

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/eliminating-money-injustice-in-new-orleans/how-new-orleans-communities-rise-up-against-money-injustice>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In this series on money injustice in New Orleans, we're speaking with experts and advocates on the need to fundamentally rethink the use of money bail and conviction fees which bear a disproportionate burden on poor communities and communities of color. Vera's recent report [Paid in Full](#) highlights the landscape of money injustice in New Orleans and provides a roadmap for how the city could become the first in the nation to eliminate both money bail and conviction fees. The report and roadmap are endorsed by 32 local organizations, who have partnered with Vera in calling for change. These organizations, local leaders, and staff from Vera New Orleans will convene [for a public event on July 3](#) co-sponsored by Vera, RFK Human Rights, and Global Citizen to highlight the urgency for change and uplift the voices of those most impacted by money injustice in the city.

Previously, [we interviewed Paid in Full co-author Alison Shih](#) and [local community activist Roy Brumfield](#) from Stand with Dignity. This week we spoke with Gilda Lewis, a New Orleans native who has been organizing community support for families impacted by incarceration for more than 35 years.

1. Can you describe some of the work you do to help people in your community who are incarcerated, or impacted by incarceration?

I work with people who have folks that are in jail; I also work with an at-risk youth program, for children of incarcerated folks. We do all sorts of things: locating donors for school supplies; hosting giveaways, suppers; locating people to prepare food, deliver food. It's a community effort. You have to wrap your arms around the folks that are affected to keep the other folks from being *effected* you know what I'm saying?

Sometimes I raise money or donations. I make a list and I find some folks, I go to bar owners and I say we're doing a supper for someone in my neighborhood, someone went to jail, we need to pay his bail money to get him out. But it's not just supper, it's school supplies, it's uniforms, it's field trips. Because the grandmother had to go to court and she was signed up to do the field trip.

2. So you help your neighbors in any way you can, but also help to raise bail money when needed?

It's all of those things. Sometimes I raise the bail money. Sometimes other people raise the bail money, but then they've depleted their resources that were already budgeted for uniforms, electric bills, etc. So I'm helping folks with all the things that contribute to living a standard quality of life.

When you go to jail you have utility bills not paid, you have automobile insurance, or you have bus passes, or you have school uniforms, or lunch money. All of those things are depleted. So somebody has to be on the ground running to try to put those things back in rotation. If I'm not directly raising money for the bail, I'm helping you use your money and I'm gonna help you supplement to do whatever else. There's a community of people who are on the ground running, who will get together and raise money.

3. Can you talk more about how you got involved in doing this work and how long you've been doing it?

I was raised in the old Magnolia housing development C.J. Peete before it became Harmony Oaks. And we were neighborly, we didn't have a lot, but my mom always believed in buying large quantities of everything. She didn't buy a 5-lb. bag of sugar, she bought a 10-lb. bag and she would buy two, because when the neighbors would come for a cup of sugar, she would give them a bag.

I was raised in a giving and sharing household. I grew up in a communicating family, a family that shared because they cared, a family that cooked because so and so's mama worked overnight. I wondered why she was cooking two piles of beans it was because she was gonna send half the pot next door.

Then when I was young, one of my jobs was at Century City, EOC. That was a neighborhood organization that advocated for people, and I was a receptionist assistant. When I would answer the phone I would hear all kinds of stories about people wanting to come in and volunteer, people who wanted to be on neighborhood watch, people that wanted to work with the youth programs so I grew up around community organizing. I've been helping people as long as I can remember.

4. Vera recently released a report *Paid in Full* that lays out a roadmap for how New Orleans could become the first city in the nation to eliminate money injustice. Can you talk about how money bail and conviction fees impact your community?

First of all, the minimum wage, the living wage, is not substantial enough for people to live a quality of life that's decent. And if you're arrested, now you have another bill. People are struggling to pay daily living requirements: light, gas, and water. So if you are set up to add another bill which you don't have the means to satisfy, what do you do?

It dont make sense. Youre paying for freedom. Who does that? I just dont understand it. Its like robbing Peter to pay Paul. You dont have a job, or your job is not paying you a decent wage, and then what little you have, you have to give it to buy your freedom. It makes you think, I got to get this money by any means necessary if Im going to stay free.

5. How do you think New Orleans would change if Veras reforms were implemented?

If they eliminated bail and conviction fees, its less stress. My community will be healthier, itll be safer, and people will have more rational decision-making. When you ask somebody for something that they dont have... well, here we go again were raising money. Its a cycle. Its a vicious cycle thats created by the criminal justice system to keep you down. How can you come up? You cant come up because you dont have the money. You still have to pay the fine, pay the fee, and you still have to get to work. Somethings going to go undone. Its a lose-lose situation.

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