

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/what-change-looks-like-for-vera>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The Department of Justice released powerful recommendations to reduce solitary confinement. President Obama told us why it mattered in a *Washington Post* [top-ed](#) the same day. The Chuck Colson Task Force [outlined changes](#) that would if heeded reduce the federal prison population by 60,000. Just a few of the things that happened last week. [And](#) while Washington was buried under two feet of snow.

For those of us working to reform our justice system, these are heady and fast-moving days.

We're cranking away at Vera, too. We're leaning into our strategic priorities to close mass incarceration's front door (jail reform, if you missed that metaphor); dramatically improve conditions of confinement; and promote safety, trust, and justice for communities of color, the coming new American majority. Some of what we're doing is visible, and some behind the scenes. But it's all designed to advance our mission of tackling the most pressing injustices of our day. If this makes you wonder what this looks like in action, have a peek at [what we did last year](#).

Speaking of [our mission](#), we've recently revised it to reflect not only how and why we do the work we do, but the values that drive us. On Friday, we're kicking off our [See Justice speaker series](#), which aims to explore how a commitment to human dignity is essential to a system of justice. We begin with a compelling talk by my friend, Alan Jenkins, president of the Opportunity Agenda. I hope you will be able to [attend](#) this Friday or [watch](#) the livestream. Upcoming speakers as long as we're talking about it include Scott Semple, Connecticut's Corrections Commissioner, and artist Mark Strandquist, creator of the [Windows from Prison](#) project, among other justice-related exhibits. They all reflect the energy we feel at Vera at this critical time for driving change.

You'll see that energy reflected in the coming months in how we actually look well be launching a new website in the summer, using the latest technology and tools to engage a growing audience. And if you stop by our office in downtown Manhattan, you'll see some extraordinary new murals designed to inspire us and our visitors in this challenging work.

Last and most certainly not least, I can't talk about everything we are doing without focusing on our staff. Our staff is the only reason we are able to do what we do. It is incumbent on us to make sure ours is a great workplace, and the way we see it, you can't really be a change agent unless you're an employer of choice.

So, as part of an ongoing initiative to hold ourselves to that standard, Vera announced yesterday that we are expanding our paid family leave policy in two significant ways. First, it is not only just for new parents anymore. Second, we are expanding it from four to six weeks. Now, any staff member will be eligible for up to six weeks of paid leave time for any reason under the Family and Medical Leave Act. This includes caring for an elderly parent, spouse, or child; as well as for the birth or adoption of a child. This change reflects a broader institutional commitment to provide benefits that make a difference to our diverse staff. It reflects a desire to create a productive and secure work environment that respects the balance between home and work we all must strike. Everyone should have the right to care for a sick family member or newborn without risking their economic security.

The new policy was inspired by the leadership of New York City, which in December [announced](#) its own six-week paid parental leave policy, and builds on it. We hope that paid family leave will soon be the norm. We think that these changes which strengthen *our* community will strengthen our ability to build justice systems that are fair, promote safety, and strengthen communities.

I hope you like what you're reading. Watch this space for more.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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