

The Importance of Participatory Defense

By Ginny Parham, founder of Families Shoulder to Shoulder

The Participatory Defense Movement is spreading throughout Washington State. So, what is it? Participatory Defense is a community organizing model for people facing charges, their families and communities to impact the outcomes of cases and transform the landscape of power in the courtrooms.



Families Shoulder to Shoulder (FSTS) is a nonprofit that started in 2019 in Pierce County. We are now empowering communities not only in Pierce County but also in King County, Thurston County, Yakima County, Snohomish County, Spokane County, and Gray's Harbor County. We meet you wherever your case is being heard.

Although we are not attorneys, we assist incarcerated individuals and their loved ones at various stages of the legal process through Participatory Defense. We involve families in the defense process in order to impact individual cases and to contribute to a more just legal system.

We have in person and online weekly Participatory Hub meetings where we create space for families to gather, share their experiences and learn from one another fostering a supportive community. In this supportive community, legal complexities are clarified, individuals are respected, and everyone is treated with dignity and fairness.

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The goal of Participatory Defense is to empower people to participate and be proactive in their own and their loved ones cases. This is important because it changes the dynamics of power. Perhaps more importantly, it boosts our agency in the process, which is essential in the criminal legal system.

The Importance of Participatory Defense, Cont.

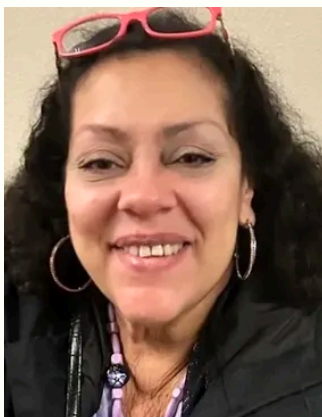
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Families Shoulder to Shoulder (FSTS) engages with the courts on behalf of individuals through letter writing, court attendance, providing testimony about support upon release, and by providing information to help tell the story of the whole person. Since 2019 FSTS has supported around 120 families and we have written approximately 670 letters that are sent to Judges, as well as the Clemency and Pardons Board.

We are part of the process of reuniting families and bringing incarcerated individuals home. We are no longer powerless; we are members of the community, not just defendants or bystanders. We are letting courtrooms know that we do welcome transformed incarcerated individuals back into our communities. We let courtrooms know that just because an incarcerated individual is missing from our communities does not mean that they are forgotten.

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For inquiries or to learn more: familiesshouldertoshoolder@outlook.com.



About the Author:

My name is Ginny Parham and I am the founder of Families Shoulder to Shoulder. I founded Families Shoulder to Shoulder because I was personally impacted by incarceration when I bravely supported my son during his 25-year prison sentence. I recognized the profound isolation, the hopelessness and disempowerment experienced by families who were pulled into the criminal justice system.