

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/remembering-rick-kern>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I met Rick Kern soon after I started working at Vera in 2008. Rick had a long-standing relationship with Vera, and he served as an associate with Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections for many, many years. Rick was our go-to guy on just about every sentencing and corrections topics: sentencing commissions, risk assessments, pre-sentence investigations, sentencing guidelines, and fiscal impact statements, among others. When I routinely called him with what I thought was a quick question, I would hang up the phone 30 minutes or an hour later thoroughly tutored in whatever the topic had been and equipped with the resources I needed to learn more.

Rick was always willing and happy to let us parade him around to policymakers and practitioners in states and counties across the country, with the goal of convincing them that they too could reform their system and base it on data and good sense. The examples he offered, drawn from his work as director of the Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission, represented what I came to call the Cadillac version of reform. But given that most jurisdictions just get by with a used Saturn (e.g., filling out paper-based, customized pre-sentence investigation reports in 10 percent of the cases), Rick knew that a brand new Cadillac (e.g., standardized, automated pre-sentence assessments in 100 percent of the cases) may seem to many to be beyond reach. That's why Rick never let the perfect be the enemy of the good and gladly worked with other states to improve their systems one step, one upgrade at a time.

Rick was, to the very end, an inspiration to us at Vera and to all whom he met in the field. His work remains the model we offer to others, especially his pre-sentence assessment tool and mandatory fiscal impact statements. The articles by and about Rick in the most recent issue of the [Federal Sentencing Reporter](#) celebrate Rick's accomplishments, remind us of his unique and memorable character, and serve as a useful resource for our work moving forward.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.