

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/keeping-communities-safe-through-data-driven-innovation-is-the-theme-of-vera-educational-forum-on-capitol-hill>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Former Attorney General Edwin Meese provides opening remarks at Vera's June 12 Congressional Forum. Dakota Fine

Now is a critical time for discussing problems and opportunities in the criminal justice system, said former Attorney General Edwin Meese in opening remarks at a Vera Congressional Forum titled, Protecting our Communities: Getting the Facts for Effective Public Safety Solutions, held on June 12, 2013, at the Capitol Visitors Center in Washington, DC. Mr. Meese set the stage by endorsing innovation that uses data-first approaches to tackle over-criminalization, improve sentencing, develop prisons that turn people out better than they come in, and provide the formerly incarcerated with incentives to stay out of prison.

In future years, people will look back at this time as a real renaissance in the criminal justice system, said Denise O'Donnell, director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance at the U.S. Department of Justice, who kicked off the afternoons first panel, A Data-Driven Approach to Reform. She pointed to bipartisan efforts that span the justice system, including pretrial process, policing, community corrections, and justice reinvestment.

Other panelists included Luceia LeDoux, vice president of Public Safety and Government Oversight at Baptist Community Ministries in New Orleans; Peggy McGarry, director of Veras [Center on Sentencing and Corrections](#); and Jim Parsons, director of Veras [Substance Use and Mental Health Program](#).

Ms. LeDoux described how using data in New Orleans high-crime environment is helping to reform the city's justice system. She pointed to efforts such as Veras expedited screening which, in two years, has reduced the average time people who have been arrested are detained in jail awaiting charges from 60 days down to just six. Ms. McGarry provided a history of data gathering in the justice system and how its use has been, an essential component for making communities safer with efforts such as justice reinvestment. Mr. Parsons noted that government agencies hold vast amounts of data that can help inform policies aimed at saving money while keeping communities safe but that they need better tools to share and use the data that is available to them. As an example, he spoke about research his team has done to enhance data sharing between community health providers and correctional agencies, which may reduce both health disparities and recidivism.

The second panel, Faith, Family, and the Future, turned to some inventive public safety efforts that aim to prevent justice system involvement in the first place, as well as limit the collateral consequences of conviction. Panelists were Eugene Schneeberg, director of the Center for Faith-Based & Neighborhood Partnerships in the Office of Justice Programs at the U.S. Department of Justice; Craig DeRoche, president of the Justice Fellowship; Margaret diZerega, director of Veras [Family Justice Program](#); and Fred Patrick, director of Vera's [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project](#).

Father is a verb, said Mr. Schneeberg, who described the holistic approach his program deploys to reduce or even prevent justice system involvement by promoting responsible fatherhood and preventing youth and gang violence. Mr. DeRoche followed by saying that, the crime people committed wasn't their problem, it was their solution. Noting that the 65 million people in the U.S. who have been incarcerated have the potential to change and actually become a powerful asset, he pushed for programs that provide mentors or person-to-person supports.

Data needs to be balanced with values, said Ms. diZerega. She described the creative work that Veras Family Justice Program is doing to build on social supports and family strengths, such as a program with the Housing Authority of New Orleans that recognizes the resources families provide at the point of reentry, and to test protocols for reuniting people returning to the community from jail with their families in public housing. Mr. Patrick described Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education, a project with strong bipartisan support being piloted in three states (Michigan, New Jersey, and North Carolina), which is providing postsecondary education to inmates in prison starting two years before release, and continuing in the community for two years after, with the goal of helping them obtain a degree or certificate. While the project focuses on education, Mr. Patrick said, its aim is to create vibrant and safe communities.

At the reception following the forum, several Members of Congress provided remarks on ways to keep communities safe that reflected the themes of innovative and data-driven solutions, including Senator Sheldon Whitehouse from Rhode Island, Representative Bobby Scott from Virginia's 3rd District, Representative Grace Meng from New York's 6th district, and Representative Hank Johnson from Georgia's 4th District.

A correction has been made to the original version of this post to reflect the role of expedited screening in reducing the time from charge to arrest in New Orleans.

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