

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/where-do-innovative-program-ideas-come-from-lessons-from-ohio>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Vera's approach to innovation relies heavily on research and stakeholder involvement: surveying existing proven practices and consulting with government officials, service providers, and the people served by the system. Input from stakeholders is an especially critical source of the ideas and inspiration that drive innovation. However, in the corrections field, involving the people served by the system is easier said than done. Their valuable insights into what works on the ground are often overlooked because they get few meaningful opportunities to advise program developers over the life of a project from inspiration and implementation to sustainable operation.

Vera's recent work developing and operating the [Ohio Green Prison Project \(OGPP\)](#), in partnership with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC), has been a notable exception. OGPP is a pilot project that will ultimately combine [Roots of Success](#), a work readiness and environmental literacy curriculum, with certifications in green industry careers and connections to community colleges and employment partners after release. The laboratory and classroom for this work is the prison itself where people who are incarcerated learn by bringing green practices (such as, weatherization) and, eventually, technologies to the facility where they reside thus producing energy-related cost savings, which can then be reinvested to sustain the program.

The OGPP concept came from a young woman, Malar, incarcerated at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW). With the support of her siblings and enlightened warden, Sheri Duffey, the concept found its way to Vera. But soon thereafter Warden Duffey was transferred to the Southeastern Correctional Institution (SCI) where the project ended up being incubated. Twelve men serving long sentences at SCI were the first incarcerated people to complete the Roots of Success train-the-trainer course and become certified facilitators. As they taught others, the men identified a number of issues with the curriculum that wouldn't work in prisons (for example, activities involving the Internet, computers, maps, etc.) and their feedback resulted in the development of a version specifically for use in detention facilities. They also redesigned the data tracking for the program and identified better classroom space.

Their efforts so impressed ODRC, that Roots of Success has been expanded to six other facilities, including ORW. Just last month, Malar at last got her turn to be a part of the project she conceived. She completed the training and is now a certified facilitator. Like the men at SCI, Malar and the other women in the program are already putting their stamp on it. A particularly novel idea they had, which will be implemented at ORW, is to offer the program as part of the orientation process so being green is established early on for incoming women as an essential part of the prison culture.

Another program in Ohio initiated and operated by people in prison demonstrates what is possible when the ideas of those served by the system are listened to. Men at Marion Correctional Institution (MCI) approached staff about starting a recycling program. With incredible support from a single staff member, they opened their sorting center in April 2011 and soon were diverting 25 to 30 tons of trash from the prison each month. Not only does this operation employ more than 150 men incarcerated at MCI, it saves the facility more than \$1,000 a month in waste management costs. The center has also developed a partnership with a local recycling company through which they earn revenue sorting and compacting bulk loads of plastics. The revenue is reinvested in supplies for the operation and hygiene products and other perks for the recycling team. The men run this initiative like a successful business and are quick to show visitors extensive charts documenting items, weights, earnings, cost savings, and monthly comparisons for every commodity processed. They have even assisted ODRC in the development of recycling standards to be replicated statewide.

Do you know of other examples where corrections have fostered the good ideas of those served by the system? Please share your stories.

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