

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/safeguarding-justice>

### Annual reports

Annual Report 2017

By Nicholas Turner

By John F. Savarese

Friends,

This was a year of daunting challenge in America. Virulent racism raised its head in a startling way. We saw the return of fear-mongering, and tough on crime rhetoric and policy direction. We witnessed demonization of immigrant communities, and deeply unconstructive escalation of conflict between police and communities of color.

In the face of these challenges, I am proud of Vera's accomplishments in 2017, delivered by the hard work and dedication of our staff, and backed by the generous support of my fellow trustees and many others across the nation.

We at Vera remain steadfast in our commitment to the bedrock American values of justice and human dignity. Vera works every day alongside our government and community partners to protect and restore the core American ideals that are the hallmark of our democratic society: safeguarding justice for everyone, protecting vulnerable families and communities, and building a more diverse and inclusive America.

We know from experience that, despite national challenges, many more public officials on both sides of the aisle are embracing solutions to crime that protect both public safety and human dignity.

Our partnerships with these leaders led to significant progress in 2017. Through the SAFE (Safety and Fairness for Everyone) Cities network, we expanded access to legal counsel for thousands of detained, indigent immigrants across the country working to preserve community and family unity where they are most vulnerable. Building on our work with the Asheville, NC police department to help them reform their use-of-force policy, we launched a nationwide initiative to build trust and real partnership between police and communities in other cities. And, we worked with allies to start making the closure of Rikers Island jail a reality.

Relentless optimism is in Vera's DNA. But it also comes from the experience of making reform happen. Again and again. For more than 56 years well before the phrase mass incarceration entered our common vocabulary we have proven that hearts, minds, and the way government delivers justice, can change. Ultimately, that means lives change.

Under the continued leadership of Nick Turner, I know that Vera will continue in 2018 to make our justice systems more fair and effective for all.

Thank you,

John Savarese  
Chair, Vera Board of Trustees

From escalating attacks on immigrant communities to long-standing conflicts between police and communities of color, the promise of justice for all appeared to be in grave danger in 2017. At Vera, we renewed our commitment to fight for justice, one built on the bedrock American values of fairness and human dignity. As always, our success in driving change was built on our strong partnerships with government and community leaders, particularly at the state and local levels. We continued to make great progress in our work to close mass incarcerations front door, transform life behind bars, and deliver safety, trust, and justice to a more diverse America.

Mass incarceration is an affront to bedrock American values of justice and human dignity. It dehumanizes poor people and people of color, damages already marginalized communities, and siphons off public resources with little social benefit. Across the country, admissions to our nation's more than 3,000 local jails which serve as mass incarcerations front door nearly doubled between 1983 and 2013, and there are an estimated 12 million jail admissions annually.

Although big cities have been achieving large reductions in jail incarceration, the number of people incarcerated in jail has continued to grow in rural counties and small towns. That's why Vera partnered with Google.org to launch In Our Backyards, a major initiative to use our unique data to inform towns all across America of this problem, tell the stories of those it impacts ranging from local businesses losing employees to local school children losing parents and spark reform at the local level. Ending mass incarceration across all of America requires us to work together to drive change in every county nationwide.

The data that informs In Our Backyards grew out of our Incarceration Trends project launched in 2015 which mapped, county-by-county,

how jails have grown in size, and first raised the flag that small and rural counties are driving mass incarceration. In 2017, we expanded Incarceration Trends to provide a deeper understanding of who is in our local jails, how many people remain incarcerated simply because they are too poor to pay bail, and racial disparities in incarceration knowledge that we are sharing with local leaders seeking reform.

Our focus on small and rural counties doesn't mean our work is complete in places like New York City. With New York's streets as safe as they've ever been, and justice reform leading to the lowest jail incarceration rates in decades, we and our local partners recognized that one major obstacle to achieving lasting justice reform in New York City must be removed: Rikers Island jail. In May 2017, we launched a comprehensive effort to capitalize and build upon the recent work and recommendations of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform (in which Vera played a significant, leadership role). Over the next three years, our initiative will concretely target three key opportunities to reform justice in New York City and make closing the Rikers Island jail a reality: reforming the bail system, so that no one stays in jail because they're poor; reducing the unnecessary use of incarceration, by reforming practices and developing alternatives to incarceration to help those that are disproportionately harmed, especially women and girls; and facilitating trainings, outreach, and research to educate and engage key government and community leaders in order to build support for critical reforms.

Recognizing that people with physical and behavioral health needs are overrepresented and poorly served in our city's jails, we partnered with New York City to provide improved health care for marginalized New Yorkers who come into contact with the city's courts. This included enhanced and immediate screenings by a qualified health professional and alternatives to jail incarceration for people with behavioral health needs. As a result, an estimated 601 trips to an emergency room were avoided, and the city conducted more than 35,000 health screenings.

The urgency and scale of the crisis facing our criminal justice systems is inspiring unlikely partnerships among business leaders, elected officials, and law enforcement partnerships that are driving reform and transforming communities. Throughout last year, we continued our work with the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce Criminal Justice Task Force (which includes local business leaders and is chaired by Clayton Bennett, owner of the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder) to better understand who was going to the Oklahoma County jail and why, what the challenges are, and where the opportunities lie to safely reduce dangerously high and costly levels of incarceration. The jail, built for only 1,200 people, held an alarming 2,600 people by 2015. By looking at the nearly 40,000 jail admissions the previous year, the task force learned that roughly 80 percent involved people being detained

pretrial, usually for nonviolent offenses, many of them minor. Thousands of people whose childcare and job responsibilities make it exceedingly difficult to fulfill obligations to the criminal justice system such as appearing in court or paying a fine were also jailed. As a result of our research and recommendations to adopt safer and more effective alternatives to jail, the population in the Oklahoma County jail has already fallen by 30 percent.

We also made several recommendations for justice reform in Tulsa County after examining the drivers of growth and overcrowding at the Tulsa County jail. We are working with our Tulsa partners to ensure that alternatives to incarceration and diversion programs are accessible during the earliest stages of people's cases.

We continue to make critical progress in New Orleans. In January 2017, our report *Past Due* exposed how the city's imposition of a financial cost on its users, even before they are convicted of a crime, has backfired. Though many assumed New Orleans made money by imposing bail and charging conviction fines and fees, the city actually lost millions of dollars by locking up people who are too poor to pay. In 2015, the city spent \$6.4 million to incarcerate people who couldn't pay, but collected only \$4.5 million in bail, fines and fees. Since the release of our report, we have made presentations about our findings to the Judicial Court of the Louisiana Supreme Court, the New Orleans City Council, the Louisiana Bar Association, and a number of journalists.

Finally, we continued working with several jurisdictions through the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge, which aims to reduce mass incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. For example, we assisted Milwaukee County with launching a new program that moves individuals with mental health or substance use issues out of jail within 48 hours and connects them with appropriate services and care, and we worked with Spokane, Washington to develop a new tool to help judges more effectively use safe alternatives to incarceration for individuals who commit minor or nonviolent offenses.

At a time when the promise of justice for all appears to be in grave danger from escalating attacks on immigrant communities to long-standing conflicts between police and communities of color, we are fighting to protect and restore core American ideals that are the hallmark of our democratic society: safeguarding justice for everyone, protecting vulnerable families and communities, and building a more diverse and inclusive America.

Detentions and deportations are condemning hundreds of thousands of immigrant residents to face a life sentence of separation from their loved ones, their livelihoods, and their communities. These injustices strike at the principles upon which the American legal system is based: rights of due process, equal treatment, and access to legal counsel. Our immigrant communities are justifiably afraid. By launching the SAFE (Safety and Fairness for Everyone) Cities Network, we are working to ensure that immigrants will not be detained and permanently separated from their families solely because of their inability to afford a lawyer.

More than a dozen cities and counties across the nation including Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, San Antonio, and Oakland joined us to provide universal, high-quality legal representation for people facing immigration detention and deportation. In the last year, we have worked closely with participating Network cities to set up their programs, and select and provide training for their legal service providers. SAFE Cities builds on the pioneering New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP), which Vera co-founded in 2014. NYIFUP began in New York City and has since expanded to offer legal counsel for all indigent immigrants detained and facing deportation in New York State. Our new, groundbreaking analysis of the NYIFUP program revealed that immigrants provided with an attorney can increase

their odds of a successful case outcome by 1,100 percent and that allowing immigrants to remain with their families has significant social and economic benefits.

Recent calls for increased law and order are adding to the already high level of alienation, anger, and mistrust between police and communities. In response to urgent calls for help from community advocates and police professionals, we developed and launched PEACE (Police Enhancing Accountability through Community Engagement). This innovative initiative was successfully piloted in Asheville, North Carolina, where we worked closely with the Asheville Police Department (APD) and 16 community groups (including Black Lives Matter and the Racial Justice Coalition) to carefully navigate several difficult questions about policing in the wake of a fatal, officer-involved shooting. Our facilitation led to a renewed level of understanding and trust between the APD and the communities it serves, as well as revised use of force and de-escalation policies designed to avoid tragic interactions in the future. Over the next two years, PEACE will actively assist police and community members in several cities and counties to cooperatively take a thoughtful, but critical look at police policies that could be strengthened with community input and the expertise of national policing experts. PEACE will help bolster police-community partnerships, build a foundation for further collaboration, and cultivate a strong narrative about policing based on public accountability and trust.

We passionately believe in building justice systems that advance restoration and hope instead of retribution. As part of our commitment to reimagining and transforming life behind bars, we're working to ensure that incarcerated people are given the opportunities and tools they need to learn from their mistakes, return to their families and communities, and succeed in their lives.

Over the past year, we launched a new initiative Restoring Promise that works with corrections agencies to revolutionize the way young adults are treated in adult prison. Our work began by partnering with the Connecticut Department of Corrections to open an innovative housing unit (now known as the TRUE Truthfulness, Respectfulness, Understanding, and Elevating Community) for incarcerated young adults, one that centers on family partnership, healing, peer support, accountability, and career readiness. Mentors (men serving life without parole) were selected to work in partnership with staff to support young adults at TRUE in achieving success. Staff received intensive training in key areas such as young adult development, healing-informed care, conflict resolution, coaching, and family engagement. To date, our work has achieved promising results. Before we began our work, a quarter of prison incidents like fights across Connecticut involved a young adult, but there has not been a single physical fight in the TRUE unit since it opened in January 2017. Corrections staff report greater job satisfaction, and nearly all young adults report that their time in the unit is preparing them to succeed. In the coming year, Vera will work with Connecticut to scale this new approach to all incarcerated young adults throughout the state beginning with young adults in Connecticut's only prison for women and in other states.

For more than a decade, Vera has worked with many states and cities to reduce the use of solitary confinement. Our efforts are grounded in our commitment to improving human dignity behind bars. Our accomplishments illustrate how the success of the reforms we implement with an initial set of partners can be replicated across many communities. For example, starting in 2015, we partnered with Middlesex County, New Jersey; New York City; Nebraska; Oregon; and North Carolina. Through our assistance and support, these partners have achieved impressive results, with some systems safely decreasing the number of people held in solitary by more than 50 percent over the last two years. Other sites have eliminated solitary for incarcerated young people, sharply reduced the number of offenses that are punishable by solitary, and reduced the maximum time allowed in solitary.

At the same time, we're working to dramatically expand access to education beyond high school to more incarcerated students. We're doing so with 66 colleges and 100 prisons in 27 states. Evidence overwhelmingly points to the transformative benefits of offering postsecondary education to people who are incarcerated, from decreased recidivism rates to increased economic prospects and improved community safety and well-being. People who receive educational programming in prison are 43 percent less likely to be re-incarcerated and 13 percent more likely to find a job, and education programs in prisons provide savings of up to \$5 for every \$1 spent on incarceration. In the last year, as a result of our assistance, our partner sites were able to enroll more than 4,000 students in courses, enable nearly 500 students to graduate with a degree or credential, and assist students with enrolling in college post-release.

Education offers important opportunities to people who have been incarcerated, as well as to the communities they return to. But more doors need to be opened. Too often, criminal histories and convictions create insurmountable barriers to securing housing for hundreds of thousands of formerly incarcerated individuals at the very moment when they need it most to stabilize their lives. Building on our successful work in New York City, we launched a national project to assist public housing authorities, community supervision agencies, and reentry service providers to work together to safely increase access to public housing along with providing a rich array of community-based support services for formerly incarcerated individuals. As we learned from our work in New York City, stable housing and strong support networks are critical to helping formerly incarcerated individuals reunite with their families, re-enter their communities, and rebuild their lives after release, all of which helps make our communities safer and stronger. Chosen through a competitive selection process, the six participating jurisdictions for our national initiative include Providence, Rhode Island; Springfield, Massachusetts; and the state of Colorado.

### **Emily Tow Jackson**

*Executive Director, and Board President*  
The Tow Foundation

In 2017, the Tow Foundation generously committed \$1 million in unrestricted support, over four years, to help Vera build capacity and allow for the organization to move quickly to take advantage of new opportunities for reform.

Vera has been our partner since the early days of the Foundation, said Emily Tow Jackson, executive director and board president. Over the years we've interacted in many ways, learning what our foundation's unique role can be in the justice reform movement. All along the way, Vera has been a strategic partner, a trusted partner, and an important sounding board. And their research has been tremendously valuable in our advocacy efforts.

She explained that while Tow has worked with Vera on particular programmatic areas, such as juvenile justice reform, for many years, the Foundation decided to make a special commitment now to building Veras organizational strength. Project support is really important, but so is keeping the lights on and supporting an organizations infrastructure. Its important to have a plan to be sustainable, but also to have the ability to be responsive and nimble.

Timing is also important, especially when the political climate challenges organizations like Vera to continue to pursue reform. The positive direction that criminal justice has been going in our country is clearly threatened in this moment, said Tow Jackson. We need the trusted, stalwart institutions that have been on front lines all along to be doubling down at this time.

She added: Beyond their federal work, Vera has been very influential at the state level. That deep experience on [the regional] level is so important to us. She cited Veras groundbreaking program for incarcerated young adults in Connecticut, and the organizations fact-finding trip to Germany, which helped inspire that work. They sparked change. We are a regional funder so we need partners who are working nationally and internationally. They help us to both see the challenges faced by other jurisdictions and learn from models that are working well elsewhere.

### **Laurie O. Robinson**

*Honorary Trustee*

Vera Institute of Justice

In 2017, former Vera Board Chair Laurie O. Robinson (now Honorary Trustee) and her husband Sheldon Krantz committed to a planned gift to eventually benefit the organization with a bequest from their estate.

It was very much a joint decision, said Robinson, who serves as the Clarence J. Robinson Professor of Criminology, Law and Society at George Mason University and has been involved in national criminal justice policy for more than three decades, most recently as President Obamas co-chair of the White House Task Force on 21st Century Policing. We considered very few organizations [for legacy gifts] and we thought long and hard about it. But when we came to justice reform, there was only one choice, and that was Vera.

In part, that was because of Robinsons long association with Vera, where she served as a Trustee for 13 years. But she noted that Veras own history played a role as well. Vera stands out for its innovation and its commitment, she said. You think about an organization that you know will be around when youre not, one that is working hard today but also committed to long-term impact.

Robinson said Veras national reach and model of innovation, research, pilot projects, and working directly with the public sector helped to inspire the commitment. The impact is so much broader, she said. Consider the work in policing, pre-trial release, the jails work, solitary confinement, conditions in prisons - taken separately, these contributions may seem more narrow, but together they cast a much larger shadow. They have a great impact.

She talked about the challenges now facing justice reform, especially at the national level: Institutions like Vera play a real leadership role, providing needed ballast during times when not just the government is unsettled, but so many people are unsettled. Vera keeps the focus on the role of justice in this challenging environment.

Considering what is a generational commitment via bequest, Robinson - who teaches undergraduates as well as graduate students - touched on the generation of Americans now coming of age. I think that for millennials, theres a real movement to question the fairness of the justice system. For them to be real leaders, they need an organization to show that institutions can work, and work well. That beacon of hope is Vera.

To discuss making a planned gift to Vera, please contact Jordan Kessler, Director of Development, at [atjkessler@vera.org](mailto:atjkessler@vera.org) or 212-376-3003.

The expansion of our work across multiple fronts of the criminal justice system received extensive media coverage in 2017 particularly as current events highlighted urgent criminal justice issues. Vera's work has been covered in outlets such as:

We are proud of the progress that we have made that has the potential to improve the lives of so many, but we also know that there is so much more to be done. In 2018, were committed to pursuing innovative initiatives that include:

Your continued support is crucial to strengthen us as we go forward and address difficult challenges and great opportunities.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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