

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/keeping-incarcerated-people-from-their-families-is-cruel>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Rashaad Porter couldn't believe what he was seeing. There, in a prison in South Carolina, incarcerated people were doing the Electric Slide alongside family members and corrections staff.

For a minute, I'm like, You know that person you're dancing next to, smiling with, that's your correctional officer? said Porter, a research associate at the Vera Institute of Justice, who was on hand to witness a family engagement day at Vera and the MILPA Collectives two [Restoring Promise](#) units in South Carolina a few years ago. The Restoring Promise team was on site to launch the creation of prison housing units grounded in dignity for young adults.

Earlier, the group of staff and incarcerated people had broken bread with their families, sharing a meal of Southern comfort food along with stories about how this unit and these relationships which run counter to the mainstream prison philosophy of breaking, not raising, spirits were made possible.

The relationships we are building are something that historically doesn't happen behind the walls, said Elias Gonzales, a training and site manager at the MILPA Collective, Vera's partner in the Restoring Promise initiative. Our focus on family engagement has offered a glimpse of hope within a dark system.

The typical prison system thrives on a *lack* of connection. With its [predatory phone costs](#) and sterile visits through glass, the system is designed to [keep incarcerated people away from their families](#). Visits are considered a privilege, not a right, and they are often the first thing prison systems take away from incarcerated people in the name of discipline. But in Restoring Promise units, families are regularly connected to their loved ones life engaged in their progress and their challenges.

Sharon Taylor, a program associate at Vera, has seen the trauma families go through when people are removed from their homes and placed in prison. Society has this out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality, especially with people of color behind bars, Taylor said. No one is worrying about the people who are inside except for their loved ones. Families and friends on the outside are doing the time with their loved ones and usually have to carry that burden all by themselves.

Restoring Promise works to ease that burden by eliminating barriers to connection and providing resources and attention to families so they can support their loved ones. In Colorado, where a Restoring Promise unit is in its planning stages, MILPA and Vera are partnering with [Justice for Families](#) to help families understand the system and connect with their loved ones.

The initiative also pays special attention to what family time looks like, said Dr. Ryan Shanahan, who leads Restoring Promise at Vera. Staff are taught to not just oversee and surveil visits, but to facilitate them and answer questions.

One of Shanahan's favorite stories comes from South Carolina, where two units leaned into Southern hospitality. While all Restoring Promise units hold family orientations, the staff in South Carolina allowed family members to bring sheets and comforter sets for their loved ones, see their rooms, and even stay to make their beds.

These intimate moments between family members which a prison generally robs them of is an incredible example of centering dignity, Shanahan said. Imagine being a family member and what you're picturing in your head about prison comes from inaccurate media representations, but now you're sitting on their bed with them, and they're showing you where they keep pictures of you on their walls.

For the first time in South Carolina history, families could come in and see exactly where their loved ones were staying, said Lt. Timothy Shephard, a Restoring Promise unit manager in South Carolina. Folks saw firsthand the classes their loved ones were taking to prepare for a successful return home.

Corrections officers also learn how to facilitate and strengthen family involvement.

I saw the change from the first meeting in the program, said Princess Dixon-Dawson, the mother of a mentee turned mentor in Restoring Promise's unit in Connecticut's Cheshire Correctional Institute. They brought all the guys' families in to explain what they were going to be doing, and that's just not how it worked before. They gave us the numbers of the counselors and explained what they hoped to accomplish. It showed they were really putting in the effort to bring us into the fold.

Research shows that [in-person visits can help families as well as their incarcerated loved ones](#). More frequent visits during incarceration can also reduce the risk that prisoners will become entangled with the criminal legal system after they are released. Inside prisons, more connection to loved ones translates to fewer violent incidents and less stress and anxiety.

These new kinds of relationships with corrections staff are significantly different from those in most U.S. prisons, where there are strict cultural practices to keep corrections officers from knowing about an incarcerated person's life or family which leads to a toxic us versus them dynamic.

The initiative has had a huge impact on incarcerated people. After 18 months, twice as many mentees living in the Restoring Promise unit at the York Correctional Institution in Connecticut agreed that their family feels welcomed. Nine in 10 mentees said that they feel comfortable talking to staff about their families, compared to two in 10 a year before, and every single respondent agreed that their family and the staff got along, a nearly threefold increase in less than two years.

As the movement for prison reform grows, it is clear that families should be critical partners in creating a system that strengthens support networks and connection to loved ones.

Just as relationships worldwide have taken a hit from the COVID-19 pandemic, so have the ones inside the Restoring Promise units. Families were not allowed to visit for nearly a year and a half, and although phone calls are still a mainstay, the technology hasn't been available or reliable to accommodate virtual visits. The Restoring Promise team hopes that will soon change and that the family and community partnerships the initiative thrives on will be fully restored and strengthened.

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.