

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/in-memoriam-tom-clements-vera-partner-and-friend>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The Vera Institute of Justice mourns the loss of Tom Clements, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, who was shot and killed at his home on March 19, 2013. The Vera family is shocked and saddened at this tragic news, and our hearts go out to Director Clements' family, friends, and colleagues. Many of us had the opportunity to work with Tom some of us for many years. Most recently, he was a key leader and partner in Vera's European-American Prison Project, an initiative funded by the Prison Law Office which aims to advance an international dialogue around what works in corrections and stimulate reform efforts in the United States. Just last month, as part of this project, several Vera staff members had the privilege of spending a week travelling with Tom and the Colorado delegation, along with our other partners in the project, to tour prisons in Germany and the Netherlands.

"We are heartbroken by this news," said Michael Jacobson, president and director of Vera, who was on the European trip last month. "Tom was a thoughtful and dynamic leader, not only of his agency but as an important and influential national voice in the field of corrections. In addition, he was simply a lovely, warm, generous and thoughtful man."

Director Clements is deservedly recognized for his openness to smart and efficient corrections reform, which he brought to Colorado, where he came to help transform its system. Clearly, he was a great asset to the state. In just two years, he made significant progress in reducing the use of segregation, improving reentry, working with challenging populations such as gang members, and tackling the needs of the mentally ill and elderly incarcerated persons. After the trip to Europe, Tom and his team were eager to start planning and implementing ways to better prepare offenders to reenter the community, for instance with a mother-child unit and strategies to encourage inmate savings.

Most importantly, Tom was a deeply kind and thoughtful person whom we were fortunate to have had the opportunity to know. He will be deeply missed. According to Peggy McGarry, who directs Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, "Tom Clements was exactly the kind of gentle, kind, and good person who you want in charge of prisons. He only wanted what was best for those in his care with no desire to control or hurt anyone. His smile was warm and reassuring, his intelligence quick and apparent. It is beyond comprehension that anyone would want to hurt this good man."

Below, we share some of the thoughts and remembrances of our colleagues who worked with Tom on the European-American Prison Project. We will add to this list as other colleagues contribute to it.

This is such sad and horrible news. On the recent visit to Germany, Tom was a very interested and open-minded person and I would have loved to meet him again either in Germany or elsewhere. Let us take this event as a challenge to further humanize prisons and society as a whole in order to reduce violence. My deep sorrows are with his family and friends. **Frieder Duenkel** *Professor, Department of Criminology University of Greifswald, Germany*

On behalf of the men and women of the Georgia Department of Corrections, I would like to extend our sincerest sympathy after learning of the tragic death of Colorado Executive Director Tom Clements. The death of a fellow member of our law enforcement family is an extremely emotional experience that affects us all. While words are not enough to express our feelings, we hope Tom's family, friends and colleagues take comfort in the knowledge that the sorrow of their loss is shared by members of law enforcement.

Our department recently had the honor of working with Tom while on a Vera Institute European-American Prison Project in Germany. Division Director of Administration Becky East and Director of Probation Operations Stan Cooper represented the department on the trip and worked closely with Tom as they traveled through Germany. During their time with Tom, it was apparent that he dedicated his life to corrections and reform. He was an outstanding public servant.

Tom will be truly missed. He was kind and considerate and we were privileged to have had the chance to work with and know him. **Commissioner Brian Owens** *Georgia Department of Corrections*

We are at a loss of words and cannot believe what happened. Right away there was a close connection between Tom and me. We had comparable positions and problems, and a never-ending list of topics of conversation and a deep understanding of each other. For me and us, he was warm hearted, very intelligent, open minded, interested in everything he saw and heard, kind, humane and last but not least a man with a wonderful sense of humor. Without doubt a true leader. Please be assured that we will not forget him. **Joerg Jesse** *Director General Prison and Probation Administration, Acts of Clemency Ministry of Justice of Mecklenburg - Western Pomerania, Germany*

The whole field is just shocked. It's devastating. Tom was well respected especially as a leader and a voice of reason who showed that it's okay to be a head of corrections and care about people. A kind, gentle, and brilliant man who will be missed personally by staff and colleagues alike, and whose contributions will be missed for some time to come.

When there's a senseless tragedy like this, it makes it the dangers of our chosen profession very real. When you're tasked with dealing

with folks society says aren't safe, there are risks. However, Toms focus was clearly not on the risks, but the rewards to improving his system.

In our time together in Europe, we were both touched by how much humanity was ingrained in their system and discussed at length how to bring that back to our own. The other take away we shared was how well the Europeans enacted and synthesized the body of research as to what works throughout their system, from sentencing to release. We were quite motivated by the possibilities in our own systems, and Tom felt like he had the staff in place to achieve it.

Our thoughts are with those impacted by Toms death both in his personal and professional life. **John Wetzel***Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Corrections*

This was, and continues to be, an unbelievable turn of events. Tom was a good man whom I believed was going to bring significant reforms to benefit the inmate population in Colorado. He will be missed. **Doug Wilson***Colorado State Public Defender*

"I hope you will accept my sincere condolences on the tragic death of Tom Clements whom I met during your stay in Germany, Neustrelitz. I was the interpreter during the day and in the evening accompanying your group. Together with our Minister of Justice and Tom and John Wetzel we had a lively and so interesting discussion that evening. I was shocked to read the news yesterday. Please pass my sympathy to all the members of the delegation and to Tom Clements' family. He was a great man with passion for his job." **Uta Brauhardt***Interpreter (Germany)*

Barely a month before his tragic murder, we met Tom as part of a multi-state delegation touring prisons in Germany and the Netherlands. During that intensive and fascinating experience, it quickly became clear that Tom was an innovative leader who worked diligently to protect the public through both humane incapacitation and meaningful rehabilitation. In his professional life, Tom was the embodiment of his Departments Vision Statement: To Build a Safer Colorado for Today and Tomorrow. We were struck by Toms intellect, passion, dedication and good humor. Our hearts go out to Toms friends and family and we join them in mourning his loss. **Mark H. Bergstrom***Executive Director, Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing***Steven L. Chanenson***Chair, Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing, Associate Dean for Faculty Research and Professor of Law, Villanova University School of Law*

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