. Paul recently joined forces to implement the Neighborhood Justice Program, a restorative justice model to provide a community-based, victim-centered alternative to traditional prosecution in addressing crime. St. Paul is the third city in the nation to adopt this alternative model. A 2018 California study found that Neighborhood Court costs up to 82 percent less than prosecution.

I've attended community circles and provided feedback on the program. Community policy is a continuum of conversations with under-represented constituents. The people closest to the problem are closest to the solution.



PHOTO SARAH WHITING

“MWP Conversations: Transformation” will be held August 6, at Carondelet Center in St. Paul, to explore transformative justice issues. Find details at tinyurl.com/MWPTransformation