

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-t-r-u-e/how-connecticut-reimagines-prison-for-young-men>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Tell me something youve learned while youve been here.

Is this an exchange between a teacher and students? A workplace retreat?

No. The question was asked in a prison by Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy, sitting in a circle with four people who are incarcerated there. But its not any prisonits a new unit at Connecticuts Cheshire Correctional Institute called T.R.U.E. The acronym, developed by unit staff, embodies the goal and vision for the unit: Truthfulness (to oneself and others), Respectfulness (toward the community), Understanding (ourselves and what brought us here) and Elevating (into success).

T.R.U.E. is a groundbreaking model that reimagines incarceration for young men aged 18-25an age where neuroscience tells us young people are still developing in important ways and there is opportunity to ensure they develop into successful adults and community members. Its the brainchild of Connecticuts Department of Correction Commissioner, Scott Semple, with the strong support of Governor Malloy, who has been a national leader in justice reform. And it stems from a U.S. delegation to Germany led by Vera two years ago. There, we saw how a system designed in the wake of a terrible legacy has rooted itself in the concept of human dignity, and what that looks likefor all those impacted by the justice system, including the people locked up, staff, families, victims. One of the things we observed was that young adults were living in special facilities working with specially trained staff with access to age-appropriate programmingyoung people practicing strategies to help them manage their emotions, learning how to cook, obtaining job skills, and having time to relax, interact with animals, and socialize with their peers.

It is extraordinary that in less than two years, many of those ideas became a reality in Connecticut. Over the past 9 months, Vera has been proud to partner with CT DOC to design and implement this pilot unit for incarcerated young adults 18 to 25. It changes the culture of corrections by drawing on lessons from American juvenile justice, international examples, and academic research. The design process was data-driven and grounded in principles of race equity to ensure that young adultsan age group where we see the most striking racial imbalance in prisonhave access to opportunities they need to succeed. The program model itself and implementation strategy was centered on the voices, experiences, and recommendations of the people most directly affected by conditions of confinementthe incarcerated young adults and front line staff.

But not only did Commissioner Semple and Scott Erfe, the warden of Cheshire, inspire, train, and support staff for the new unitthey sought mentors among those in prison who are serving life without parole. Twelve of those who applied were selected and trained, and now live as paid mentors on the unit with 28 mentees (a number that will grow to 70 over a few months).

Already, in a few short weeks, there are many stories to tell. Over the next few months, in Dispatches from T.R.U.E, were going to take you behind the scenes to hear from a warden who went from skeptical to super-supportive, a mentor who describes being trained along with stafftwo groups he describes as typically more divided than Republicans and Democrats, and the Vera team and what we see on the ground. And especially the young men living in T.R.U.E and their experienceslike making a first snow angel. Or holding a daughter for an hour for the first time on family engagement day.

Were still in the first months of the pilot, but the early returns are encouragingfor Connecticut and beyond. We look forward to sharing them with you.

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