

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/my-brothers-keeper/the-value-of-family-visits>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Much of my work in Veras Family Justice Program focuses on understanding the impact of staying connected to family for people who are incarcerated and helping our government partners to identify policies and practices that enhance opportunities for family connections during peoples incarceration or their transition home. It seems intuitive that familybroadly defined to include all supportive peopleis critical to the long-term success of incarcerated people as well as to ensuring public safety. But intuition is not always enough to incentivize policy change, and for that we have a growing body of evidence that measures the impact of family involvement with[in-facility outcomes](#)and[recidivism data](#).

It is encouraging that the recent report to President Obama from the My Brothers Keeper task force places family connection as a central recommendation. Among the task forces recommendations is a focus on outcomes for children of incarcerated parents and a request that government help incarcerated parents enhance their parenting and other skills while providing more opportunities for them to stay connected with their families. There are two ways we can respond to this call to action quickly and without much cost: 1) provide relationship classes within correctional facilitiesespecially ones that focus on parenting, and 2) provide as many opportunities as possible for visiting, phone calls, and other forms of family contact.

We[know](#)that helping parents who are incarcerated has long-term benefits for their children. Parenting classes can be a cost-effective way to provide people who are incarcerated with tools they can use when they return. Classes that allow for parents to practice what they are learning are especially effectivefor example, the[Baby Elmo program](#), which the Ohio Department of Youth Services has implemented, uses video-based learning to prepare parents for their childs visit and has impressive results on the relationship between parents and their children and on parents achievement while incarcerated.

In all of the work of Veras Family Justice Program, incarcerated individuals and their family members are consulted about the role of families and contact during incarceration in order to inform our recommendations. Overwhelmingly, we hear that in-person visits are the preferred way to keep in touchthough visitation comes with challenges, and can be cost-prohibitive when families have to travel long distances. My Brothers Keeper recognizes that one way to address these challenges is through technology. Televisiting programs, also known as video visitation programs, use technology to create opportunities for families who cannot visit in person to stay connected. In the most innovative programs, video technology is being used not only for visitation but to also to update families on the progress in programming for a person who is incarcerated orto help children in the foster care system maintain ties to their biological parents.

Vera is currently[studying the role for technology](#)to support family connections in partnership with Washingtons Department of Corrections. Washington has committed to offering this technology without reducing support for in-person visitationin direct response to the needs and preferences of incarcerated people and their families. We look forward to learning how this project in Washington can support the My Brothers Keeper recommendation.

Veras [My Brothers Keeper](#) blog series provides insights from Vera staff and other experts on the recommendations President Obamas task force released in 2014, as part of [a progress report](#) on the My Brothers Keeper initiative. We invite your comments.

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