

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/annual-report-2019-a-vision-for-change>

### Annual reports

A Vision for Change

Dear Friends,

Last year, I wrote that we are living in a paradoxical moment, replete with immense challenge and big opportunities. 2019 proved no different. Assaults on justice and human dignity have continued to escalate, and the rhetoric of hate and division has not subsided. With growing urgency, we see our nation's highest values—justice, dignity, and the rule of law—at risk.

At the same time, we're seeing an escalation in calls for our nation to end its decades-long experiment in harsh punishment, racial injustice, and unfairness. Regular Americans and government leaders of all political persuasions are embracing the belief that we must radically reduce the breadth and depth of our criminal justice system if we are to be sincere in our proclamation of equal justice under the law.

Here at Vera, we understand that this groundswell of support has not developed in a vacuum. It is the result of tireless work by advocates, activists, reformers, and government leaders who believe that we can and must reimagine our justice system to be rooted in human dignity. This is why, for more than 60 years, we have worked from the ground up to build partnerships and test bold solutions to make this vision of justice a reality.

The need to bring solutions to scale has never been more urgent and Vera is rising to the occasion. Across the nation, we are building movements to ensure equal justice for all that are grounded in the knowledge and experience of what works. We're partnering with state and local governments to radically transform conditions of confinement for young adults—mostly young men of color—to embrace healing, restoration, and mentorship instead of punishment and retribution. We're working to ensure that all incarcerated people have access to postsecondary education so that they can restore their lives and improve their ability to provide for themselves and their families. We're empowering reform-minded prosecutors to take major steps towards implementing a more fair administration of the law. And we're creating a network of jurisdictions that are committed to ensuring their immigrant communities are protected and safe and that everyone detained and facing deportation has access to a lawyer.

The challenges we face today are likely to continue. But I am immensely hopeful that the foundations of reform being laid across this country—in rural towns and large cities, in blue states and red states—will only strengthen and accelerate our momentum for change.

This progress would not be possible without the tireless work and dedication of our staff, as well as our supporters, and I am eternally grateful to all of you. It is because of you that we are able to do this work, not only envisioning but implementing that vision of a humane and significantly smaller justice system.

Thank you,

**Nicholas Turner**  
President and Director  
Vera Institute of Justice

Friends,

2019 saw a continuation of attacks on our nation's ideals of equal justice. Hostile, hateful rhetoric aimed at immigrants and people of color endured and domestic terrorism and violence based on racial hatred grew. The challenges we face are daunting and the work ahead of us is immense.

Yet even in this environment of division and fear, there is reason to hope. For example, 2019 saw a continuation of far-reaching reforms and progress in our pursuit of a smaller, more humane criminal justice system. I am proud of Vera's role in these efforts.

In New York State, Vera partnered with advocates to increase public pressure and momentum for change, as well as worked with government leaders to demonstrate that bail reform is not only possible, but actually feasible. This approach was critical to an astonishing outcome: the New York State legislature passed some of the most sweeping criminal justice reforms in five decades—a move that will dramatically overhaul the state's bail system and has the potential to end mass incarceration at the local level.

Similarly, Vera worked in New York City at the forefront of the movement to close for good the horrific Rikers Island jail complex.

With support and pressure from advocates, reformers, and communities, the New York City Council cast a historic vote in favor of legally mandating that no jails exist on Rikers past 2026. The council also approved construction of four smaller new jails to replace decrepit and inhumane facilities in four of New York City's boroughs.

Vera's work not only in New York, but across the country at the state and local levels in jurisdictions that span the geographical and political spectrum is a testament to our nation's broad support for reform. It is also a testament to our nation's rejection of hate and divisiveness even when it comes from the highest levels of government and its embrace of humane immigration policies and common-sense solutions to crime that protect both public safety and human dignity. I am confident that Vera will continue to be at the forefront of this progress, as it has been, in partnership with government and community leaders, for nearly 60 years.

After more than 25 years as a Vera trustee, this will be my last year as chair of Vera's Board. I am immensely proud of the work that my fellow trustees and Vera staff have done and the progress we have achieved. I know that I am leaving Vera in very capable hands, and I look forward to seeing the continued advancement of equal justice for all as Vera moves into 2020 and beyond.

Thank you,

**John Savarese**  
Chair, Board of Trustees  
Vera Institute of Justice

We partnered with local communities, advocacy organizations, and government entities in eight states to develop strategies to safely reduce incarceration and increase community investment.

We spurred the passing of historic reforms in New York State that will shrink the statewide jail population by 40 percent.

Our work in New Orleans helped the city reach an extraordinary 80 per- cent reduction in its jail population over the last 13 years.

In three jurisdictions across the country, we supported reform-minded prosecutors by equipping them with the tools they need to reduce over- incarceration, end racial disparities, and advance equal justice for all.

Transforming conditions of confinement for young adults, we expanded our Restoring Promise initiative which promotes healing, restoration, and mentorship rather than punishment and retribution to six states.

Bolstering our national campaign to overturn the federal ban on Pell Grants for students in prison, we secured \$5.7 million of financial aid for incarcerated students in five states.

Working to ensure that all immigrants facing deportation have access to due process and legal representation, we grew our SAFE Network by 50 percent, to 18 jurisdictions across 11 states.

Sparking a fundamental dialogue about the role of police in our communities, we designed and launched an innovative data visualization tool that collates and analyzes key policing data across regions, states, counties, and agencies.

With offices in four major cities and projects in more than 40 states, no other justice reform organization in the United States can equal Vera's unique combination of wide-ranging expertise, national reach, and capacity to create breakthrough ideas and implement solutions at scale to transform lives and strengthen communities.

Vera's fight to end mass incarceration nationally is fueled by our strategic work focused on small cities and rural communities, which are grappling with the nation's highest rates of jail incarceration and prison admissions. While major cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, and Philadelphia have dramatically reduced their incarceration rates, our research shows that many smaller communities across the country are moving in the opposite direction. It is critical that we respond to this shifting geography of incarceration. Otherwise, our progress toward ending mass incarceration may be eroded by deepening problems in overlooked communities across the country.

Although the challenges facing rural America today are widely covered in the news, the dramatic rise in jail incarceration remains a missing piece of the discussion. Vera's In Our Backyards initiative is working to stop the rise of incarceration in small towns and rural communities. Over the past year, our team has worked with local advocacy organizations and government stakeholders in a range of states (Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas) to develop strategies to safely reduce incarceration and invest public dollars in supporting communities. In some communities, this work called for Vera to provide updated data on prison and jail populations at both the county and state levels, research on local causes of incarceration, and information about best practices. In other places, it involved facilitating discussions with key stakeholders including justice activists and organizers, government and corrections officials, and families about alternatives to incarceration. Vera also deepened our support of local battles against mass incarceration by awarding grants to 11 community-based and statewide organizations in seven states to help expand and sustain this work. Over the next year, working in 10 states with high rural jail populations, Vera will expand our engagement with and support for local communities and government partners seeking to fight jail expansion and overincarceration.

Vera is committed to transforming an unfair justice system in which too many are incarcerated not because they pose serious risks to their communities, but simply because they are too poor to pay for their freedom. This unjust burden is also disproportionately harming communities of color, with studies showing that Black people are more likely to pay higher bail amounts and less likely to be released without bail. The problem of bail, fines, and fees has captured the attention of the American public and media in a way not seen in half a century, and bold litigation and advocacy by civil rights lawyers and organizers have built powerful momentum for change. Vera is

harnessing this energy by actively collaborating with local justice systems across the country and partnering with advocates at the state and local levels to curtail the use of money bail, fight the criminalization of poverty, and stem the overuse of jail.

**Home win!** In a huge victory, Vera and our allies spurred sweeping reforms passed by New York State this year that will dramatically curtail the use of pretrial detention and cash bail, overhaul rules for the sharing of evidence, and strengthen measures to ensure a persons right to a speedy trial. If implemented effectively, these historic reforms should drive a 40 percent reduction in the statewide jail population. Vera helped lay the groundwork by providing advocacy groups and community organizers with data analysis, research, and strategic guidance to support their work toward key reform priorities. In January, we also organized a two-day statewide convening attended by more than 60 advocates and people impacted by the justice system to facilitate discussions and generate strategies around issues ranging from bail reform and fighting new jail expansion to sentencing and parole reform. As the issue of bail reform gains even more momentum nationwide, other places will look to New York as a model.

**Down 80%! In New Orleans** where our team has worked for more than a decade Vera helped develop reforms allowing people under arrest to be released without bail when they are not a threat to public safety and can be counted on to appear in court. These reforms have led to an extraordinary 80 percent reduction in the citys jail population over the past 13 years. To build on this work, earlier this year Vera published *Paid In Full: A Plan to End Money Injustice in New Orleans*, a detailed roadmap for completely eliminating the practice of bail, fines, and fees in New Orleans and bringing equity to the citys justice system. Developed in close collaboration with city officials and 32 community-based organizations, the proposed plan has the potential to make further dramatic cuts to the citys jail population and save \$5.5 million in taxpayer money in the process. As we support the movement for nationwide change, Vera is demonstrating a better way that improves the system, benefits the public, and serves the cause of justice.

Rikers Island, a jail complex built on land owned by a notorious New York judge involved in the slave trade, has for almost a century been a stain on the humanity of New York City. While the number of people held on the island has fluctuated from a high of more than 20,000 people in the early 1990s to fewer than 7,000 today it has always been a warehouse of human suffering and misery. People who are locked up simply because they cannot afford bail or are held on minor parole infractions such as missing a curfew or an appointment. People with mental illness, for whom jail only makes them sicker. Women, for whom alternatives to jail are too few. Everyday New Yorkers, with families, jobs, and lives in the balance. One universal observation by both those incarcerated and those employed at Rikers is that the level of violence, the poor housing conditions, and the lack of meaningful programs and opportunities are unconscionable.

In 2016, City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito tasked the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform colloquially known as the Lippman Commission after its chair, Judge Jonathan Lippman to study the problems of Rikers Island and make recommendations for change. Vera played a key role on the commission as a research and thought partner to the organizations on the frontlines of closing Rikers Island and reforming New Yorks criminal justice system. We participated in coalition meetings, shared data and knowledge, and learned from our partners to inform our research and writing. After a year of careful inquiry, the commissions recommendation was unequivocal: Rikers Island is a stain on our great City. We have proven that more jail does not equal greater public safety. We must close the jail complex on Rikers Island. Period.

Nearly three years later, in a historic vote on October 17, 2019, the New York City Council approved the construction of four new jails by 2026 to replace the decrepit, decaying facilities that currently exist in the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan a significant first step in the decades-long battle to close Rikers Island. The council also approved a cap of no more than 3,300 jail beds citywide, which will shrink the capacity to incarcerate by 76 percent from the 14,000 beds available today. In addition, the council approved a legal mandate ensuring that no jails will exist on Rikers after 2026, along with significant investments in community-based services and alternatives to incarceration. The city council vote this October marked a turning point, not only in the trajectory of criminal justice reform in New York City, but also in the vision of what is possible.

As important and historic as the vote was, however, the hard work to close Rikers Island is not over. In fact, it is just beginning. Throughout this difficult journey, Vera has worked closely with government and community partners to capitalize on the momentum to establish a transformative vision of justice in New York Citys neighborhoods and criminal justice system that is rooted in human dignity. As we move into the next chapter, we will continue to partner with the mayor, the city council, advocates, and reform-minded leaders to safely and dramatically shrink the number of people behind bars, make significant investments in the resources and programs that help neighborhoods thrive, and finally make good on closing Rikers Island once and for all.

Our criminal justice system sweeps far too many people into its net particularly over-surveilled communities of color, as well as people who are poor or those who cope with substance use and mental health disorders. With 2.2 million people behind bars, America is an outlier in incarceration even as crime across the country has declined precipitously. At Vera, we work to end mass incarceration and to make the system drastically smaller. At the same time, we refuse to neglect the 2.2 million people who are currently warehoused in our jails and prison spaces that are generally cramped and unhealthy, without natural light or fresh air.

Young men of color and their families bear a disproportionate share of this burden of incarceration a sadly predictable fact in a country where racial oppression has persisted for generations. People incarcerated in our nations jails and prisons rarely benefit from the education, care, and training that could help them develop and succeed. Deprived of positive human contact, they live on the edge, hypervigilant to the possibility of violence around them and more likely to contribute to violence themselves as a result of living in such dehumanizing conditions. The result is a vicious cycle of punishment and brutality that shatters lives, devastates families, and leaves all of us less safe.

Contrast this with a typical day for an incarcerated young man living in a Restoring Promise unit. He wakes up to the ring of an alarm clock, walks out to breakfast, and is greeted by his community to start his day. He studies, meditates, or learns financial literacy on a computer in one of the many former cells that have been converted into rooms painted with the faces of President Barack Obama, Mahatma Gandhi, and Maya Angelou. He checks in with his mentor, a man serving a life sentence who lives on the unit and provides support and guidance. Later, he will play chess with a corrections officer before seeing his family. The staff in charge will stop by to let his mom know how he is doing and answer any of her questions.

As the stories of Shyquinn Dix and hundreds of others prove, it is possible to change the status quo of mass incarceration. Our Restoring Promise initiative is pioneering a groundbreaking model that prioritizes family engagement, self-expression, peer support, personal growth, education, and career readiness for young incarcerated people. This work is helping build a national movement that is fundamentally disrupting the brutal culture, design, and routines that currently define prisons and jails in the United States.

Vera is working hand-in-hand with corrections facilities in six states, red and blue, north and south, to ensure that those most impacted by the justice system incarcerated young adults and frontline corrections staff are supportive partners in reform. The young residents in Restoring Promise units report feeling much safer, more hopeful, and more connected to their families. Staff feel safer at work, experience fewer job-related physical and mental health issues, and find greater meaning in their work. Over the next three years, Vera plans to expand this program to a total of 10 state corrections agencies.

To build on this work, Vera is organizing international study tours of prisons in Germany and Norway two countries at the forefront of humane corrections practices. Continuing a practice we began in 2013, these trips are bringing together thought leaders and decision makers from corrections, government, advocacy, media, and philanthropy to visit prisons and talk with European experts about ways to transform corrections and justice systems in the United States around core principles of human dignity. Past trips have proved transformative to participants, and our goal is to create a movement of leaders committed to building and supporting corrections units across the country based on the Restoring Promise model and to engaging new allies in support of this work. Vera is also amplifying the voices of young people living in Restoring Promise units by telling their stories in traditional and social media. Vera's goal is nothing less than the transformation of American prisons and the realization of a hopeful vision of what American justice could and should look like.

**What?** College counts in prison. Powerful stories like Aminah Elsters (see page 17) demonstrate what Vera's research has definitively shown: expanding access to college in prison prepares incarcerated people to get good jobs and be successful when they're released. We know that more than 90 percent of incarcerated people will eventually come home to their communities and that education is one of the best tools to help them succeed over the long term. Pell Grants are federal financial aid grants for low-income students. Over the last two years, Vera's leadership and support have helped our partners in the U.S. Department of Education's Second Chance Pell program successfully enroll 11,000 incarcerated students across 27 states in college classes each year and more than a thousand of those students have already graduated with a degree or credential.

**Why?** We're making important progress, but we will not be satisfied until the opportunity to take college classes in prison is much more widely available. Our research shows that removing the federal ban on Pell Grants for people in prison would, on average, increase employment among formerly incarcerated students and boost combined earnings among all formerly incarcerated people by \$45.3 million in the first year of release. This is why we launched Unlocking Potential, a national campaign dedicated to the full and permanent reinstatement of Pell Grant availability to all incarcerated people by 2020.

**How?** As part of our campaign, more than 80 corrections leaders, college administrators, and formerly incarcerated students joined Vera staff on Capitol Hill in July to educate congressional leaders about the benefits of postsecondary education in prison. Members of our delegation met with 104 congressional offices, and members of Congress personally attended 36 of those meetings. Over the next two years, Vera will educate key congressional committees responsible for oversight of the Higher Education Act reauthorization bill, through which the Pell Grant ban could be lifted. And we will continue to use our communications channels to press for systemic change.

On the state level, Vera is working to overturn barriers to college in prison in Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, and Tennessee. We successfully secured a total \$5.7 million per year in financial aid for incarcerated students in these states. And in each state, we have partnered with local leaders on the ground including colleges teaching in prisons, corrections departments, reentry advocacy groups, formerly incarcerated students, and others to inform and support their work to expand access to state financial aid for incarcerated students. As with Vera's efforts on Capitol Hill, we are working to spread the word about the value of states expanding access to college in prison in influential local media outlets and on social media channels.

**A black box.** For far too long, prosecutors have exercised power in ways that have fueled mass incarceration and racial injustice. This historic overreliance on locking people up, rather than addressing their underlying issues, has not made us safer. And it has brought disproportionate harm to the most vulnerable members of our communities: people who are poor (especially people of color) and those with histories of substance use or mental health issues, as well as their families and communities.

The good news is that these issues are rising to the forefront, as communities demand a new approach to justice through the election of reform-minded prosecutors in high-profile races across the country. To support this growing movement for change, Vera's Reshaping Prosecution program is equipping prosecutors with the tools that they need to deliver on their campaign promises to end mass incarceration, reduce racial disparities, and increase transparency and accountability to the communities they serve. We are using in-depth analysis and training to inform prosecutors' decision making, measure progress, and fuel transformation in culture and practice within prosecutors' offices at all levels, from the executive office to frontline staff.

Vera also connects with community leaders and organizers many of the people who have helped to elect reform-minded prosecutors to help each prosecutors' office shape top priorities for reform. We are already working with offices in Burlington, Vermont; Contra Costa County, California; Kansas City, Kansas; and St. Louis, Missouri, and we are expanding the program to three additional jurisdictions in early 2020.

**Centering racial equity in prosecution.** Vera has also partnered with the Institute for Innovation and Prosecution at John Jay College to bring together 25 racial justice scholars, reform-minded prosecutors, and key stakeholders in a new effort called Dignity, Racial Justice, and Prosecution. Together, this group of experts is confronting the ways traditional prosecution dehumanizes people particularly Black and Latinx people, forging a vision for reform, and formulating a practical plan for prosecutors to uphold human dignity and pursue racial equity. Importantly, their work has been shaped by the expertise of advocates and people impacted by the justice system. By next year, this group will launch a multimedia toolkit of actionable guidance for prosecutors, which Vera will pilot with three partner offices.

**Combating attacks against Black women prosecutors.** Finally, although most reform-minded prosecutors face opposition from

police unions and other stakeholders seeking to maintain the status quo, lead Black women prosecutors implementing change have faced an unprecedented level of racialized and gendered attacks. These have included law suits, appointments of special prosecutors, and racialized intimidation including death threats, use of racist language, and even a noose that was delivered to one prosecutor. This virulent outbreak of intimidation led Vera's team to organize a retreat in August for 12 Black women prosecutors. Designed to create a space for these women to regroup and strategize, the retreat included opportunities for professional support and sessions with experts on navigating hostile political environments. On September 13, Vera convened a meeting of more than 30 leaders to coordinate additional support for the communications, legal, and funding needs of Black women prosecutors. Vera continues to lead this coordinated effort to provide ongoing support.

The desperate situation at our nation's border and in immigrant communities all across America is nothing short of horrific. Detentions, deportations, and family separations happen every single day. Many people are left facing the terrifying prospect of navigating the complexities of immigration law alone, simply because they cannot afford or get access to legal counsel.

However, for Mariana and hundreds of immigrants with similar successful outcomes, an attorney was a crucial last line of defense that enabled them to access their rights, keep themselves safe, and stay with their families and communities. And these success stories are consistent with studies showing that immigrants who have legal counsel are more than 10 times more likely to establish a right to remain in the United States than those who do not. This fact is what drives our efforts to sustain and expand our SAFE Network, a partnership of local governments, legal service providers, and advocates dedicated to defending the rights of immigrants facing detention and deportation in their communities. We share a bold and ambitious goal of achieving universal representation to ensure that everyone at risk of deportation has access to due process and high-quality legal representation, even if they cannot afford an attorney.

Over the last year, as indiscriminate immigration enforcement and inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric have continued to escalate, Vera grew the SAFE Network by 50 percent, bringing this work to a total of 18 partner sites across 11 states. This work has helped put the issue of universal representation on the map, and we are now taking full advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to build a national movement to achieve widespread and lasting change. Over the next three years, Vera will expand SAFE to a total of 25 jurisdictions and work with local government partners to expand and sustain public funding for legal representation programs. We will expand our partnerships with national and local advocates in the immigrant rights movement and ramp up our use of polling, media, and social media to support our partners and build broad national public support for reform. Vera is committed to this urgent work over the long term, and our team will not rest until our country has established a system of universal representation that protects the rights of all immigrants facing deportation.

Today, someone is arrested every three seconds, and American policing is at a difficult crossroads. Its overreliance on punitive enforcement and arrest has significantly contributed to mass incarceration, racial inequities, and fractured trust between police and the communities they serve, especially communities of color. To fundamentally reimagine the role of police in our communities, arrests should be monitored carefully and used sparingly, and alternatives must be explored and implemented. To further this end, Vera designed and launched Arrest Trends, an innovative data visualization tool that collates and analyzes key data on various law enforcement-related indicators. Arrest Trends features interactive infographics, charts, and a 50-state map that allow users to explore policing trends over time for a selected agency, county, state, or region and compare those results to other locations or agencies. By making this information accessible to policymakers and the general public, Arrest Trends has begun to generate dialogue about the role of policing and police-community cooperation, underscore how local decisions about enforcement can act as a driver of mass incarceration, and highlight alternatives that might better address the root causes of crime. Arrest Trends is helping fuel our work to transform the culture of policing from one that focuses on punitive enforcement to one that delivers equal justice for all through active community engagement.

Public misperceptions and corrosive messages about justice in the United States must be challenged and disrupted if we are to succeed in achieving systematic change. Understanding this, narrative change is a core goal in Vera's fight to reimagine and transform America's dysfunctional and inhumane justice system. In this work, we are actively integrating communications campaigns into our programs to advance powerful, galvanizing narratives about the need and opportunities for reform.

Our first Restoring Promise site, the T.R.U.E. (which stands for Truthfulness, Respect, Understanding, and Elevating) unit at Cheshire Correctional Institute in Connecticut, was featured by 60 Minutes in a lengthy segment on March 31. The story featured interviews with people living and working at T.R.U.E. It also highlighted Shyquinn Dix, a recent graduate of the T.R.U.E. unit who is now a thriving student-athlete at the University of Maine at Presque Isle.

Vera's President Nicholas Turner was interviewed by NBC's Lester Holt as part of a televised town hall at New York's Sing Sing Correctional Facility that aired nationally on MSNBC in September. The town hall was part of NBC's *And Justice for All* series focused on criminal justice reform and mass incarceration in America. Speaking with Turner at the town hall were entertainer and activist John Legend and former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch (who was honored at Vera's annual gala this year).

*Through Their Eyes*, a collaborative multimedia project coproduced by Vera and the people involved with our Restoring Promise unit at the Middlesex Jail and House of Correction in Billerica, Massachusetts, launched in May. A dynamic collection of videos, photographs, audio recordings, and essays, *Through Their Eyes* tells stories of reform from the perspectives of those who live and work inside the jail walls.

This year, Vera's *In Our Backyards* initiative published a series of online reports to draw media and public attention to the fiscal and human costs of jail incarceration in communities across rural America. *Keeping the Lights On: Incarcerating the Bluegrass State* explores how incarceration has been used as a tool for economic development in Eastern Kentucky as the region's coal revenues have dried up. *This is By Design: Jail, Justice, and Race in Southwest Georgia* shines a light on the toll that high rates of incarceration and post-release supervision have taken on residents of Georgia's small and rural communities and charts criminalization's role in the state's long history of

exploitation, repression, and systemic racism.

Vera, and the justice reform movement, lost a champion this year with the death of Fred Patrick, director of Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections (CSC). A powerful mentor to many Vera staff members, Fred was a passionate and tireless advocate for a more just and humane criminal justice system. He joined Vera in 2012 to lead our efforts to provide incarcerated people with access to a college education. In 2015, Fred was elevated to director of CSC, where he led a team committed to centering human dignity in corrections by cutting the use of solitary confinement, reducing the jailed population, and increasing access to public housing for people coming home from prison. Thousands of people throughout the country are thriving today as a direct result of Fred's visionary work and commitment to justice.

After almost two decades of working near City Hall in the Woolworth Building and almost six decades since our founding with the Manhattan Bail Project, Vera moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Our new home, at Industry City in Sunset Park, reflects some of the things moves often mean for organizations. We've grown; we need more room. Our old space no longer served the needs of our workforce or the way we work. We're also being smarter with money. Our move means we're saving \$15 million in costs over 15 years of critical resources that can go to support our mission instead of paying rent.

But our move means far more than that. At a time of increased momentum for justice reform, Vera's new offices are designed to provide inspiration and foster the collaboration and bold thinking necessary to reimagine the American justice system and drive its needed transformation. On the walls are works of art by formerly incarcerated artists and Brooklyn-born artists who have dedicated their work to social justice. Heroes from John Brown to Linda Brown, from Rodolfo Corky Gonzalez to Kitty Cone, from Marsha P. Johnson to our own founder Herb Sturzuger are on the walls.

Vera Reform Leadership Council member

Vera Reform Leadership Council member



When Lili Lynton began working with education nonprofits in the late 1990s, she noticed a particular phenomenon that made a lasting impression: there were always quiet conversations in school communities about those who were not there—fathers, brothers, uncles, and sons who were incarcerated.

No one would talk about it publicly, she recalls. The stigma of incarceration was so pernicious. But it was clear that entire school communities were impacted, that the cohesion knitting families together in more privileged schools was often missing. It was a moment of real clarity for Lynton, a veteran philanthropist, investor, and entrepreneur. The idea that the system was purposely unjust hadn't occurred to me. But it was.

Lynton has made a major multiyear philanthropic commitment to Vera and is a member of Vera's Reform Leadership Council, a diverse group of social justice leaders, philanthropists, and experts from civil society who serve as advisors to and ambassadors for our work. Her commitment to Vera stems from her understanding of just how difficult the problem of mass incarceration is to unwind. Injustice permeates the whole system, and it's such a large and complex system.

Lynton's success in business informs her views on justice reform as a large, systemic problem: I believe in distributing money where the problem gets solved. Vera does a great job at analyzing all dimensions and deciding where change is possible and most impactful. She is the co-founder of The Dinex Group, which operates 17 Daniel Boulud-branded restaurants. Prior to forming Dinex, she co-founded digital banking pioneer Telebank and formerly served as an investment analyst at Sanford Bernstein and Lehman Brothers.

Vera is important for the way it looks at incarceration holistically, says Lynton. It informs public opinion and works closely with elected officials and people working within the system. You have to work deeply enough in the system to inspire a culture change in both places or you end up with more conflict and little ability to implement real change.

Lynton is particularly involved in supporting Restoring Promise, Vera's initiative working directly with residents and corrections officers to transform the culture, climate, rhythms, and routines that define life in prison starting with young adults. In many ways, it's restoring the future for these young people, restoring the opportunities that are available to them, their families, and their communities. The scale of this project also has tremendous appeal. As Vera establishes dozens of units in five different states, the impact is impossible to ignore. People inside the system begin to reimagine how their institutions and cultures can change.

Through the Reform Leadership Council, Lynton is encouraging others to support Vera's work. At Vera, she says, everything arcs toward

justice, nothing gets lost in the noise.

By Caron Butler, Two-time NBA All Star and Vera Trustee

By Caron Butler, Two-time NBA All Star and Vera Trustee



Many people know me as a former NBA star, but I am also someone with a deep personal connection to Vera's mission. I believe so strongly in Vera's work that I came on board this year as a trustee and am lending my voice in support of the campaign to end mass incarceration.

This is a critical time for justice in the United States. The movement to fix our justice system has great momentum and bipartisan support, but is still in its earliest days. Last year, overall incarceration rates in the United States decreased by only 1 percent and, in 22 states, those rates actually increased. Like the Civil Rights movement, this movement needs big, early investors and many more partners to achieve its aims and turn around a massive, dysfunctional system that has been built up over 50 years.

I know on a personal level how great the need is. Before I was a Big East player of the year, first-round draft pick for the Miami Heat, and two-time All Star, I was an incarcerated young man. Thanks to some good people in my life, I was lucky and given a hand up. I was not destroyed by the experience like so many who are pushed deeper into an inescapable cycle of disadvantage, exclusion, and unresolved trauma. I have been able to fulfill my potential as a businessman, commentator, author, athlete, and family man. I'm also putting my shoulder into helping advance the Vera Institute of Justice's important work to end mass incarceration.

Just as Jim Crow was not only a set of laws but a whole system, the far-reaching tentacles of mass incarceration are the biggest barriers facing poor people and Black and brown people today. The effort to end mass incarceration is the Civil Rights movement of our time.

To be clear, I'm not talking just about the 2.2 million people who are incarcerated in jails and prisons in the United States—more than in any other country in the world. It's also the 4.5 million people on probation and parole, and the overreliance on arrest to address social and mental health problems, and everything in between. There are 10 million arrests a year in this country or one every three seconds, and this has to change.

Fortunately, leadership and innovation at the local level are not just an essential part of the solution (everyone needs to do their part); they also create models that can be replicated elsewhere. Better data and analysis, strategic communications, narrative change, lifting up the voices and leadership of people who have been incarcerated, and policy and practice solutions are all part of the path forward.

For me, it's about changing the system from one that destroys whole families to one that helps them succeed in society and fulfill their potential.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.