

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/safeguarding-justice/what-were-doing-to-transform-life-behind-bars>

Annual reports

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.

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