

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/remembering-robert-wilson-philanthropist-who-fought-to-reduce-solitary-confinement>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Robert W. Wilson died on December 23, 2013, and Vera and all those who find themselves involved with the criminal justice system have lost an amazing ally and supporter.

Robert Wilson, 87 at the time of his death, had made a fortune as founder of one of the early hedge funds. He ran it successfully for many years but was determined to give his fortune away. While he was widely known for his support of the arts, Mr. Wilson also cared deeply about the fate of those who ended up in jail and prison. He believed deeply that our criminal justice system should lock up fewer people and treat those incarcerated with greater care.

Robert Wilson did not suffer fools gladly, and in Vera and its staff he found an organization that not only shared his concerns about conditions of confinement, but could bring change to them. His grants to Veras Center on Sentencing and Corrections (CSC) supported all of our work on segregation (though he preferred the term solitary confinement). CSCs Segregation Reduction Project (SRP) has worked in four states—Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, and Washington—with his support. That work, begun in 2010, has brought increased rationality to the use of segregation in those states, reduced the numbers held in isolation, brought attention to this issue and the related treatment of the mentally ill and other vulnerable populations within prisons and jails, and improved the lives of many hundreds of inmates in those states with improved programming and services. Now, with the use of solitary confinement getting more and more attention in the press and among corrections professionals, Veras segregation work is gaining support from states and counties themselves—a development that would have brought hearty approval from Mr. Wilson.

His funds also supported a large portion of CSCs work in New Orleans as well as our sentencing and corrections change efforts in Los Angeles, Alabama, Illinois, and many other places.

Robert Wilson asked hard questions about our work and accepted only straight answers with numbers attached. He challenged us to look to the other sources and the jurisdictions we helped to match his support. He was not a man who wanted warm and fuzzy good feelings from us but rather specific information about how we were putting his money to work to change life for inmates in the nations prisons and jails, and to keep as many as possible from ever being there in the first place.

Vera is pleased to have helped fulfill Mr. Wilsons mission. We mourn his death but celebrate the difference he made possible in the lives of thousands.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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