

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/inspired-by-germany>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I believe that a successful criminal justice system is one that, among other things, prepares people who are incarcerated for a successful reentry into the community.

As a former prosecutor, I have found that the best way to reduce recidivism is to provide people who are incarcerated with opportunities to develop skills, invest in their education, and cultivate the self-esteem and pride to thrive on release. That is why, more than two years ago, we at Middlesex Sheriff's Office (MSO) first began considering the idea of launching a unique, voluntary unit for incarcerated young adults with the goal to build something that would lead them to long-term success when they return home. Today, that unit, called P.A.C.T. short for People Achieving Change Together, has been called [one of the most important criminal justice reform experiments in the country](#) by the *Boston Globe*.

We wanted to create something at a high standard, but we could not do it alone and that's why we engaged the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera). We realized that Restoring Promise, an initiative of Vera and the [MILPA Collective](#), could help make our vision a reality. Now, I am going to be honest, as sheriff, I was more than a little nervous because some of the changes proposed by Restoring Promise were not for the faint of heart. Frankly, they were a little daunting. We were being challenged to do things that were different: to practice restorative justice principles, to allow young adults to hold themselves accountable, and more. Since the conception of this unit two years ago, Restoring Promise has been by our side providing us not only with their expert assistance, but with their moral support as well.

The question I get often is: why do this? The answer is simple. The research, data, and our own eyes were telling us that traditional approaches to corrections were falling short of meeting the needs of young adults. We were not effectively addressing the underlying issues that led to their involvement with the justice system in the first place: failures in education, employment, housing, and behavioral health, among others. In Massachusetts, as in jurisdictions across the country, these unaddressed issues tend to lead to a continuous cycle of involvement with police, the courts, and state and county correction facilities. To change this, I believed we needed to reimagine corrections and build a new model. That is exactly what we are doing with P.A.C.T.

Walk into the P.A.C.T. unit on any day and you will see that barriers that have traditionally existed between young adults and corrections staff have been broken down, creating new opportunities for genuine engagement and betterment. You will find young adults sitting with staff going over their homework or their parole paperwork. You will see them talking about their family and reentry plans with staff and working together to implement new programs for current and future members of P.A.C.T. You will find young adults and mentors (incarcerated people over the age of 24 who assist young adults) participating side-by-side in classes and programs designed to address many of the underlying issues that led to their involvement with the system. They are provided with tools to develop new, productive skills that they can put to use today and in the future. You will even see young adults, mentors, and staff all sitting together for a Thanksgiving meal.

What we have built here at P.A.C.T. is a unique, true community. It is a different approach to corrections that is responsive to the needs of young adults. Not only are walls being broken down, but bridges are being built. Opportunities for growth and success are being created. This is truly *People Achieving Change Together*.

The journey toward creating P.A.C.T. was certainly not easy. Change is always difficult, especially in a field like corrections. Since we opened the doors of this unit just over a year ago, we have had successes, we have faced challenges, and we have learned from both. But the early results we are seeing reveal promise. Our recent report on these results, [Cultivating Change](#), shows that our model is not only working, it is thriving—a model that can be replicated and scaled.

On the heels of celebrating the first anniversary of the P.A.C.T. unit, I want to thank all those who have made P.A.C.T. a reality. I want to thank our officers and staff, the young adults, and their mentors. Without their participation, this community would not exist. Our officers, particularly, took a leap of faith with respect to P.A.C.T. and embraced change in an industry where change does not come quickly or easily, working on a daily basis to build on and improve the foundation we have set.

As I join Vera as part of a global learning exchange between American, German, and Norwegian corrections professionals, I am reminded that, although we have much cause to be proud of what we have accomplished to date, there is work still to be done. We can take lessons from international best practices and fuse them with criminal justice approaches at home to better meet the needs of young people who are incarcerated. As the first county jail in the country to take this step alongside Restoring Promise, P.A.C.T. can serve as a model for other corrections agencies looking to move beyond traditional approaches to corrections. If we are to ensure that our criminal justice system is successful, it is on us to also ensure that people who are incarcerated are afforded opportunities to realize their potential.

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