

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/embracing-human-dignity>

Policy Issue Resources

Annual Report 2018

Dear Friends,

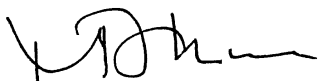
We live in a paradoxical moment, replete with both immense challenge and big opportunities. We watch with dismay an escalation of rhetoric and actions that fuel hate and resentment, hostility toward people of color and the poor, and contempt for rationality and humanity. Attacks on human dignity in America are unprecedented for this generation.

But it is not as if people are just watching. These threats have spurred a growing movement that seeks to reflect and restore our nation's promise of equal justice. Despite daunting challenges, we have an unprecedented opportunity to reverse America's decades-long exercise in harsh punishment, racial injustice, and unfairness. Poll after poll demonstrates that Americans everywhere, and of every political persuasion, are seeking change. Elected leaders across the country are calling for it as well. And we are living in a historic moment for activism and organizing. Black Lives Matter, the Women's March, #MeToo, and Times Up. School walkouts and #NeverAgain. People standing up for DREAMers and separated families. As activism continues to grow, so too does the imperative to translate the desire for change into real, far-reaching reforms. This is where we, at Vera, come in.

We are stepping up to meet this challenge by doubling down on our commitment to reimagine our country's justice system in ways that are grounded in human dignity. We are building restorative correctional environments for young adults that are inspired by lessons learned in Europe and informed by people who are incarcerated and prison staff. Around the country, more immigrants are home supporting their families and contributing to our communities, thanks to our national effort to expand legal representation and protect the right to due process for immigrants facing deportation. We are helping reform-oriented prosecutors to safely end their overreliance on incarceration and confront the painful legacy of institutional racism. Fewer people suffer in jail many because they are too poor to pay bail thanks to our work with New York City, Oklahoma City, New Orleans, and Philadelphia. And we are turning our attention to the small and rural counties that are now huge drivers of jail incarceration.

Today's threats to justice haven't deterred us. Instead, we are energized to meet these challenges with experience, determination, and optimism. I am grateful to our dedicated staff members, who have invested their talent and expertise in the struggle to relentlessly defend justice and human dignity. In addition, I want to thank all of our friends and supporters, who continue to stand with us in these extraordinarily challenging times. It is your generous and committed partnership that empowers us to pursue bolder and more ambitious opportunities to secure justice for all.

Thank you,



President & Director

Friends,

2018 proved to be another challenging year for America. We saw the continued rise of divisive, racist rhetoric aimed at dehumanizing immigrants and people of color. We also saw a rise in domestic terrorism and violence based on racial hatred. The divisions in our country are deep, and the solutions to overcome them are daunting.

Yet, through the persistent, dedicated work of our talented and tireless staff, Vera has been on the front lines of efforts to respond to these threats. Together with the support of my fellow Trustees and many others across the nation, Vera took action and again to advance equal justice for all.

When the federal government decided to end an essential immigrant legal services program that is administered by Vera, we mobilized a coalition of advocates, experts, and congressional leaders to advocate for the reversal of that decision and we won.

When the family separation crisis at the southern border exploded into the national spotlight, Vera and our partner organizations responded rapidly, developing a hotline that helped facilitate family reunification by connecting detained immigrant parents with the lawyers serving their children a tool that has allowed nearly 300 family members to find each other.

When dehumanizing, tough on crime policies were promoted at the highest levels of government, Vera pushed forward our work to end mass incarceration and promote an approach to incarceration that is centered on human dignity.

We know that there will be many more challenges ahead in 2019. And yet, we remain optimistic. The wave of bipartisan reform at the state and local level continues to grow, as more ordinary Americans and government leaders across the political spectrum embrace humane immigration policies and common-sense solutions to crime that protect both public safety and human dignity. For example, Florida voters recently restored the right to vote to people convicted of felonies who have served their sentences, thereby re-enfranchising approximately 1.4 million of their fellow Floridians, and Louisiana voters did away with non-unanimous juries, a relic of the Jim Crow era.

Vera is leading the way on many of these reforms, and we remain persistent in our commitment to advancing the bedrock American values of justice, fair treatment, racial equity, and due process. Indeed, our persistence and optimism stem from more than 57 years of driving reform in partnership with government and community leaders. I am proud of Veras achievements and am certain that Veras leadership in ensuring equal justice for all will continue well into 2019 and beyond.

Chairman, Board of Trustees

Here at Vera, we reject the myth that changing the oppressive culture of our prisons and jails is impossible. We're working to radically transform incarceration in America by replacing punishing practices with an approach that prioritizes compassion, true accountability, healing, restoration, opportunity, and hope.

In October, the groundbreaking final report from Veras Reimagining Prison project traced the role that our country's legacy of racial oppression has played in shaping mass incarceration and presented a compelling vision of what it would mean to place human dignity at the core of our criminal justice system. To mark the release of this report, we organized a convening at John Jay College of Criminal Justice that featured a powerful simulcast discussion with incarcerated young men and corrections officers. Filmed inside the T.R.U.E. unit in Connecticut—the first site in our Restoring Promise initiative—the discussion provided a tangible example of what can be achieved by a radical reimagining of prison. The T.R.U.E. unit, opened more than 18 months ago at the Cheshire Correctional Institution, provides a restorative justice model of incarceration for young adults aged 18 to 24—a model that prioritizes fairness, choice, safety, and restoration over retribution. Since opening in 2017, there have been no acts of violence there. Staff members report a greater sense of calm at work and improved job satisfaction. Young adults in the unit feel safer, more prepared to succeed, and more connected to family.

The power of T.R.U.E. has inspired us, and we're building a movement based on its remarkable success. Our Restoring Promise initiative has now grown to a total of five units across three states. But we are not stopping there. Following our Reimagining Prison convening, we brought a diverse delegation of more than 30 corrections leaders and advocates committed to justice reform to visit German and Norwegian prisons that are explicitly rooted in human dignity. They came back inspired, and we are continuing to work with them to expand Restoring Promise and change the narrative about who we incarcerate and why.

Our focus on transforming conditions of confinement and creating a system rooted in human dignity also drives our work to make postsecondary education in prison available for everyone who is eligible and wants it. Why college in prison? Justin Roslonek, a formerly incarcerated student, explains it best:

This work to increase access to education in prison is spreading across the nation. Over the past year, as the national technical assistance provider to the Department of Education's Second Chance Pell initiative, we continued to work with 65 colleges and universities in over 100 prisons in 27 states. In just two short years of facilitating this program, our partners have enrolled more than 10,000 students in college-level courses and empowered more than 1,000 to graduate with a postsecondary degree or credential. Now, we're pairing this effort with a national campaign to cultivate broad public support for postsecondary education in prison at the state and national levels with the eventual goal of repealing the federal ban on Pell Grants for students in prison.

As we work to expand restorative justice and education for those in prison, we work just as hard to end harmful practices like solitary confinement.

Every day, approximately 60,000 people are held in solitary confinement in America's prisons, and since the 1980s, our prisons and jails have increasingly relied on this cruel practice to maintain order. But solitary can damage, sometimes irreparably, people who experience it for even brief periods of time, and it stops incarcerated people from developing the skills they need to successfully return to their communities.

That's why we are stepping up our work to sharply reduce the use of solitary. In the last year, we worked with corrections officials in five states—Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Utah, and Virginia—to help them adopt policies and practices designed to establish solitary as a rare last resort. We helped close the infamous solitary unit at the Louisiana State Penitentiary and helped Virginia launch a new program that diverts people with serious mental illness to safe alternative programs. Moving forward, we will seek to partner with a total of seven jurisdictions to reduce their use of solitary by at least 25 percent by the year 2020, and 50 percent by 2023.

Alleviating the harmful toll of incarceration extends far beyond prison. Across the country, particularly in rural counties and small towns, local jail populations have grown at alarming rates. Intended to house people awaiting trial who are deemed to be a danger to society or a flight risk, jails have instead become massive warehouses in which too many are incarcerated simply because they are too poor to pay bail. This burden of jail incarceration disproportionately impacts communities of color, with black people jailed at almost four times the rate of white people. This is why Vera is at the forefront of a powerful movement to sharply curtail the use of jail and local incarceration.

To ease the burden of these unfair bail practices, our Greater Justice New York initiative launched a bail assessment pilot in the Bronx and Queens that provides judges with a tool to assess a person's ability to pay when setting bail. So far, in a third of cases where the tool was used, judges either imposed a more affordable bail amount, or set no bail at all. At the same time, we continued our efforts in many other cities and counties to help communities dramatically reduce their jail populations. Our work helped Philadelphia surpass its

original, three-year jail population reduction goal in less than two years. In Tulsa County, Oklahoma, our work helped to achieve in just one year an 18-percent drop in the jail population which had grown by nearly 400 percent over the previous four decades.

While earlier narratives on the growth of incarceration focused almost exclusively on large cities, our research has shown that it's now the nation's 2,600 small towns and rural counties that are the biggest drivers in jail incarceration. In partnership with Google.org, we expanded In Our Backyards, our effort to raise awareness of the human and financial costs of incarceration and inspire action to curb the overuse of jails, especially in smaller cities and rural counties. Our online resource hub provides information about the number of people in jail for every county, stories that illustrate the dehumanizing impact of incarceration, and new polling data that shows broad public support for justice reform. In the coming year, we will continue conducting research in small towns and cities and work with local communities to craft solutions that can help them safely and effectively reduce their overreliance on incarceration.

Most people end up in jail because a prosecutor recommends it. Prosecutors most of whom are elected wield an amazing amount of power.

This year, Vera launched Reshaping Prosecution, the latest, most ambitious chapter in our longstanding work on prosecution and racial justice. This data-driven project is designed to help reform-minded prosecutors adopt practices that combat the overuse of incarceration, address racial inequities, and advance equal justice in their communities. Work is underway in St. Louis; Contra Costa County, CA; the 16th Circuit Court District in Mississippi; and Jacksonville, FL with plans to expand soon to additional jurisdictions. We are also partnering with local community leaders in each place, to ensure that prosecutors better communicate with the people they serve. Our new online tool Unlocking the Black Box of Prosecution provides both community members and prosecutors with guidance on concrete opportunities for reform.

How often do we have the chance to safely and effectively end a form of incarceration altogether?

It's rare, but we now have an unparalleled opportunity to stop the arrest and incarceration of girls across the country a practice that especially impacts girls of color and Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Questioning, Transgender, and Gender Non-Conforming youth. Tragically, most girls in the juvenile justice system are incarcerated for low-level offenses like truancy that pose no risk to public safety and that are often rooted in histories of trauma and abuse. Instead of providing girls with the help they need to recover and heal, the system simply locks them up. In response, we are partnering with advocates and government leaders in New York City; Philadelphia; Santa Clara County, CA; Maine; Hawaii; and North Dakota to provide alternatives that ensure well-being and safety for girls in their communities.

We are fighting to disrupt the tragic, ongoing legacy of bigotry in our justice system, and to ensure that everyone is guaranteed due process and protection under the law. Our work is built on our passionate belief that equal justice for all is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of our democracy, not a hollow promise or an empty slogan.

The current federal administration has vigorously escalated its efforts to frame immigration as a threat to our country's security and values. Tragically, these policies have embodied a dehumanizing mixture of cruelty, chaos, and incompetence. This became evident as the family separation crisis unfolded on the border, with more than 2,300 children estranged from their families. Sadly, this mirrored what has already been happening across the nation, as immigrant families are torn apart by ramped-up deportations and arrests in their homes, workplaces, and schools. These injustices are an affront to human dignity, a malicious attack on civil society, and a betrayal of our democracy. Vera is fighting on multiple fronts to protect and restore our collective commitment to due process and our identity as a nation of immigrants.

Through our Safety and Fairness for Everyone (SAFE) Network, we are leading a partnership of 12 diverse jurisdictions in eight states that are dedicated to providing publicly funded legal representation to immigrant residents facing detention and deportation. With our government and legal service provider partners, we are fighting to ensure that all immigrants have access to counsel. In year one, a remarkable 38 percent of cases represented by SAFE attorneys and completed in immigration court resulted in successful outcomes, permitting SAFE clients to remain in the United States. By comparison, only approximately 3 percent of unrepresented cases nationwide are successful. We are making a difference in keeping families together and protected, which makes our nation safer.

We rapidly responded to the family separation crisis by collaborating with other legal services and immigration organizations to launch the Immigrant Connection Project (ICON).

While the federal government is the only entity able to physically reunite separated children with their families, ICON served as a critical bridge by providing a route to connect parents with a legal service provider working directly with their children. During its operation, ICON received nearly 300 inquiries and made connections for more than 95 percent of those seeking Vera's assistance.

In April, we successfully mobilized a coalition of advocates, experts, and congressional leaders to persuade the U.S. Department of Justice to reverse its decision to halt Vera's Legal Orientation Program (LOP).

Through this program, we work with 17 nonprofit legal service providers at 38 detention facilities across the country to assist and support 50,000 immigrants detained and facing deportation each year. LOP empowers detained immigrants to understand their rights and navigate our complex legal system by providing know your rights orientations about the court process and defenses against deportation. It also assists them with the process of seeking pro bono representation. Eighty-four percent of detained immigrants in deportation proceedings receive no legal representation whatsoever, and LOP fills a critical gap in the system by providing access to justice for thousands of individuals every year.

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As communities across America become increasingly diverse, we must improve the ability of law enforcement officers who serve on the frontlines of the criminal justice system to deliver equal justice and effectively interact with the communities they serve.

We are working to shift the culture of policing from arrest and enforcement to community engagement and collaborative problem-

solving. In partnership with the National Police Foundation, we developed a new version of the popular CompStat police management tool CompStat 360 designed to help police balance crime reduction with community satisfaction and help communities actively collaborate with law enforcement. We are now piloting a prototype in five places and providing training and assistance to more than 15 additional police agencies. In September, we launched Understanding Police Enforcement, a new initiative that will help law enforcement and communities develop more effective responses to 911 calls such as responses that bring in police only when necessary, reduce the number of avoidable arrests and potentially harmful interventions, and enhance the safety of both civilians and officers. As part of this effort, we will conduct research on current trends in 911 calls and outcomes, highlight useful resources and best practices for officers to respond to 911 calls, and partner with law enforcement and community leaders to develop effective, replicable strategies to reduce unnecessary police enforcement.

In 2019, Vera will move its headquarters from lower Manhattan to Industry City in Brooklyn's Sunset Park. Our larger and more affordable new office will place us closer to many of the communities we serve, and Industry City's emergence as a growing hub of creativity will provide us with new opportunities for collaboration with the many nonprofit, media, technology, and design firms based there. Vera's California office has also moved to a larger and more centrally located space in downtown Los Angeles, in a building owned and managed by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. This move represents both a new chapter in our two decades of work in the region and the culmination of an extensive exploration on how we can, in the future, best contribute to justice reform in California.

Ned Dewees, a managing partner at Douglas Lane & Associates, an investment advisory firm in New York City, has been a supporter of Vera for a number of years. His commitment to Vera deepened when his intellectual understanding of the horror of mass incarceration in this country, and the need for justice reform, became a more personal and emotional one. Dewees, who recently joined Vera's Reform Leadership Council, a volunteer group of allies and donors, described it this way:

"Of course, I find the work of Vera to be incredibly important. It has been for over 50 years, and in today's political and social climate, it is sadly clear there is a long way to go. Vera is not applying band-aids to the issues it is tackling. They are striving to create real partnerships with the players in the justice system and make true systematic changes. My message to anyone who is reading this annual report, whether you are a current Vera supporter or just learning about the work they do, is to go a little deeper if you can. Vera is working hard to create opportunities for donors to witness and experience first-hand the issues they are working on. My commitment to Vera deepened when I was invited to New Orleans for a two-day 'immersion' into the work they are doing around the issues of justice and mass incarceration. We visited separately with the mayor, the sheriff and community leaders to hear them discuss their viewpoints and frustrations. We went to the courtroom and watched the arraignments of those arrested the night before. We watched and learned about the roles of the judges and the bail bondsmen in the processing of the defendants. And we went to the jail, and talked to people locked up there. I left New Orleans with my eyes opened much wider! We are confronted year-round with requests from fabulous organizations doing important work. The trip to New Orleans was instrumental in my decision to dig deeper than usual for Vera, both financially, and with my time."

When Sandra and Lowell Lamb decided to make a long-term commitment to Vera through a planned gift, the couple looked at Vera's work now and its impact down the road. You can guarantee that there will be some issues that Vera works [in the future] that align with our hopes, our passion, and yes, our outrage, said Sandra, a Vera trustee for the last decade and a strategic consultant for nonprofit organizations. America can do better. Not everything will be solved in the short term. The planned gift aligns with the Lambs' own passions for the cause of justice reform and their experience in philanthropy. It's easy to make a planned gift, said Lamb. And your money and your passion to fight injustice leaves a lasting impact. A former managing director at Lazard where, for 20 years, she advised on mergers and acquisitions as well as other complex corporate financial advisory assignments, Lamb understands the importance of individuals investing in Vera's work. Vera has a very large vision, one that requires a large commitment from people who care about what Vera does, she said. Individual donors are so important. Vera is part of a movement, and the work is amazing. [At all giving levels] being part of that is an important step to take.

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