

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-vision-for-change-insha-rahman-kica-matos>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Earlier this year, [Kica Matos](#), a lawyer, community organizer, and advocate for immigrant communities for decades joined Vera as the new director for the [Center on Immigration and Justice](#). At the same time, [Insha Rahman](#) former director of Vera's project [Greater Justice NY](#) became the newest member of Vera's leadership team as the director of strategies and new initiatives.

Insha and Kica lead work that expands on Vera's primarily inside lane role as a partner to government leaders and lawmakers. Their work represents a new approach for our organization working not only in collaboration with government to move policy, but also in partnership with local advocates and activists to push for change.

We sat down with Kica and Insha to discuss their careers and visions for change.

#### 1. Tell us about yourselves and your careers. How did you get to Vera?

**Insha:** Professionally, criminal justice and legal reform has been all I've known. Two decades ago, when I was in college in upstate New York, I took classes at a nearby men's prison, Green Haven. As hackneyed as it sounds, that experience was transformational. Until then, I had never set foot in a jail or prison or even given much thought to the way the law treats people differently. The second transformational moment was 9/11. As a Muslim, South Asian immigrant from a community that historically was seen as a "model minority" in this country, suddenly I understood what W.E.B. DuBois meant when he said of Black America, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Once you see something, you can't look away. That's how I feel about the injustices of our legal system and it's what inspires me in this work.

**Kica:** I'm an Afro-Boricua organizer. I'm convinced that I was born a feminist! I'm also a mother, a wife, and an active member of my New Haven community. I've always been involved in social justice in different ways: I've worked as a death penalty lawyer, a non-profit executive director, a deputy mayor for community services, a foundation executive for a progressive foundation, and an organizer. And now I'm here.

**Insha:** I didn't have nonprofit or executive experience before coming to Vera. I worked here for two years before law school and I immediately understood what a special place it is the harnessing of research, the remarkable access to government partners, and the unique platform from which to support and drive change.

After I received my law degree, I worked as a public defender in the Bronx for several years. I loved that job. It gave me a sense of purpose to stand next to someone and shoulder some of the weight of a system that all too often crushes people. People ask what inspired me to move from public defense back to policy and research work at Vera. Burnout? Frustration at chipping away at a system case by case? For me, it was neither of those things. I found that being a public defender gave me a tremendous daily joy and satisfaction, but what was missing was the chance to inspire wholesale reform at scale. The criminal justice field is at such a moment of unprecedented opportunity right now that it felt right to switch gears. I've now been back at Vera for almost four years. I'm so grateful for the chance to work in a moment that feels urgent, in a field that feels hopeful, and with colleagues and friends who have grit, determination, and a commitment to upending and changing our justice system.

**Kica:** I agree with Insha on inspiring wholesale change. Before Vera I was at the Center for Community Change, heading up the immigration and racial justice work and helping to lead the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, the nation's largest coalition of state-based immigration advocacy groups working to build a national immigrant rights movement committed to fighting for positive change in our nation's immigration laws. I came to Vera because it is an extension of this work. I get to work with a great team to help build system level solutions that could potentially impact significant numbers of vulnerable immigrants during a time of crisis.

#### 2. Kica, most people in the field know you as a fierce and effective organizer. Why does Vera make sense for you right now?

We're living at a time when our democracy is in danger. Not just that. Human and civil rights are threatened across the board whether in voting rights, violence targeting religious communities, or issues of over-policing in Black and brown communities. When it comes to the plight of immigrants, things just keep getting worse. Children in cages, women being told to drink from toilets, people dying in detention centers. Families being separated at the border.

We should all heed the words from German theologian Martin Niemoller's poem "First They Came for the Socialists." If we as a nation do not solve the anti-immigrant problem, we risk the very existence of the experiment that is our democracy.

Vera makes sense to me because as an institution it is uniquely situated to do some of the things that I think are critical. We need to build tools to protect immigrants, work with governments that want to provide strong protections for immigrant communities, and strengthen the ties between police and communities. Making true the ideals of our nation is the work of Vera and where I want to be.

#### 3. Insha, you mentioned that you used to work at Vera a while back. How has it changed and what is the same?

I worked at Vera as a young pup in my mid-twenties as the first staff member of the then-newly created Center on Immigration and Justice (CIJ). Yes, the same Center on Immigration and Justice that Kica is now leading at Vera! Back then, Vera saw itself as an organization that partnered primarily with government and that's still very much our modus operandi. But what feels different now is that as an organization I think we're much more aware of, and feel accountable to, others beyond our government partners advocates and organizers, others in the field doing this work, and, importantly, people and communities who are directly impacted by the justice system. While that may sound like a small and potentially semantic shift, I actually think it's a seismic one. It impacts how we plan and follow through on our work, think about outcomes and accountability, and how we define success and failure.

#### **4. Kica, what are you most excited about for Vera and our immigration work?**

First, let me just say that I'm excited to be working alongside bad ass women like Insha! Seriously Insha, the way that you have so generously shared of your ideas, your resources, your wise counsel have really helped create a very welcoming and vibrant environment for me at Vera. You've been of tremendous benefit to CIJ.

I'm also really looking forward to building out the work that CIJ has been doing, and finding ways to bring a more intentional advocacy lens. Vera has worked to create a framework for a universal system of legal representation for immigrants facing deportation and I'm dedicated to helping make this a reality. CIJ staff also want to do more in the immigration space in a way that connects to our already existing work including working to end the civil detention of immigrants, adding our voices to those arguing for the need for independent immigration judges, and tackling the pernicious intersection of criminal law and immigration law.

#### **5. As a veteran Veran, Insha, what have you done in the past four years here that you're most proud of?**

I'll start by answering more broadly what I'm most proud of as a Veran, and that is my colleagues. People are what makes Vera the organization it is. Given her humility, I know my saying this will make Kica cringe a little, but I've known of her and her reputation in the field as a fierce and incredible advocate for years. That she is bringing that experience to Vera is such a compliment to us. And I'm lucky to feel that way about so many of our colleagues.

In terms of things I'm personally proud of, one is the role we played in helping to pass historic bail reform legislation in New York earlier this year. I'm both proud of the law itself and also the partnership and collaboration with advocates, elected officials, and others that it took to make it happen. The second thing I'm most proud of is still a work in progress. In my new role at Vera as the director of strategy and new initiatives, I'm helping to create a center of gravity around advocacy and lobbying to use those tools, in addition to our standard ones, to help drive our work further and to be even more effective in what we do.

PRESS RELEASE

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