

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/anchoring-reform-in-community-partnership>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Although men of color are [disproportionately impacted by the prison system](#), they're [the least likely to be in leadership positions driving justice reform](#).

As part of Restoring Promise initiative to radically transform the living and working conditions inside jails and prisons Vera partners with [MILPA](#), a grassroots organization founded and led by people who became politicized during their time in prison. As we embark on our one-year anniversary in South Carolina and prepare for our annual convening, where we'll announce new site partners, we're reflecting on a foundational tenet of our work: If nonprofits are truly committed to disrupting and reforming the criminal justice system, we need to partner with more organizations like MILPA that fight to overcome incarceration, victimization, and ongoing marginalization to realize social change and racial justice.

Many of our programs at Vera pilot solutions by working with government; in prison reform this includes working with departments of corrections. We believe that engaging courageous and willing prison leadership is critical for prison reform. Helping government leaders enact change has been Vera's modus operandi for 58 years. However, we know that relying on this alone marginalizes impacted communities in the process of driving change, depriving us of wisdom and limiting their decision-making, credit, and resources. With Restoring Promise and in other areas of Vera's work, we're intentionally centering a different kind of partnership that reflects our commitment and accountability to communities.

MILPA is an extraordinary example of the power of grassroots organizations made up of people who have been involved in the justice system to drive change. We're partnering with MILPA because of the organization's track record of using cultural healing and relationship-centered approaches to support community leadership, provide intergenerational mentorship, foster civic engagement, advance race equity, and improve health outcomes for the communities most impacted by mass incarceration. Part of what makes MILPA's work special is its roots in Uto-Aztecan philosophies, its link to spiritual elders, and its intentional leadership-building practices and indigenous cultural traditions derived from the groups predominantly Native Mexican American members. MILPA's credibility and innovation is well respected in the field of justice reform; their [recent award](#) from the Annie E. Casey Foundation is one testament.

MILPA's work has contributed to an 89 percent drop in homicides in Salinas, California, where the organization is based. Their staff brings talent and skills, honed over decades, to connect with people who are incarcerated *and* with corrections agencies, guiding a healing process that allows prison culture to change [more quickly in Restoring Promise sites](#) than through traditional technical assistance. Our movement is stronger because of the work of organizations like MILPA. Yet at the local level, MILPA staff work in neighborhoods alongside other people of color who are marginalized, criminalized, and branded gangsters. MILPA members purposely include people formerly involved in gangs on their staff because they're well positioned to organize in their community. Our partnership reminds us daily of what nonprofits risk intentionally or unintentionally when our efforts aren't driven by the communities it is our mission to center.

MILPA is our partner in every sense of the word. We share funding streams and make all decisions about our research and other work in prisons together. We recruit and train staff as part of our four-person leadership structure: two leaders from MILPA and two from Vera. Cultivating our relationship took over a year's worth of time, sensitivity, discussion, intentionality, and cultural humility. We're learning to build across lines of race, class, gender, geography, white supremacy culture, and lived experience. Vera's partnership with MILPA requires us to look inward: Are we really ready and able to share power? White supremacy culture trains us to fear not listen to, trust, or follow the leadership of impacted people. *But this movement is not possible without their leadership: they are experts.*

Our partnership with MILPA necessitates that we face these questions head-on. This means sitting in healing and discussion circles with each other for courageous conversations, developing rapport, cultivating trust, and building solidarity. It's in this circle process that we've adopted shared decision-making processes and distributive leadership practices, and it's where we continue to address whiteness and foster healing. We don't have all the answers. We're imperfect, seeking, learning, and growing every day together.

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