



60 YEARS OF FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Annual Report December 2021

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Clyde Meikle, founding mentor of the T.R.U.E. unit at Cheshire Correctional Institute and Vera Restoring Promise leadership associate. Photo by Jeanette Spicer.

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ABOUT HERB

Herb Sturz founded the Vera Institute of Justice with Louis Schweitzer, who had asked him to find a solution to New York City's overcrowded jails. Sturz visited incarcerated people and went cell by cell asking them why they were behind bars. He learned that most simply couldn't pay for their liberty. Trying to end New York City's overreliance on cash bail was Vera's first project. Photo from the Vera archives.

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Herb Sturz, co-founder of Vera Institute of Justice, was fighting to close Rikers Island until the very end of his life.

I visited with him in May, four weeks before he died. Prone and in pain, Herb still wanted to discuss strategy to shutter this horrific jail complex. As was always his way, in a last gentle piece of advice, he recommended two people I should call to advance that goal.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of Vera's founding. As we mourn Herb and his successor Michael E. Smith, who passed away in May, we strive to build on their legacies by forging criminal legal and immigration systems that safeguard the humanity of all they touch.

We work for true justice in a country whose racist roots remain clearly active. Before the historic inauguration in January of the United States' first woman, Black, and Asian vice president, a right-wing mob stormed the Capitol, displaying the Confederate flag and attempting to overturn a fair election. The restrained law enforcement response to this largely white group added to evidence that the United States still does not treat all people equally under the law. Overcriminalization and mass incarceration have replaced Jim Crow and continue to destroy lives, separate families, and squander resources in ways that cause outsize harm to Black people and other people of color.

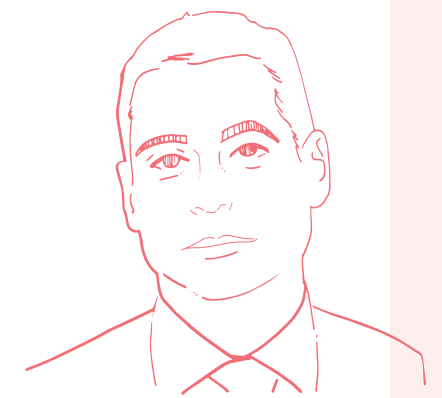
Vera began as an organization dedicated to reforming bail in Manhattan. Today, we are committed to transforming justice systems on a

national scale: helping to ensure prosecutors pursue justice, not jails; every single immigrant facing deportation who needs a government-funded lawyer has one; and all incarcerated students can receive a high-quality college education.

And for nearly two years, this work has been done against the backdrop of a pandemic that continues to cause suffering. I am thankful for our supporters and friends, who make our work possible. I am grateful to our staff and partners, who are weathering this difficult time with an unwavering commitment to transforming our justice systems. Last month, we returned to our offices after 20 months of separation. Though uncertainty continues, returning to community fortifies us.

As we celebrate 60 years of fighting for justice, we are still Herb's Vera: empirical, independent, fierce, insistent, and endowed with entrepreneurial spirit. In our last conversation, Herb spoke of his love for Vera, his confidence in our course. In his memory, and in honor of the many who suffer under the oppressive systems he sought to change, we press on.

NICHOLAS TURNER
President and Director



A LETTER FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

In 2021, the world was still grappling with the new reality forged by the onset of COVID-19, the most profound collective trauma in at least a generation. As we look to the future, we have an opportunity to examine what aspects of our society should return to normal – and what should change.

The government is providing \$350 billion in American Rescue Plan Act funding for communities to use in their recovery from the devastating impacts of the pandemic. We envision a future in which all people have equal access to health, safety, and protection under the law.

In 2021, Vera has worked to challenge political and media narratives that insist more spending on handcuffs, jails, and prisons is an investment in “public safety.” Advocating with research and data, Vera has shown how federal, state, and local governments can steer resources into community violence interventions that show promising results, behavioral health support and diversion programs that will limit the harms of policing and incarceration, and pretrial release and post-incarceration reentry programs that will improve quality of life for individuals, families, and communities.

As we seek systems that truly ensure health, safety, and justice for all, Vera is working to reduce the harms of the immigration and criminal legal systems as they currently exist. As a result of work

done this year by Vera and its government, community, and grassroots partners:

- **FEWER PEOPLE WILL ENDURE THE TERROR OF NON-PUBLIC SAFETY TRAFFIC STOPS**, which are fueled by racial bias and have resulted in the deaths of far too many people, including Philando Castile and Sandra Bland;
- **FEWER PEOPLE IN IMMIGRATION DETENTION WILL BE FORCED TO FACE DEPORTATION** proceedings without the assistance of an attorney who can help protect their rights, greatly decreasing the odds that they will be unjustly deported;
- **MORE INCARCERATED PEOPLE WILL HAVE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY COLLEGE EDUCATION** that can help them thrive when they are released.

We are grateful to the dedicated staff, partners, friends, and supporters who make our work possible. Your generous and committed support gives us strength to keep striving toward our goal of justice for all.

DAMIEN DWIN
Board Chair



Students study world history in a college class at the Monroe Correctional Complex in Monroe, Washington. Photo by Elaine Thompson for AP Images.

WHAT 60 YEARS OF FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE LOOKS LIKE

Sixty years ago, the Men's House of Detention in Lower Manhattan was packed with people who had been accused, but not convicted, of crimes. The jail was called "the Tombs," and its filth, stench, and overcrowding made it unfit for the living. Most of the people behind bars there were not convicted of a crime; they simply could not afford to pay bail.

In 1961, Herb Sturz and Louis Schweitzer founded the Vera Foundation—now the Vera Institute of Justice. They believed that research, evidence, and advocacy could help end the injustice of money bail. Bail bondsmen, who profited from pretrial jailing, doubted that the fledgling organization would be successful.

"If they had taken us on in our infancy, they could have knocked us off," Sturz later said. "But they had seen various academic studies come and go since the 12th century. They were sure we would be gone soon." They were wrong.

This year, the organization that Herb Sturz and Louis Schweitzer started celebrates its 60th anniversary.

Herb Sturz, our founder, died on June 10. As news of his passing spread, Verans around the country were fighting to end money bail, providing legal representation to people in immigration detention, establishing humane conditions in prisons, ending the incarceration of girls and gender expansive youth, stopping the growth of rural jails, equipping prosecutors with tools to end racial disparities in charging and sentencing, stopping racially biased policing, and providing incarcerated people with opportunities for college education.

Vera started in 1961 with Herb Sturz sitting alone in the alcove adjoining Louis Schweitzer's secretary's office. Today it has grown to 290 employees with offices in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Washington, DC.

As we mourn our founder, and his successor Michael E. Smith (who died in May), we lean on the lessons they left us and work to build on their legacies.

Herb's formula—using compelling data and tireless advocacy to transform unjust systems—continues to succeed. In our 60th year, we are applying that formula at the highest levels of power, as we focus intentionally on eradicating racial injustice. The criminal legal and immigration systems are fundamentally brutal, especially to people of color. Vera exists to transform these systems so that communities can thrive.

In the pages that follow, read how Vera seeks to transform the role of the prosecutor to one that pursues justice, not jails; to make sure that every immigrant facing deportation has a government-funded lawyer and a fighting chance to stay with their family and in our communities; and ensure that every incarcerated student has the chance to receive a quality college education. Vera once incubated social justice organizations across New York City. Now we strive for national policy change across state capitals and in Washington, DC, alongside community partners and government leaders.

Our founding charter stated that we exist "to seek and further the equal protection of the laws." We are now carrying this mission—and the legacy of our founders—forward at a larger scale, with 60 years of experience and our unwavering commitment to justice for all.

IN MEMORIAM

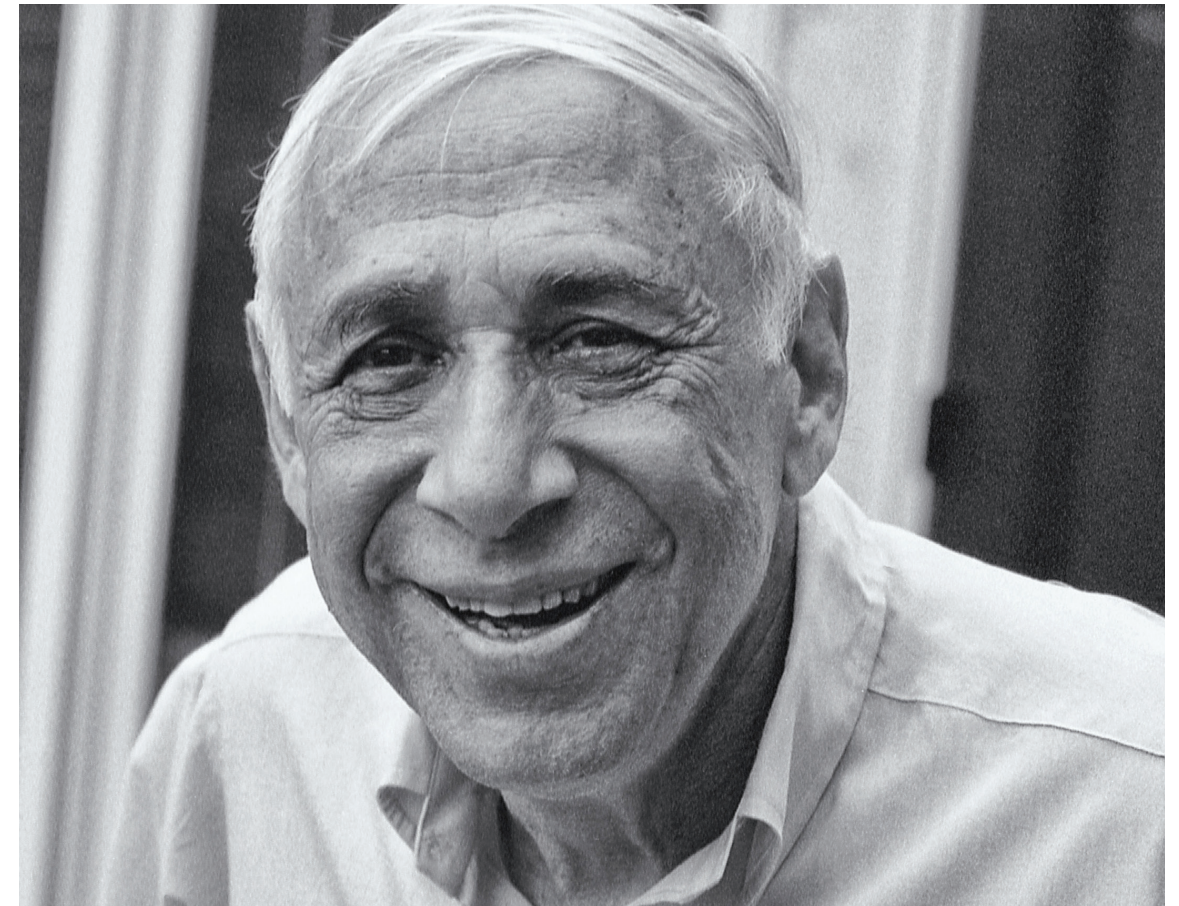


Photo by Nelson Bakerman.

Herb Sturz, a Modest Giant Among Advocates

Herb Sturz, a social justice legend who devoted his life to public service and served as Vera's leader from its founding in 1961 through 1978, passed away on June 10, 2021.

He was 90 years old.

Herb was a modest giant among advocates. His work touched countless lives, and his mobilization led to some of the most important criminal justice reform movements of our time—from the curtailment of stop and frisk to campaigns to close New York City’s infamous Rikers Island jail complex—but many people have never heard his name. He was inconspicuous, working behind the scenes to better the lives of others. Although he was the recipient of dozens of honors and sat on the boards of countless organizations, for Herb it was never about popularity or recognition. It was about the humanity in all of us. The child of immigrants who arrived to the United States at Ellis Island, he was a classic New Jersey native with a dry sense of humor.

When Herb founded the Vera Institute of Justice—then called the Vera Foundation—with Louis Schweitzer in 1961 and, at 30 years old, became its first executive director, he set his sights on ending New York City’s overreliance on money bail. Herb and Louis’s effort to transform this system, dubbed the Manhattan Bail Project, was the first meaningful criminal legal system reform program the country had ever seen. The project was replicated in dozens of cities across the country and ultimately led to the landmark National Bail Reform Act of 1966.

Herb’s advocacy and commitment led to the creation of dozens of organizations dedicated to helping millions of people both locally and around the world. Because of Herb and Vera, the Addiction Research Treatment Corporation, Safe Horizon, the Legal Action Center, Mobilization for Youth Legal Services, Pioneer Messenger

Corporation, the City Volunteer Corps, the Midtown Community Court, Red Hook Community Justice Center, the Center for Court Innovation, the After-School Corporation, and the Center for New York City Neighborhoods—just to name a few—were born.

When he left Vera to serve as New York City’s deputy mayor for criminal justice, Herb pioneered efforts to close Rikers. He spent time with people incarcerated there and advocated for what they actually needed—aid and access to employment, education, and housing—to keep them out of the system.

As the chairman of the City Planning Commission, Herb developed a number of neighborhood planning initiatives, including an Arson Strike Force, which sought to combat the epidemic of fires ravaging tenements in low-income neighborhoods. Later, he worked on reentry programs like Single Stop, which ensures that incarcerated people can access the federal and state benefits they are owed. He served on the editorial board of the *New York Times*. In its pages, he advocated for expanding Medicare and other social reforms. Even in his last few years, he continued to attend monthly meetings to close Rikers, leading to the historic city council vote in 2019 to do just that.

Herb, a lover of poetry, was the embodiment of one of his favorite lines, from “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” We remember Herb for his devotion to others. He will be missed by the many he mentored at Vera and beyond, and those whose lives were forever changed by his work. **V**

Herb Sturz, Vera’s co-founder, spent more than half a century fighting for justice. He was active in efforts to close Rikers Island right up until his passing in June. Photos by Nelson Bakerman and from the Vera archives.



“HE WILL BE MISSED BY THE MANY HE MENTORED AT VERA AND BEYOND, AND THOSE WHOSE LIVES WERE FOREVER CHANGED BY HIS WORK.”

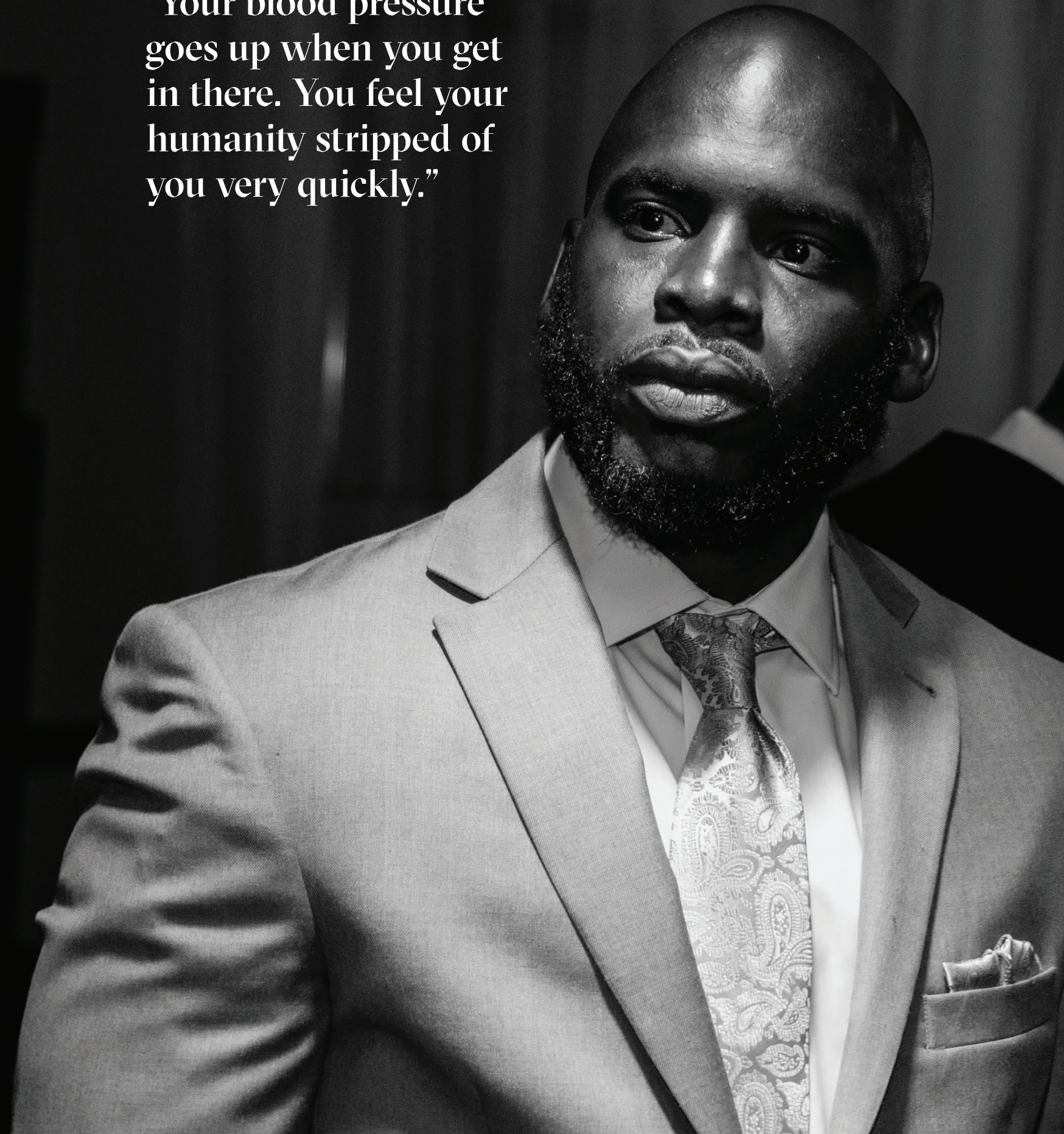


No One Should Have to Buy Their Freedom

Jail is often a hellish, traumatic experience. Just ask Terrance Koontz, an organizer for the Texas Organizing Project, one of Vera's partners in the effort to end money bail. "Your blood pressure goes up when you get in there. You feel your humanity stripped of you very quickly. Seeing the water fountain over the toilet was disgusting to me, and there was no soap in the dorm. The night I went in, a guy was slapped by the officer for getting out of his bed. There is no help. You are property of the system."

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"Your blood pressure goes up when you get in there. You feel your humanity stripped of you very quickly."



Terrance Koontz.
Photo by Christopher
Rojas of Christian
Janai Photography.



The majority of people in America's jails are not confined in these terrible conditions because they are guilty of a crime or pose a threat to public safety. Instead, they're in jail because they cannot afford to buy their freedom through bail. This burden falls heaviest on Black people, due to a criminal legal system that was born at a time when they were not considered human under the law, one that continues to mete out punishment along racist lines.

The money bail system criminalizes poverty, destroys lives, and wastes public resources while failing to make us safer. Vera is committed to eradicating money bail and

providing communities around the nation with the tools to build pretrial systems built on the four pillars of good bail reform: promoting public safety, reducing jail populations, reducing racial disparities, and reducing the use of money. Using decades of experience fighting to end money bail, including a key role in the 2020 passage of landmark bail legislation in New York, Vera continues to advocate for sustaining and expanding reforms to the bail system.

The lessons learned in New York—what good bail legislation looks like, and how to fight against backlash—have served Vera well in its work in other states. Vera was on the

[Terrance Koontz of the Texas Organizing Project calls attention to a town hall meeting in north Houston at the intersection where Danny Ray Thomas, a Black man, was shot by a Harris County Sheriff's deputy in March 2018. Photo by Shelby Knowles for the Texas Tribune.](#)

front lines of efforts to advocate for an end to money bail in California, Texas, and Michigan. We also played a supportive role to the coalition that passed a landmark bail reform bill in Illinois in early 2021.

In California: Vera's analysis, expertise, and advocacy helped convince voters to reject problematic Senate Bill 10, which could have resulted in expanded incarceration and pretrial supervision. Vera is working with a coalition of partners, including The Bail Project, ACLU, and local advocates like Essie Justice Group and Silicon Valley DeBug to draft comprehensive bail reform legislation to be introduced in California in 2022.

In Michigan: After modest pretrial reforms were passed in Michigan, a broad coalition of advocates sought to introduce a more comprehensive bill. This coalition asked Vera to provide our advocacy, research, and technical assistance expertise to their effort, given our experience on bail reform efforts in California, New York, and Texas. Vera serves as an advisor to the chief justice of the Michigan state supreme court and is providing staff support to the chief justice's pretrial working group.

In Texas: Since 2019, Vera has worked with Harris County (Houston), Texas, to pass an automatic release measure that would eliminate bail for more than 50 nonviolent felonies. Harris County's bail reform efforts have resulted in more than 16,000 people annually avoiding time in jail, saved the county millions of dollars in pretrial detention costs, and have not compromised public safety. Despite those successes, the state passed a bail bill that is likely to exacerbate wealth-based

“There are people whose entire family can't pull together \$150. People lose their jobs, lose their housing.”

disparities. Vera is working closely with a bipartisan coalition (including Faith and Freedom Coalition, Prison Fellowship, the ACLU, and others) to fight these rollback measures.

Terrance Koontz, who shares his experience in a Texas jail as part of these advocacy efforts, pinpoints why this work is so important:

*When I was in jail, I heard a younger guy there calling everybody he could to get \$150. He was around 19. I could hear him asking somebody to pawn his PlayStation. I remember him trying to put on a presentation like he was unbothered and strong, but I could feel the despair. Like, 'I really want to get out of here, but I am trying to keep this poker face on.' It broke my heart to see somebody stuck in jail for \$150. That is like pocket change to some people. There are people who will blow that in a bar in 30 minutes. Meanwhile, there are people whose entire family can't pull together \$150. People lose their jobs, lose their housing. I pray and I hope that within my lifetime I am able to witness real criminal justice reform; real bail reform. Hopefully there will be a point in this lifetime that I am able to see justice in its truest form. **V***



JULIAN'S AND ANA'S STORIES

Why Publicly Funded Deportation Defense Matters

Julian, a green card holder from the Dominican Republic, was thrilled when an immigration judge ruled that he had a legal right to remain in the United States. He had spent months in detention fighting deportation.

People who are detained and facing deportation do not have a right to an attorney if they cannot afford one. As a result, tens of thousands of people each year go unrepresented, including asylum seekers, longtime legal residents, immigrant parents or spouses of U.S. citizens, and even children. Many people who have legal standing to remain in the United States are deported simply because they cannot pay a lawyer to help them navigate complex immigration court proceedings. People from overpoliced communities of color, who are disproportionately targeted and funneled into the deportation pipeline, are particularly at risk of unjust deportation.

This would have been Julian's fate were it not for his government-funded attorney, who helped him gain relief from being deported. Although he could not afford an

immigration lawyer, he was provided a government-funded attorney through the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP). NYIFUP is the nation's first state-wide public defender program for immigrants facing deportation, and Vera is a founding member of the coalition that established the project. Julian's case illustrates the importance of this kind of representation, because even after the judge terminated Julian's removal proceedings, ICE refused to release him from the county jail where he was detained.

If not for the zealous representation of his attorney, Julian might still be imprisoned, separated from his family, and suffering in a cell for 20 hours a day.

This is his story.

JULIAN'S STORY

When I got to the detention facility, I didn't know what to feel. I was in a cell most of the time, with no fresh air. I got to go out for recreation for an hour in the morning, and then I had to lock back in. The recreation area was like if you were in a cage like a dog. I'd go to lunch and then I was back in my cell for the rest of the day. I just sat there for months. My family kept saying I should fight. I put it in God's hands.

I had good lawyers. When I was going to sign the deportation papers just to get out of detention, my lawyer said, "No, no. You have a good chance." Having a lawyer helps you mentally because you have somebody that actually cares for your well-being and wants you to stay in the United States. It's not just you by yourself. It makes you feel like you have a chance. If a person doesn't have somebody representing them, it feels like you have no choice but to deport yourself. There are people in detention who only speak Spanish. They don't even know how to speak to the judge or understand what the judge is saying. When you have a lawyer, it takes more stress and anxiety away from you.

When I learned the deportation proceedings were terminated, I just started crying. Usually, I never cry in front of anybody, but it was overwhelming. People saw me in there crying like a baby. My head was spinning and I was like, "No way, it can't be real."

My lawyer expected me to be released from immigration jail in a week or two after the judge terminated the case, but they didn't let me out. They said it was because they didn't receive paperwork from the judge, but even after they received the paperwork, they kept me in there. It was a real struggle, and I felt like I was already losing it. I said, "What do they want from me?" There were just more excuses. I was waiting for days, and then they said they were waiting to see if the government was going to appeal. I was going crazy. My family was going crazy.

I called my lawyer and she said, "Don't worry, I am pushing." She had to write to the judge and explain that ICE was refusing to let me out. I was there for close to a month longer than I should have been. Even my friends in there were talking to the guards and asking them what was going on. It was a month of calling and pressing and pressing before they let me go.

They finally let me out. Now, I'm doing good. I got a construction job. I can see my family. By the grace of God, I am healthy. Everything is for a reason and a purpose.

Vera is committed to ensuring that every person facing deportation receives legal representation regardless of income, race, national origin, or history with the criminal legal system.

Based on this goal, in 2021 Vera expanded its Safety and Fairness for Everyone (SAFE) Initiative to include a total of 22 partner sites that provide government-funded attorneys to detained immigrants. SAFE is a collaboration among governments, immigration legal service providers, and advocates working to build a movement for universal representation: a national public defender-style system for all immigrants facing deportation.

In a system that sets up immigrants to fail, we know that universal representation increases—by a factor of 10—people's chances of winning relief from deportation and securing their freedom. SAFE will bring legal defense to people in dire need of it, particularly those in detention, where approximately 70 percent go unrepresented. It will protect and keep families together, including those of the 5.5 million U.S.-citizen children whose parents are at risk of deportation. And with Black immigrants disproportionately placed in proceedings—they comprise just 7 percent of the total immigrant population, but 20 percent of all those facing deportation on criminal grounds—universal representation will reduce these systemic racial inequities.

Over the past 20 years, 93 percent of people granted relief from deportation have had lawyers. Conversely, 80 percent of

“The recreation area was like if you were in a cage like a dog. I'd go to lunch and then I was back in my cell for the rest of the day. I just sat there for months.”

immigrants who received removal orders over the past 20 years did not have access to legal representation. Immigrants with attorneys are 3.5 times more likely to be granted bond, enabling them to escape the prison-like conditions of immigration detention. Most immigrants in deportation proceedings are forced to defend themselves on their own against the federal government, a formidable opponent with nearly unlimited resources.

SAFE has effectively persuaded community and government leaders that defending the rights of their immigrant residents and their families is a solid investment, consistent with our shared values of due process and equal justice for all. The year 2021 saw increased funding for SAFE partners in Santa Ana, California, Long Beach, California, Philadelphia, and Austin. In Colorado, SAFE engaged in statewide advocacy that helped pass legislation to create a state-funded deportation defense program that was signed into law in July 2021.

Building on decades of experience and the growing movement for universal representation that SAFE has

helped to establish, Vera is launching a national campaign to establish federally funded representation for all people facing deportation. That means that people like Ana, who received an immigration attorney as a result of SAFE's Long Beach Justice Fund (LBJF), won't have to face immigration court alone.

After the trauma and terror of being separated from her son when they were detained at the border, Ana desperately wanted an attorney to help her fight deportation. She did not speak English, knew little of immigration law, and believed deportation was inevitable if she appeared in court alone.

She is grateful that the LBJF provided her with an attorney who is guiding her through the asylum application process. Working with LBJF's partners—the Immigrant Defenders Law Center and Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition—Ana became an outspoken advocate for the local successful campaign to grow LBJF. Because of the powerful advocacy of Ana and others, the City of Long Beach added \$300,000 in support of the program. This is her story.

“If I hadn’t had a lawyer, I would have felt totally alone and without support. I would probably have given up and agreed to be deported.”

ANA’S STORY

In detention, we had to sleep on concrete benches or the floor because there were so many of us. I was cold and so sad to be there.

Sometimes they gave us a little mattress, but there were never enough of them. They give you aluminum to wrap yourself in, but it doesn’t warm you. Sometimes, you don’t sleep.

I brought my son from Guatemala so that he could have a better life here in the United States. He was being threatened by gangs where we lived. They showed up at our house with weapons looking for him. They threatened to hurt him and kill me if he would not join. My poor nephew had been killed by one

of the gangs, and so we believed their threats. I was especially vulnerable as a woman and knew I could be killed by the gangs who wanted my son or by the same people who murdered my nephew and were still angry at our family. I could not let my son be hurt, so we fled. Coming to the United States was a very hard journey that took one month. We traveled through Mexico. Sometimes we ate; sometimes we did not.

When we crossed into the United States and were in the desert, we saw the headlights of the immigration cars. They asked us what we were doing, and we said that we wanted asylum. They sent us to a detention facility, which was a terrible place.

They separated me from my son after we were detained. I was in a cell with other women like me, and my


son was with young kids like him. I couldn’t see him, and I was so sad and worried. It was so sad that there were so many children there, all closed in. It just fills me with sadness to remember hearing them cry.

There are still so many people who are stuck in detention and don’t have lawyers. Now, with COVID-19, they really need people to support them. It is really awful to be in those places. I don’t know why I was released, but I was very lucky. When I got out, someone gave me the phone number for Long Beach Justice Fund. They provided me with an attorney free of charge to help me file a claim for asylum.

In the claim, we told the judge that it is not safe for us in Guatemala because we are the target of gangs and people who have resisted gang

recruitment. Guatemalan women who oppose association with gangs are in great danger.

I was happy to have the opportunity to speak at public meetings to ask the government to provide more funding for the Long Beach Justice Fund so that they can help more people like me. There are so many of us who need legal assistance. If I hadn’t had a lawyer, I would have felt totally alone and without support. I would probably have given up and agreed to be deported.

My son is happy now; he is not afraid of anything. He says that it is different here. My hope is that we can win our asylum request and stay in the United States. My dream is that we can have a better life in this country. 

VERA BY THE NUMBERS

Defending People Facing Deportation

22

22 JURISDICTIONS ARE FORMALLY PARTNERED WITH VERA’S SAFE INITIATIVE,

across 11 different states. Each provides government-funded attorneys to immigrants who are facing deportation.

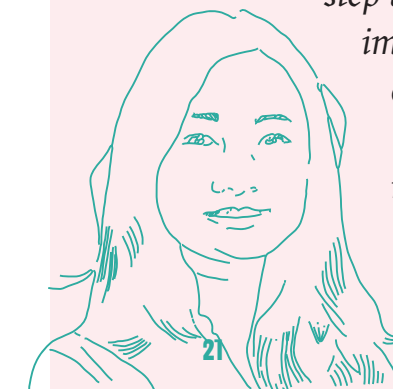
>1,300

MORE THAN 1,300 CHILDREN HAVE A PARENT FACING DEPORTATION

who is now represented by a SAFE attorney, making them much more likely to avoid deportation and separation from their child.

As more and more people get caught up in the ever-widening net of immigration enforcement, it is Black people and communities of color who bear the brunt of the devastating impacts of detention and deportation.

Now more than ever all levels of government need to step up and take bold action to protect our immigrant communities. Together, we can chart a new path forward—laying the foundation to make federally mandated representation a reality.



ANNIE CHEN

Program Director, SAFE

DANIELA GILBERT KNOWS COMMUNITY IS CENTRAL TO ADDRESSING GUN VIOLENCE


The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act provides state and local governments with a once-in-a-lifetime pathway toward recovery not only from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also from a history of disinvestment in Black communities and other communities of color. The ARP allocated \$350 billion in flexible funding for state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments to address the harm of COVID-19, and the U.S. Department of the Treasury encourages governments to spend ARP dollars to “foster a strong, inclusive, and equitable recovery, especially uses with long-term benefits for health and economic outcomes.”

What does a strong, equitable recovery look like? It looks like a future where low-income and Black and other communities of color have the same access to safety, health, and wealth as white communities. This means spending on community resources that build safety, using health-first approaches to behavioral health crises, and limiting the harms of policing and jail incarceration. These outcomes can be achieved through investments in programs like community violence interventions (CVI). CVI strategies

are proven to reduce homicides and shootings by using credible messengers to build relationships with people at the center of gun violence, and they can save cities millions of dollars. Daniela Gilbert, the new director of Vera’s Redefining Public Safety program, has spent more than a decade implementing CVI programs. In this interview she discusses how she came to this work, its challenges, and what real investment in these programs looks like.

Tell us about your experience working on community violence interventions.

I’ve spent about 10 years working on violence reduction strategies in California, Arizona, and New York. Eight of those years were in my home state of California, where in 2011 I co-founded the California Partnership for Safe Communities. I worked in 10 California cities over that period, but most intensively in Oakland and Stockton, on the implementation of group violence intervention (GVI), which is a type of violence reduction strategy that involves community members, law enforcement, and social service providers. GVI is highly collaborative. We communicate directly with people who are at the highest risk of involvement in gun violence. Our focus was on reducing shootings and homicides, improving outcomes for people at risk of violence and reducing recidivism, and building trust between communities and police. I also spent a year and a half at the New York City Police Department supporting its implementation of a GVI program.

A portrait of Daniela Gilbert, a woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a green top and large, colorful earrings. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a thoughtful expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage.

“IF WE DON’T ATTEND TO DEVELOPING ANTIRACIST POLICY AND INVESTMENTS AND DESIGNING THINGS EQUITABLY, THEN WE’LL JUST REPLICATE THE SAME HARM WE ALWAYS HAVE. WE UNDERVALUE EVERYTHING RELATED TO PUBLIC SAFETY AND PUBLIC WELFARE THAT DOESN’T HAVE A PUNISHMENT ORIENTATION.”

“WE SUPPORT PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN FAILED BY OUR SYSTEMS OVER AND OVER, AND THEY HAVE TYPICALLY EXPERIENCED A LOT OF TRAUMA.”

When did these kinds of programs and strategies emerge?

The term “community violence intervention” didn’t even exist when I started this work—but the strategies we’re discussing emerged in the 1990s. There were a few replications in various places by the early 2000s. But of course, communities have been intervening in and preventing violent behavior since the beginning of time.

Recently there has definitely been more recognition of the importance of the role of community-based organizations and people with lived experience in non-punishment-oriented interventions around safety. President Biden’s American Rescue Plan includes funding that can be used to invest in these programs.

How was the term “community violence intervention” coined?

A coalition of Black leaders and other leaders of color organized a group called Fund Peace, which, as I understand it, coined the term in 2021 in collaboration with the Biden-Harris administration to describe ways to reduce gun violence that occurs in the streets—ways that don’t center police and policing as the solution. They wanted to call attention to the kinds of solutions communities are seeking and the kinds of investments that communities need.

The fact that there’s even a term to describe the constellation of strategies that one might consider “community violence interventions” reflects a long-needed but relatively new mainstream recognition of its importance. This term advances the idea of centering communities as part of the solution and their role in intervening in violence and promoting safety. I’m really inspired and grateful to the Black leaders and other leaders of color who pushed the Biden administration and worked together to develop a strong and growing coalition to

demonstrate the importance of investing in solutions that don’t involve more police.

In your work implementing CVI programs, what have been some of the challenges you encountered?

This is hard work. It depends on extraordinary levels of dedication and openness to working differently and humbly. And we need continued investment in capacity building to sustain and grow the workforce that’s required to carry out these strategies.

This work requires organized resources to identify people at highest risk of violence. It requires respectful relentlessness. We support people who have been failed by our systems over and over, and they have typically experienced a lot of trauma. One of the pastors who I worked with in New York City would always end intervention meetings by saying, “I love you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” I think acknowledging challenges and approaching them with a solutions orientation is really important. And always centering people’s humanity.

There’s a broader challenge too. As a society, we don’t invest in communities in a way that changes the fundamental underlying circumstances that generate the need for these acute interventions. These interventions are just that—interventions. If we don’t attend to developing antiracist policy and investments and designing things equitably, then we’ll just replicate the same harm we always have. We undervalue everything related to public safety and public welfare that doesn’t have a punishment orientation. We need to remove barriers to employment. We need to provide access to high-quality health care and stable housing. The broader landscape really is a challenge because it continues to put us in a position where we need to implement these strategies.



How did you come to this work?

I am the granddaughter of refugees and survivors of state violence. My grandparents fled Nazi Germany and pogroms and eventually made it to what is now Israel and to Mexico. My grandfather survived concentration camps and many of my other relatives did not. Eventually, everyone made it to the United States. I grew up in Oakland, where I was very aware of issues of gun violence.

In college, I really dove into these issues and learned about the ways in which our criminal legal system isn’t designed to really promote safety and causes a lot of harm. I’ve always been interested in fundamental safety as a human right, and it felt obvious that I wanted to dedicate my career to implementing solutions that promote safety. I’m grateful to have been able to work on public safety transformation with amazing people ever since. **V**



Photo by Todd Cooper.

Changing the Narrative Around Investments in Public Safety

Despite declining crime rates across the country, fewer people behind bars, and increasing calls for police accountability and an end to mass incarceration, criminal legal system budgets grew by 36 percent from 2000 to 2016.

Cities, counties, and states pass annual budgets of millions—even billions—of dollars that reflect political priorities and shape all aspects of the criminal legal system from policing to prosecutors, jails, prisons, and more. The annual budget process offers cities and counties, no matter

how big or small, an opportunity to demand accountability for how public funds are spent and to move public dollars away from traditional criminal justice investments that have failed to deliver safety, especially in Black communities. Vera is providing leaders with tools to stop

trying to solve every problem with handcuffs and a jail cell.

Vera's special report *How the American Rescue Plan Can Foster an Equitable Recovery* offers recommendations for investments that would use health-first approaches to behavioral health crises and limit the harms of policing and jail incarceration. It includes community violence interventions, behavioral health support and diversion programs, and pretrial release and post-incarceration reentry programs. **V**

VERA BY THE NUMBERS

Budget Justice

\$25B

JAILS COST THE UNITED STATES \$25 BILLION A YEAR.

\$2.2B

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE 48 PLACES THAT VERA STUDIED in its *What Jails Cost* report could save \$2.2 billion if they rightsized their jail budgets, and even more as jail populations decline further.

13%

SINCE 2011, JAIL BUDGETS HAVE INCREASED 13 PERCENT accounting for inflation—while jail populations have declined 28 percent.

\$600M

VERA FOUND \$600 MILLION IN COST SAVINGS opportunities in the New York State criminal legal system.

Jail populations have fallen significantly in many places around the country, and crime has dropped as well. But spending on jails continues increasing. Counties should be cutting jail spending and reinvesting those savings in communities most impacted by mass incarceration. By diverting jail savings to social services and infrastructure, counties could build safer, more stable communities.

SANDRA VAN DEN HEUVEL
Senior Program Associate, Vera Insights



RESTORING PROMISE FOUNDING MENTOR CLYDE MEIKLE:

LISTEN TO PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED

Clyde Meikle was a founding mentor of the Truthfulness, Respectfulness, Understanding, and Elevating (T.R.U.E.) unit at Cheshire Correctional Institute in Connecticut. In his position, Meikle helped young adults grapple with incarceration and guided them along their transformation, and he became one of the unit's most notable and influential leaders. T.R.U.E. was established through a partnership between the Connecticut Department of Corrections and Vera's Restoring Promise Initiative. Meikle now works as a leadership associate for Restoring Promise, an initiative of the Vera Institute of Justice and MILPA, which is creating housing units grounded in dignity for young adults in prison.

Earlier this year, a Connecticut judge granted Meikle early release, noting that not only did he take advantage of all existing opportunities for education while incarcerated, but he also went on to create and lead such opportunities for others. He was released on May 25, 2021, after more than 26 years behind bars. The following day, he attended his graduation ceremony at Wesleyan University, where he received his bachelor's degree in philosophy. Meikle, now a leadership associate for Vera's Restoring Promise Initiative, aims to make stories like his own less rare.

As a founding mentor in this program, what do you believe people should know about the young men who are involved?

I think that the greatest message is that you've got a lot of brothers in prison that could come out here and really change the world. People need to start going in prisons

and making sure that when brothers come home, they have support. If they're put into the right situations and conditions and have the right support that allows them to improvise and produce new things, they can create new kinds of arrangements that are conducive for justice. People at the so-called bottom need to be given opportunities because we have all these things inside of us that we need to get out.

When I was incarcerated, I was reading Fred Moten and Frank B. Wilderson and Saidiya Hartman and I learned that there is power in improvisation. I began to think about how Black people, since slavery—anytime we were allowed to improvise, we created something beautiful, right? There is something beautiful in our trauma and pain. If we are supported and allowed to flourish in the right kind of spaces, in the right kind of way, I believe that the world will look like a different place.



“IF WE ARE SUPPORTED AND ALLOWED TO FLOURISH IN THE RIGHT KIND OF SPACES, IN THE RIGHT KIND OF WAY, I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD WILL LOOK LIKE A DIFFERENT PLACE.”



Brothers on the so-called bottom, sisters on the so-called bottom in these spaces—give them the tools, give them the space, and allow them to build relationships. From relationships, they can begin to create new things. I think that's why the T.R.U.E. unit worked: it was the relationships, that was the critical thing—building those relationships and finding things in each other and bringing those things out of each other, like the young brothers brought out of me.

What did you learn from the young men that you mentored?

One thing they always reiterate is that people don't listen to them. Nobody listens to what they have to say. If they tell you, “If I go home, I gotta go back to the streets,” the first thing people tell them is, “You ain't got to go back to the streets,” instead of sitting down having a conversation with them; instead of saying, “Let's walk through this.” When we are in a space together every day, if I'm sincere about sitting down and conversing with you, and if you see me sincerely dedicated to my own transformation, now you look at me like, “I can trust him.” So, I think that allowed us to learn from each other. And I think that the greatest thing that they gave me was, “Yo, people don't listen to us. I'm in the streets, and I'm caught up. I really don't have the tools to get out of this. I really don't. You try to tell me that I have the tools, but I really don't have the tools.” So, let's find the tools together. Sometimes we can. Sometimes you can use a butter knife instead of a Phillips screwdriver. Sometimes you can use a spoon.

You recently graduated from Wesleyan University, through a program that provides incarcerated people with the chance to pursue higher education. What about your college experience impacted you most, and why do you think it is important to provide these opportunities in prison?

I remember reading Thomas Hobbes and thinking about Leviathan and the idea that the state has a monopoly on violence. I couldn't really grapple with philosophy because it was complicated and intricate, so I had to refer back to my experiences. And I realized that in the streets, this is what we were doing. This entity that had a monopoly on violence situated us where we weren't part of society, we felt like we were outside of it. So, what we did, we created our own space where we had a monopoly on violence. This was the

'80s, and the drug era was about young people in the inner city, creating little spaces. We didn't have protection from the state or didn't feel like we had protection from the state. When I used to move around Hartford, I used to have to fight everywhere I went. I realized in prison, once I took those classes, that everybody was just as scared as me. For the people that didn't fight, you didn't get inside of the “in” crowd, but if you did fight you were part of the “in” crowd. Why they allowed you to become part of the “in” crowd is because now they knew that you're somebody that will protect them.

So, looking at that and reading Thomas Hobbes, I began to take philosophy seriously, because I realized these complex abstractions were somehow leaking down to the people on the streets. And we were participating in these ideas in peculiar ways, trying to find our way. We were kind of reflecting and mimicking the entity that was supposed to protect us. We were trying to find security and certainty. College education really gave me that ability to look back at my experiences and find a language to really figure out not only what those experiences were, but what I was up against. Not having the ability to articulate your reality is a reason why, when you're dealing with that inner pain, you prefer to externalize it. And I think young brothers out here are dangerous because they don't have the language, they don't have the text, they don't have the ability to articulate these complexities. They don't have the pedagogy—I'm not going to say education; they don't have the pedagogy. They don't have people telling them that they can find value in trauma and pain; you don't have to let that trauma and pain be all negative.

What do you hope to accomplish next?

I'm really taking small steps. Today, I was walking down the street from my new residence, and I walked past the police station, and what I realized is that, “Yo, I'm just a different kind of person.” I would usually cross the street and feel uncomfortable walking past the police station, but I felt like, “Yo, I'm in the right.” I felt like, “I'm straight, I got this, I'm on the right path.” I want to be recognized as somebody that's striving. Nobody's perfect. But I want to be somebody that's striving to continue to be on the right path. One of my brothers, when I got out, called me and said, “Clyde, use the same energy that you used to get out of here to succeed out there.” And what success means to me is, you know, just these little stages. But by the time I'm 75, I want to win the Nobel Peace Prize. That's my goal. I know that's a big thing. But it's something to shoot for. **V**



Expanding Access to Education for Incarcerated Students

Vera and a coalition of allies led a four-year campaign that, at the end of 2020, successfully reversed the federal ban on Pell Grants for incarcerated students.

To achieve this historic victory, we worked in close partnership with College and Community Fellowship, the Drug Policy Alliance, Prison Fellowship, the Unlock Higher Ed

coalition, corrections officials, college administrators, policymakers, and countless formerly incarcerated students who stepped forward to share their stories. Incarcerated people earn pennies per hour for the work they do in prison. Without financial aid, a college education would be completely unaffordable for nearly all of them. This counterproductive ban, a legacy of the 1994 Crime Bill, prevented people from pursuing higher

education that would have helped them secure employment when released from prison and avoid reincarceration. By 2023, tens of thousands of incarcerated students will be able to access financial aid while in prison.

With the reversal of the ban now secure, Vera is shifting its focus to implementation and ensuring that all incarcerated students can access and receive quality higher education. To provide guidance on this front,

Vera launched the Corrections Education Leadership Academy (CELA) to help corrections leaders create statewide education systems for incarcerated people. CELA is assisting colleges and prisons with designing high-quality college-in-prison programs that include recruitment, student support, and staff training. Vera is also piloting strategies that colleges and corrections departments can adopt to reduce racial disparities for incarcerated students, most of whom are people of color, and improve enrollment and completion rates for students of color. Finally, Vera is helping college accrediting agencies—which are critical to ensuring the quality and success of large-scale programs—understand what quality college-in-prison programs look like.

This work will build on Vera's experience as the designated technical assistance provider for the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative—a pilot program launched by the U.S. Department of Education to test the return of federal Pell Grants to people in prison. Second Chance Pell currently includes a total of 130 participating colleges in 42 states and the District of Columbia. In the 2019–2020 school year, 2,621 degrees or certificates were awarded to participants, and a total of 7,074 have been awarded since the program began in 2016. **V**

Melanye Price is teaching an "Intro to American Politics" class to a class of 18 incarcerated students who are part of a two-year pilot program run and paid for by Wesleyan University. Photo by Thomas Cain for AP Images.

VERA BY THE NUMBERS

Helping Incarcerated Students Thrive

10K

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WILL HAVE ACCESS TO LIFE-CHANGING EDUCATION as a result of the campaign by Vera and a coalition of allies, which resulted in the restoration of Pell Grants for incarcerated students.

16

VERA'S CORRECTIONS EDUCATION LEADERSHIP ACADEMY IS SUPPORTING 16 CORRECTIONS LEADERS from across the United States as they aim to create high-quality statewide education systems for incarcerated people who will be eligible for tuition aid.

We say that access to postsecondary education is transformative not just because it improves opportunity for one person, but because it holds the potential to shatter cycles of poverty and involvement with the criminal justice system. Children of incarcerated students are more likely to pursue their own postsecondary degrees or certificates. Children see the newfound sense of purpose, confidence, and empowerment that postsecondary education programs provide their parents—and that makes a difference.

MARGARET DIZEREGA

Director, Center on Sentencing and Corrections

HOW TO STOP A JAIL FROM BEING BUILT

America's dependence on jails has fueled mass incarceration, perpetuated a false equivalence with safety, and deprived communities of color of resources they need to thrive. Government officials at every level must work to shift the paradigm from punishment as the response to social issues to deeper community investment. Investing in community-based solutions will result in a dramatic decrease in people entering the criminal legal system and languishing in pretrial detention and create greater ability for people and communities of color to access resources needed for safety and well-being.

ELIZABETH SWAVOLA

Project Director, Jail Decarceration

Vera Institute of Justice Annual Report 2021

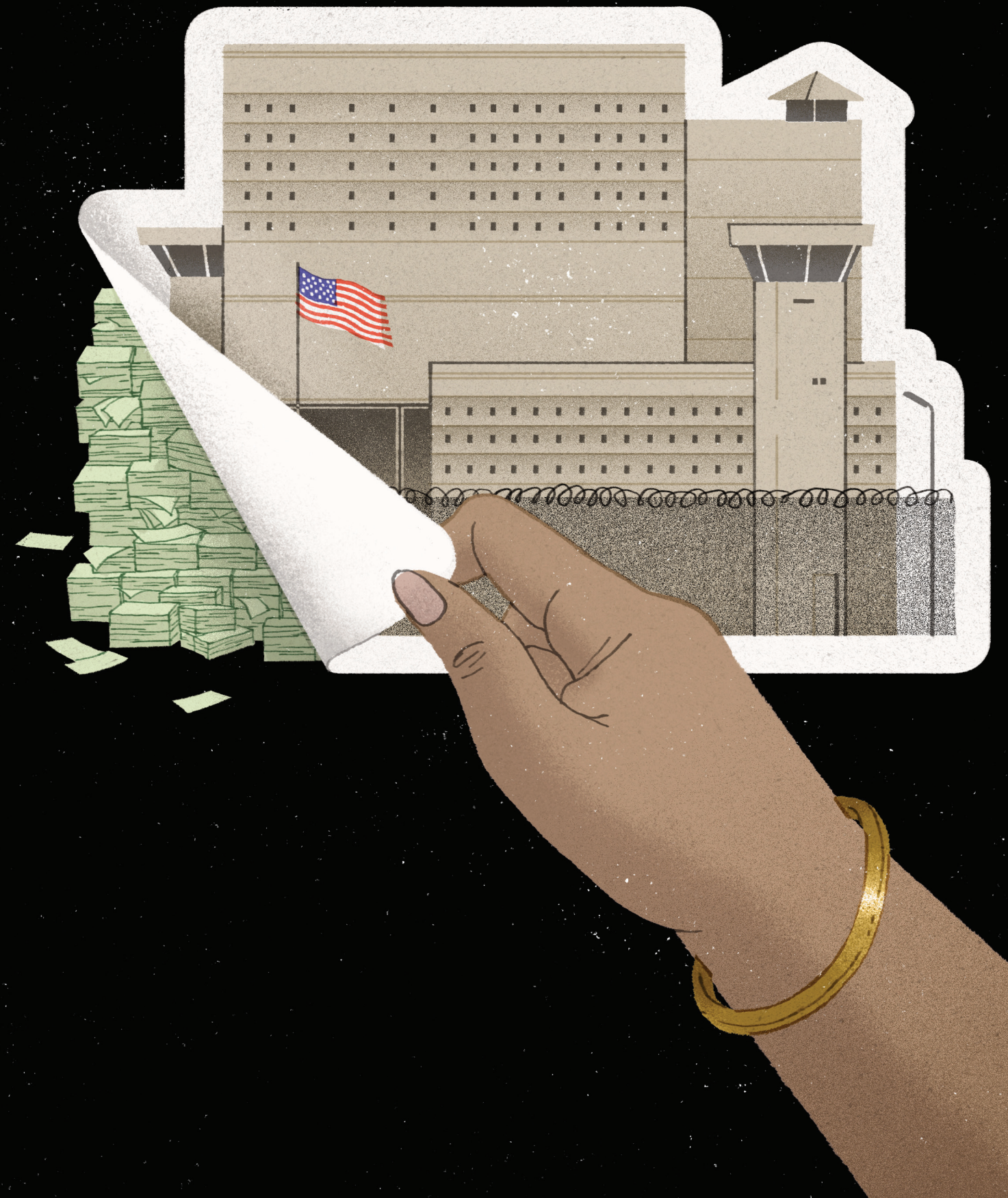


Illustration by Jasjyot Singh Hans.

The United States does not need new jail beds. Although conversations about mass incarceration often focus on prison, local jails admit almost 20 times more people each year, a staggering 10.7 million annually. Most of those in jail are poor people arrested on minor charges who can't post bail. Even a short stay behind bars can exact a terrible toll on their lives, causing job loss, trauma to dependent children, and loss of housing.

Vera continues to collect and publicize data on current prison and jail populations in local jails and state and federal prisons. The organization's People in Jail and Prison in Spring 2021 report revealed that little more than a year after the first calls to release incarcerated people during the COVID-19 pandemic, decarceration efforts appear to have stalled—even as the pandemic still rages and the country continues to lead the world in incarceration. After an unprecedented 14 percent drop in incarceration in the first half of 2020—from 2.1 million people to 1.8 million—incarceration declined only slightly from fall 2020 to spring 2021. While state and federal prison populations declined by 9 percent, the relative stasis in incarceration since late 2020 is the result of a refilling of many jails. By spring 2021, jail populations had increased 13 percent from their mid-2020 low.

In 2021, Vera's In Our Backyards (IOB) Initiative and Jail Decarceration Program used local research to show the public that investments in jails are not investments in public safety and decarceration is the best solution to overcrowded jails. IOB, which focuses on ending mass incarceration in small cities and rural communities, partnered closely with local organizers and advocates to support their efforts to stop jail expansion plans and reverse incarceration rates in their communities. Twenty IOB community grantee partners across 10 states have received grants, research support, and technical assistance to press their local leaders to end mass incarceration.

2021 SUCCESSES

IN DOUGLAS COUNTY, Kansas, leaders were proposing a jail expansion that would have cost the county nearly \$30 million. With Vera's assistance (including community grant, research, and policy support), a coalition hosted a Direct Action Assembly with 800 participants, educated local business owners about the use of taxpayer funds, and trained more than 60 community leaders to host conversations in their homes. After these sustained efforts, the county commission unanimously voted to overturn the jail expansion plan.

IN HAYWOOD COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA, IOB provided strategy, data analysis, and communications support to help We Are Down Home North Carolina and partners fight a proposed jail expansion that would have cost \$16.5 million and more than doubled the county's capacity to lock people up. Commissioners in Haywood County approved an FY2022 budget without funding to expand the county jail.

IN STAUNTON, VIRGINIA, IOB supported a new coalition that emerged to prevent expansion of the Middle River Regional Jail. Vera facilitated local strategy development, provided data analysis and messaging, and connected the organizers to a community of practice in the broader justice reform movement. In March 2021, the coalition successfully secured enough support in the city council to defeat the jail expansion proposal.

Vera's IOB team is also working to advance a federal agenda, including efforts that supported bipartisan introduction of the the Community First Pretrial Reform and Jail Decarceration Act in October 2020 and its reintroduction in summer 2021. The bipartisan legislation, introduced by U.S. Representatives David Trone and Kelly Armstrong, would authorize \$600 million over five years to support local jail population reduction efforts, with priority given to small cities and rural communities that have high or rising incarceration rates. Introduction of the proposed bill came eight months after Vera's IOB and federal policy teams—in conjunction with U.S. Representatives Alma Adams, Joe Kennedy III, Terri Sewell, and David Trone—hosted a standing room-only briefing on Capitol Hill



A sign outside Haywood County Court House encourages legislators to reject a proposal to expand the county jail. Photo by Down Home NC.

titled “Rural America’s Hidden Jail Crisis.” This team is also building a federal coalition to end the use of USDA Rural Development funds to subsidize rural jail construction and expansion by 2023, with coalition partners from progressive and center-right justice reform organizations; rural development and farmer advocacy organizations; and housing, behavioral health, and transit-focused advocates.

In October, Vera's Jail Decarceration Program published *A Toolkit for Decarceration In Your Community*, which offers evidence-based information about how community organizers, journalists, judges, law enforcement, local legislators, probation officers, prosecutors, public defenders, researchers, state legislators, and system-impacted people can drive decarceration efforts. It provides a six-step process for advocates and organizers working to decarcerate their local jails:

1. **KNOW YOUR POWER TO EFFECT CHANGE,**
2. **IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALIGNMENT AND PARTNERSHIP,**
3. **HARNESS THE POWER OF DATA,**
4. **IDENTIFY LOCAL DRIVERS OF CRIMINALIZATION AND JAIL,**
5. **BUILD LOCALLY TAILORED POLICY SOLUTIONS,**
6. **BUILD PRESSURE FOR ACHIEVING AND SUSTAINING CHANGE.**



Photos by Anjali Pinto.

Karl Fort, Released From Prison With No Place to Live

Access to safe, affordable housing is essential to the success of people returning to their communities after incarceration and to the success of their families—with studies showing that they are more likely to find and keep a job and less likely to be reincarcerated.

However, admissions restrictions set by public housing authorities can contribute to an already increased risk of homelessness for formerly incarcerated people—who are nearly 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public. Black and Latinx people are also disproportionately affected by these regulations, as they are both more likely to be involved in the criminal legal system and more likely to apply for residency in public housing.

Vera's Opening Doors to Public Housing Initiative is committed to removing barriers to public housing for formerly incarcerated people and their families. As part of this work, we provide technical assistance to select public housing authorities across the country looking to change their admissions policies and implement reentry programs.

Karl Fort is one of those who found housing as a result of humane policies that prioritize opportunity for people impacted by the criminal legal system.

When Karl Fort was released from prison in July 2019, he faced the same predicament that many of the 600,000 people who return from prison every year do: he did not have a place to live.

He spent the next several months in a halfway house, then living with his niece, then at his sister's, then going back and forth between their places. Last fall, several months after he applied for public housing, he received a letter from the Winnebago Housing Authority, now known as Northern Illinois Regional Affordable Community Housing (NI ReACH), that he was eligible. But when he called, he learned there were no vacancies.

"I was just eligible to be on the waiting list," Fort said.

Every week for the next few months, he called the housing authority to follow up. Finally, his exhausting search culminated in January of this year—18 months after his release—when he moved into a NI ReACH apartment in Rockford, Illinois.

"I felt relief," Fort said. "But it should not take that long."

Fort's struggle to secure housing as someone who is



formerly incarcerated is not unusual, as many landlords have restrictive admissions policies. The fact that he was even able to eventually find public housing is unusual: most of the nation's 3,300 public housing authorities have admissions policies that bar formerly incarcerated people from living in their communities. These restrictions can separate formerly incarcerated people from family members and loved ones. And policies like these add to the burdens and stressors that formerly incarcerated people face, as a combination of laws, rules, and biases can block them from accessing services, securing jobs or professional licenses, getting loans, and exercising the right to vote.

"We paid our debt to society, so why do we still pay?" Fort said. "It is difficult for somebody who's trying to get a place and trying to do the right thing, without the support system to help navigate it."

In response, a growing number of local housing authorities are removing restrictions that prevent incarcerated people from receiving housing. NI ReACH is one of more than 26 public housing authorities across 17 states that have worked with the Vera Institute of Justice, through its work currently supported by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance, to remove such barriers. In May, the Tacoma Housing Authority in Washington announced it would stop automatically denying applicants based on conviction history. And earlier this year, Illinois became the first state in the country to pass legislation that limits public housing authorities' ability to refuse housing to people based on arrest and conviction records. That legislation also reduces the "look-back" period, or the amount of time public housing authorities can consider a person's conviction history, to six months from the application date.

In addition to the changes occurring at the local and state levels, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently announced that it will increase access to emergency housing vouchers for people leaving jails and prisons who have low incomes or are at risk of homelessness.

Eliminating restrictive housing policies can go a long way toward helping people who have been incarcerated get back on their feet, and Fort says change is desperately needed. In the meantime, he's focused on helping other people recently released from prison navigate the often-complicated process.

"Because I know that with a roof over their heads, they have the potential to be something greater." **V**

"We paid our debt to society, so why do we still pay? It is difficult for somebody who's trying to get a place and trying to do the right thing, without the support system to help navigate it."





ENDING NON-PUBLIC SAFETY STOPS PROTECTS COMMUNITIES

Prosecutors have enormous power to prevent and rectify the harms of the criminal legal system. Ninety-four percent of felony convictions are the result of a plea deal, and the prosecutor largely controls the charges offered, the sentence length, the type of sentence, and any conditions of community supervision. Through Motion for Justice, Vera helps prosecutors divert people away from incarceration and pursue racially equitable reforms.

Motion for Justice participants partner with a community-based organization and receive training support, technical assistance, and data analysis guidance. These partnerships offer opportunities to build community power and increased district attorney (DA) accountability. Vera assists by providing data, offering tools to build community engagement, and helping communities craft policies that increase justice in the criminal legal system.

In June, Motion for Justice added the following new partners, who are working to create lasting policies and practices that tackle the racial injustices deeply rooted in the criminal legal system.

Here are two examples of work changes that Motion for Justice partners are making in their communities.

Five years after Philando Castile was fatally shot after being pulled over for a broken taillight in Ramsey County, Minnesota, Motion for Justice Partner County Attorney John Choi announced that his office would no longer prosecute cases against people who were unfairly targeted and detained during non-public safety traffic stops. Non-public safety stops include stops for infractions that do not pose an immediate threat to safety, like broken taillights.

Following Ramsey County's announcement, Vera Trustee Caron Butler wrote about his first-hand experience with non-public safety stops and explained why this change in policy is so important:

A memorial including a photo of Philando Castile adorns the gate to the Minnesota governor's residence, where protesters demonstrated after Castile was shot to death by police officer Jeronimo Yanez during a traffic stop. Photo by Jim Mone for AP Images.

MOTION FOR JUSTICE'S NEW PARTNERS

WESTCHESTER COUNTY

District Attorney Miriam Rocah and the Youth Shelter of Westchester

FAIRFAX COUNTY

Commonwealth's Attorney Stephen Descano and Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources of Fairfax County

WASHTENAW COUNTY

Prosecutor Eli Savit and My Brother's Keeper Washtenaw County

ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY

District Attorney Deborah Gonzalez and People Living in Recovery

CHATHAM COUNTY

District Attorney Shalena Cook Jones and Savannah Feed the Hungry

KAUAI COUNTY

Prosecutor Justin Kollar and Hale Opio

MARION COUNTY

Prosecutor Ryan Mears and Horizon House

FRANKLIN COUNTY

District Attorney Matt Fogal and Racial Reconciliation

ARLINGTON AND FALLS CHURCH

District Attorney Parisa Dehghani-Tafti and Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources of Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church

I’VE BEEN TARGETED BY POLICE. TRUE PUBLIC SAFETY MEANS ENDING UNNECESSARY POLICE STOPS.

The first time I was picked up, I was 11 years old and in the wrong neighborhood—literally on the wrong side of the tracks in Racine, Wisconsin. I didn’t have bus fare, so I was walking home from school and had to pass through a white neighborhood. To the police, I didn’t look like I belonged. As a teenager, it continued. I was arrested more than 15 times and detained countless others. Can you imagine the impact that has on a kid?

Even in my second year after joining the NBA, the harassment continued—most of the time from traffic stops. They’d say there was something wrong with the car I was in or would find something even more frivolous. I had bought a nice foreign car to celebrate and was pulled over because the police wanted to check it out. They had never seen one like it before. That gave them all the cause they needed to detain me.

As an individual story, one might say it’s benign. But after you experience it that many times, you know exactly what it is—that feeling of being dehumanized. As a kid, when I realized I was going to be dehumanized, I felt like I should just run from the police. I knew I would always fit the description. I was getting stopped, searched, and detained frequently—for trivial reasons.

There’s an arrest every three seconds in the United States. Many of those are traffic stops. How many of these stops for minor infractions—as an excuse to look for evidence of bigger crimes—actually make people safer?

Sandra Bland was pulled over because a police officer said she failed to signal a turn. Philando Castile was stopped for an allegedly malfunctioning brake light. Daunte Wright was driving a car with an expired registration tag. None of these deaths were necessary. None of these stops were in the interest of public safety.

Police action should make people safer. I feel frustrated and angry thinking back on my experiences and knowing that today Black kids are still experiencing harassment. I’m very fortunate. I made it. I’ve had a very successful career and been able to escape what so many others never do. I’ve lived through the harsh realities of overenforcement in Black and brown neighborhoods, police violence, and racially biased fatal police shootings. Many people are only now waking up to this reality.

We know that the vast majority of non-public safety stops do not result in the discovery of drugs or weapons. Out of 297,000 frisks conducted in New York in 2012, for example, only 2 percent resulted in the discovery of

a weapon. With such clear evidence that non-public safety stops create pointless risk without making us safer, more and more law enforcement agencies are directing officers to cease stopping drivers for violations that don’t present a clear danger and focus on safety risks. Some prosecutors are also working to eliminate the harms of non-public safety traffic stops.

In Ramsey County, Minnesota, we celebrate a small victory. County Attorney John Choi has announced a new policy to not prosecute cases that are filed as a result of a non-public safety stop. Now, when an officer pulls over a driver for a minor traffic or equipment violation and uses the stop as a pretext to look for more serious charges, the DA’s office won’t press charges.

I’m hopeful that new policies from John Choi and other district attorneys who are interested in true public safety will make people safer by limiting unnecessary interactions with the police. These policies will save countless lives. I wish they’d been around when I was a kid.

I know now that there are so many more tools that we can use to reduce crime and the root causes of crime. We’ve been experiencing cycles of trauma for generations now, and mass incarceration has had its hand in making the situation worse. I’ve been speaking out about this for more than 20 years, and only now do I see bold progress within the criminal legal system. I’m grateful that people now are seeing the tremendous damage caused and are coming out in support of major structural changes.

CARON BUTLER
Vera Trustee

ELIMINATING FIREARM ENHANCEMENTS

In August, Motion for Justice partner Ingham County Prosecutor Carol Siemon announced a new policy that limits the use of a felony firearm charge enhancement to ensure that people are prosecuted only on their actual behavior.

Under a Michigan law adopted in 1976, felony possession of a firearm results in a mandatory minimum sentence of two years. This law was intended to deter gun violence, but its application drove mass incarceration and racial inequity, while failing to keep the public safer. Vera worked with community-based organization One Love Global on a series of public presentations about the power of the

prosecutor’s office that highlighted data on the disparities in prosecution based on race, income level, neighborhood, and gender. For example, in 2018, 90 percent of people in prison due only to this felony firearm charge enhancement and from Ingham County were Black. In 2018, 80 percent of people in prison with this charge enhancement from Ingham County were Black. During the presentations, Siemon listened to concerns from the community, answered questions about how her office functions, took ownership of the disparities, and expressed her commitment to enacting policies to address it.

As a result of this work, Siemon decided to limit application of the problematic Michigan felony firearm charge, issuing the following statement:

PROSECUTOR CAROL SIEMON—STATEMENT ON FELONY FIREARM POLICY

AUGUST 2021

[This] Felony Firearm policy was issued to address the very real and significant racial disparity of how this law has been utilized since its inception in 1976.

While the original legislative goal was to deter gun violence by creating a mandatory two-year prison sentence, the reality is that crime and gun violence continued to rise until it peaked in 1991. Not only did the felony firearm law not serve its stated function of reducing gun violence, it was another way, like the ill-conceived ‘war on drugs’ in the 1980s and 1990s, that dramatically increased the incarceration of Black men.

... I was elected both in 2016 and 2020 on a platform of using research, evidence, and data to enact policies and practices to promote the dual goals of protecting the interests of victims and our community while also reducing mass incarceration and racial injustice. This policy is another step to fulfill that promise.

In developing this policy, we considered the fact that if a firearm is used in a crime, it is covered in the sentencing guidelines for the

underlying felony offense, such as an armed robbery, homicide, or assault with intent to great bodily harm. We also considered other felony cases, such as a breaking and entering of a building, strangulation, or other very serious crimes where a firearm is not used. Ultimately, the question is whether we have the appropriate legal tools available to hold an offender accountable for his or her behavior without utilizing this ‘add-on’ charge that has resulted in 82 percent of those incarcerated on this statute statewide being Black. This is a race equity issue, not a gun violence issue. We remain committed to using multiple laws, tools, and strategies to reduce gun violence, promote public safety, and hold perpetrators accountable—without using this one particular law that no-one can question has disproportionately impacted Black community members. ... The criminal legal system is complicated and nuanced and the people of Ingham County deserve complicated and nuanced responses.

CAROL SIEMON
Ingham County Prosecutor

Ending Girls' Incarceration

Through Ending Girls' Incarceration, Vera and a coalition of government officials, community organizations, and directly impacted youth are working to zero out the country's confinement of girls and gender expansive youth. Progress is being made. Since our work began

70%

NEW YORK CITY HAS SEEN A 70 PERCENT (FROM 475 TO 144) AND 90 PERCENT DROP (52 TO 5) IN GIRLS' ANNUAL DETENTION AND PLACEMENT ADMISSIONS, respectively. In 2021, New York City hit zero in all girls' detention and long-term facilities—reaching as many as 18 days of zero girls in detention in a single month. Santa Clara has had a 58 percent drop in annual girls' detention admissions (268 in 2018 to 111 in 2020). They had over 15 consecutive days with zero youth in girls' facilities in 2021.

42%

HAWAII HAS HAD A 42 PERCENT DROP in annual girls' detention admissions (from 146 in 2018 to 84 in 2020).

0

MAINE HAD NINE MONTHS WITH ZERO LONG-TERM PLACEMENTS in the girls' unit at Long Creek in 2020.

The burden of girls' incarceration is disproportionately borne by girls and gender expansive youth of color. It's time we stop accepting locking children up as a solution to trauma. The end of incarceration is within reach, and we're honored to partner with decisive leaders who are lighting the path to zero.

LINDSAY ROSENTHAL
Project Director, Ending Girls' Incarceration



Systems, Not Girls, Need Fixing: Ending Girls' Incarceration

Forty-one thousand girls and gender expansive youth are detained each year and many are held in facilities that mirror adult jails—kept away from their families and communities for months or even years. They are routinely incarcerated for reasons that directly contradict decades of best practice—such as to punish noncriminal violations like skipping school, violating curfew, or for their own safety. In fact, if the country stopped incarcerating children for misdemeanors and low-level violations, we could reduce girls' incarceration by more than 80 percent, and many communities would get to zero overnight.

Residents sit at a table in a career guidance center at the Department of Juvenile Justice's Metro Regional Youth Detention Center in Atlanta. Photo by David Goldman for AP Images.

**“Young people in girls’
detention are overwhelmingly
survivors of violence.
Confinement does nothing
to address the drivers of girls’
incarceration, which often
include family conflict, housing
instability, and abuse.”**

We know incarceration is harmful and does not address the underlying causes of girls’ incarceration, which include the aftermath of trauma, violence, and racialized gender discrimination. Instead of addressing these needs, systems often see their role as fixing “broken girls.” Vera’s Initiative to End Girls’ Incarceration (EGI) is committed to ending the incarceration of youth on the girls’ side of the juvenile justice system in the United States by 2030 by changing the goal to “fixing broken systems that fail to recognize or support the potential of girls and gender expansive youth of color.” Instead of incarceration, we advocate for communities to invest in holistic solutions that advance freedom and healing—taking meaningful steps to realize fundamental rights to safety, well-being, and education.

In New York City, Santa Clara County, Hawai‘i, and Maine, EGI

works in partnership with government officials, community organizations, and coalitions of directly impacted youth to implement programs and policies that promote the safety and well-being of girls and gender expansive youth and make systemic changes that aim to address the root causes of their incarceration.

In Santa Clara County, for example, Vera’s diagnostic assessment showed the ways that concerns about a person’s safety and a lack of housing were driving decisions to confine girls and gender expansive youth. As part of a multisystem effort to prevent these so-called “safety confinements,” the board of supervisors passed a referral, or a request for information, requiring probation to work with Vera to produce recommendations for temporary housing solutions to prevent girls and gender expansive youth from being confined in detention

while longer term housing solutions are found for them. Vera’s assessment also highlighted how experiences of trauma, abuse, and marginalization are tightly woven together with economic opportunities for girls and gender expansive youth. Earlier this year, the county approved a pilot program to provide up to \$1,000 per month in economic support to young people at risk of commercial sexual exploitation or sexual violence.

In addition, the county received a \$1 million youth reinvestment grant from the state of California to focus on diversion for girls and gender expansive youth. The majority of the funding flowed directly to our close partners at the Young Women’s Freedom Center—an organization led by formerly incarcerated women, girls, and gender expansive people—to operate their national best-practice gender-responsive model in San Jose. In 2021, Santa Clara County had consistent stretches of time with zero girls in detention. This summer, the average daily population for the girls’ side of detention was one—and for the girls’ side of secure placement, it was zero.

Based on this success, countries throughout California are beginning to follow Santa Clara’s lead. Santa Clara County Juvenile Justice Gender Responsive Task Force co-hosted a convening with Vera bringing together system leaders from across the Bay Area to discuss a regional approach to ending girls’ incarceration, sharing promising practices from local work, and identifying opportunities for cross-county collaboration. **V**

Photo by Colleen Cahill for Alamy.



COMMUNICATING TO DRIVE CHANGE



The public receives numerous inaccurate, unfair, and prejudicial messages about the criminal legal system. Countering these messages and driving a narrative based on facts is imperative if we are to challenge and change harmful systems.

Through strategic communications, we combine groundbreaking research with the voices of people impacted by the criminal legal and immigration systems to create powerful messaging that can advance opportunities to create more equitable systems of justice.

Vera's communications team nearly tripled in size this year, increasing our capacity to correct misperceptions and drive public opinion toward reform. Through media coverage, blog posts, reports, op-eds, multimedia reports, and social media, Vera is reaching a larger audience and attracting more supporters to our work to achieve justice for all.

Vera's Power in Numbers multimedia campaign, narrated by NBA player Carmelo Anthony, invited the public to learn about and support Vera's work. Photo by Becky Stein Photography for the NBA.

VERA BY THE NUMBERS

Expanding Our Reach

700K

VERA'S WEBSITE ATTRACTED MORE THAN 700,000 USERS, from July 2020 to June 2021, who viewed our pages more than 2 million times.

300K

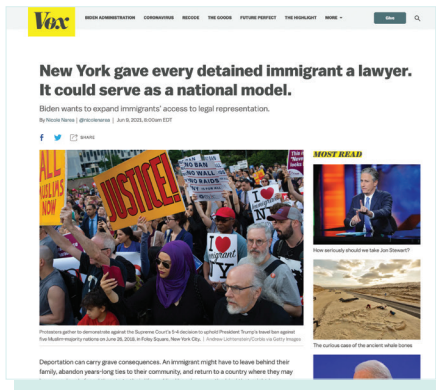
ACROSS EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS, we regularly engage nearly 300,000 users with our content and digital calls to action, activating at key moments and bringing them closer to our work.

Digital advocacy drives change. We use digital channels to reach, inform, inspire, and drive our audiences to action. Digital helps us engage people where they spend the most time online, across devices, and give them concrete and meaningful steps to be part of our work, our community, and our cause.

CHRIS CHOI
Digital Engagement Director

VERA MAKES NEWS

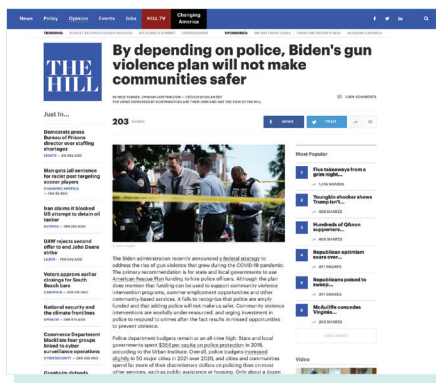
Reaching people through media coverage of criminal legal and immigration issues is an integral part of Vera's strategy to advance transformative change. Vera remains a trusted source of data, analysis, and expert commentary for national and local media outlets and appeared in hundreds of news articles, op-eds, radio and television programs, and online publications in 2021. Each of these appearances allows Vera to advance facts that support our goal to eradicate racism in the criminal legal and immigration systems and transform them into systems that allow our communities to thrive. Here is a sampling of Vera's most impactful 2021 media appearances:



VOX "New York Gave Every Detained Immigrant a Lawyer. It Could Serve as a National Model"

June 9, 2021

Vox published an article that encouraged the Biden administration to emulate Vera's NYIFUP as he seeks to make good on a promise to expand legal representation for immigrants who are facing deportation and cannot afford attorneys. In the article, Annie Chen, program director of Vera's SAFE Initiative, is quoted as saying programs like NYIFUP are being replicated around the country and are the building blocks of a national system.



THE HILL "By Depending On Police, Biden's Gun Violence Plan Will Not Make Communities Safer"

July 1, 2021

The Hill published an op-ed by Vera President Nicholas Turner that criticized a federal strategy to address gun violence with recommendations that state and local governments hire more police with American Rescue Plan funding. Increased investment in policing does not produce public safety, wrote Turner. He encouraged federal investment in community-based solutions to crime, including community violence intervention programs that use outreach, direct communications, and transformative relationships to engage, support, and address those at greatest risk of gun violence.

As media strategists, we shape narratives by creating a pipeline of stories and ideas that influence the press to shed light on the need for significant criminal legal system and immigration system reforms and to look at these issues with a racial equity lens.

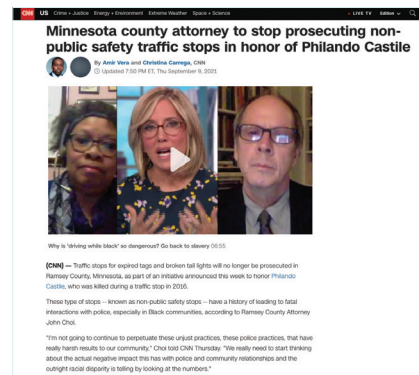
SONA RAI Media Strategy Director



NEW YORK DAILY NEWS "Bail Reform Isn't to Blame for Gun Violence"

July 27, 2021

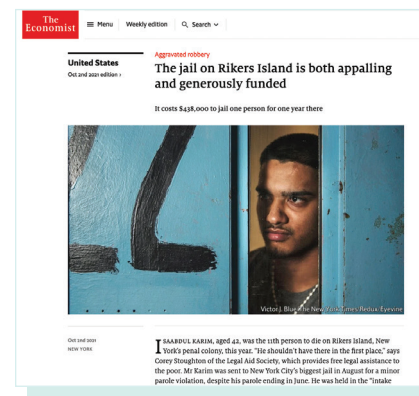
As opponents of bail reform sought to undo New York's landmark bail reform legislation with false narratives and fearmongering, Vera's Greater Justice New York Director Jullian Harris-Calvin wrote an op-ed in the *New York Daily News* debunking myths with facts. "There is no evidence that reform resulted in a violent crime spike," the op-ed reads. According to Calvin-Harris, "Calls to retrench criminal justice reform and prioritize traditional policing strategies threaten to resurrect racist and ineffective practices of prior administrations while ignoring the successes of community-centered violence interruption and public health interventions."



CNN "Minnesota County Attorney to Stop Prosecuting Non-Public Safety Traffic Stops in Honor of Philando Castile"

September 9, 2021

CNN reported on the decision of the office of Ramsey County Attorney John Choi in Minnesota to decline to prosecute cases against people who are unfairly targeted and detained during traffic stops. This move was a result of Choi's involvement with Motion for Justice, a partnership between Vera and Institute for Innovation in Prosecution. CNN quotes Vera as saying, "research shows that racial and ethnic bias play a role in police decisions to make this type of traffic stop."



THE ECONOMIST "The Jail on Rikers Island is Both Appalling and Generously Funded"

October 2, 2021

The Economist published an article about the shamefully high cost of incarcerating people on Rikers Island, the notorious jail complex that saw at least 12 deaths in 2021. It costs \$438,000 to jail one person there for a year. Vera's Greater Justice New York Director Jullian Harris-Calvin is quoted as saying that Rikers Island has been poorly managed for a long time. The only way to fix Rikers, she noted, is to "get people off that island."

KEY PUBLICATIONS AMPLIFY VERA'S RESEARCH AND CENTER THE STORIES OF DIRECTLY IMPACTED PEOPLE

The written word is a key component of any campaign to inform, persuade, and drive narrative and behavioral change. Vera's publications are an integral part of our overall communications strategy to advance Vera's core priorities.

CINDY REED
Editorial Strategy Director



Illustration by Michelle Garcia



ICE's Deadly Practice of Abandoning Immigrants with Disabilities and Mental Illnesses on the Street

September 2021

Vera released a multimedia report highlighting ICE's deadly practice of unsafely releasing people with serious medical and mental health conditions from immigration detention without care. The report—available in print and audio in both English and Spanish—included interviews with legal service providers of people directly impacted by ICE's unsafe release practices and demonstrated that there is no consistent policy for the release of people the government has deemed unable to advocate for themselves due to a serious mental health condition from immigration detention.

Vera Institute of Justice Annual Report 2021

What Jails Cost

March 2021

Since 2011, jail budgets across the United States have increased 13 percent—accounting for inflation—while jail populations declined 28 percent. Jail costs have continued to increase because counties have not downsized the number of jail employees, who account for 73 percent of jails' costs. *What Jails Cost* illustrates how if, in the 48 places Vera studied, local governments rightsized their jail budgets, the United States could save \$2.2 billion a year—and even more as jail populations decline further. This money could be allocated to other government programs that better serve the needs of communities.



Arrest Trends

May 2021

Every year, police across the United States arrest—or issue summonses and citations to—a staggering number of people: enforcement decisions that act as a gateway into the criminal legal system. The government invests considerable resources to capture information surrounding many policing practice indicators, including civilian-police interactions, arrest and clearance rates, crime and victimization, and more. However, due to data complexities and the fact that datasets are scattered over many different locations, these key indicators are often inaccessible to those who could benefit from the most: residents, advocates, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, journalists, and philanthropists. This interactive tool organizes arrest data so people can better understand arrests and the current footprint of policing in the United States.



Photoillustration by Gloria Mendoza

Women's Voices Blog Series

May 2021

As incarceration rates for men drop in some states, efforts to decarcerate jails and prisons have largely left women behind—and it's women who are leading the charge to right these wrongs. This blog series features the voices of four women who have seen how the system works first-hand and who are working for change.

LAUNCHING VERA ACTION

Vera seeks to dismantle and transform the legal systems that criminalize and harm Black communities and other communities of color, immigrants, and poor people. To advance this goal on a national scale, Vera launched Vera Action in early 2021 as an independent but closely aligned 501(c)(4) affiliate.

Building on the efforts of Vera's Advocacy and Partnerships department, Vera Action supports legislation, engages in lobbying, and seeks to influence key candidates and elected officials. Vera Action aims to influence legislators to prioritize racial justice, transform the criminal legal system, and deliver on a vision of a safer and more equitable country for all.

On the federal level, Vera Action and other national organizations called for the U.S. Treasury Department to expand its guidance on permissible uses of federal recovery funds so that they can be used for criminal justice and public safety investments. The Treasury Department did allow

for these types of investments, which paves the way for us to work with local jurisdictions including Denver, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Portland, Maine, to invest American Rescue Plan Act funds in innovative public safety programs like mobile crisis response teams, community violence interruption, diversion, supportive housing, and pretrial services.

Vera Action works in 13 states that span a wide geography and political spectrum—California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Tennessee, and Texas. In each state, Vera Action is developing a stable of go-to lobbyists who can be deployed to advance Vera's initiatives and issues, establish a Vera presence and name recognition in statehouses, and build infrastructure to effectively launch and run future legislative campaigns.

Since its launch, Vera Action has led or supported campaigns on three core Vera initiatives: expansion of the right to counsel for people in immigration detention, bail reform, and ending the incarceration of girls and gender expansive youth.

“

WE ARE ESTABLISHING A VERA PRESENCE AND NAME RECOGNITION IN STATEHOUSES, BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE TO EFFECTIVELY LAUNCH AND RUN FUTURE LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGNS.

”

1

EXPANDING THE SAFE INITIATIVE THROUGH LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY.

In 2021, Vera Action worked in coalition with other partners to pass legislation that expands the right to counsel for detained immigrants who are facing deportation in Colorado, Illinois, and Nevada. In June 2021 in Colorado, for example, Governor Jared Polis signed into law a bill to create a statewide Immigration Legal Defense Fund to provide legal representation to detained immigrants who are subject to immigration proceedings but can't afford a lawyer. For the 2021–2022 state fiscal year, this act appropriates \$100,000. In March 2021, in Nevada, the state appropriated \$500,000 to the Immigration Clinic at the William S. Boyd School of Law of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, for the purpose of providing pro bono legal services to immigrants facing deportation.

These wins, along with the heightened awareness raised in states like Maryland, where immigrant rights legislation passed the legislature but was vetoed by the governor, all build toward Vera's goal to create a national deportation defense program for all immigrants, regardless of their income, race, national origin, or history with the criminal legal system.

2

BAIL REFORM AND DEFENSE AGAINST BAIL BACKLASH.

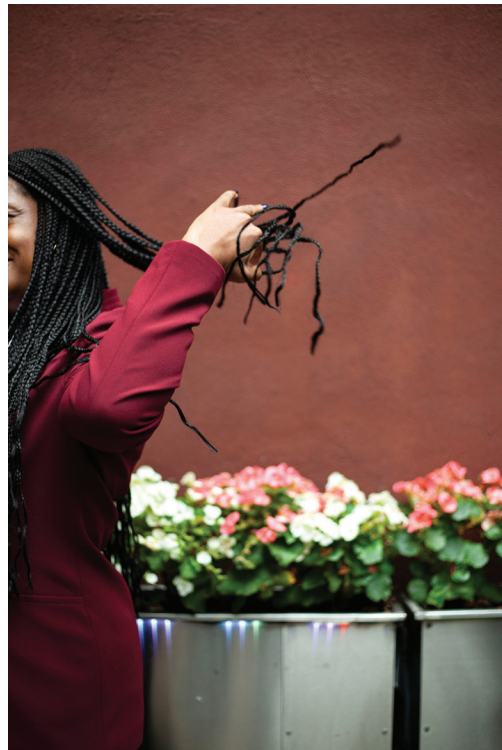
The expertise Vera gained through its major role in the passage of bail reform in New York in 2020—our understanding of what constitutes good legislation and how to fight backlash—served us well in our bail work this legislative session in California, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and Texas. In Michigan, Vera Action is working with legislative champions to lay groundwork for legislation that adheres to the four pillars of good bail reform: promoting public safety, reducing jail populations, eliminating racial disparities, and diminishing the use of money.

3

ENDING GIRLS' INCARCERATION.

Vera worked closely with a coalition in Maine to win bipartisan support for a bill that would effectively eliminate the use of juvenile detention for youth by mandating closure of Maine's one secured youth detention facility and replacing those beds with community-based placement options. The bill passed the Maine legislature but was vetoed by the governor. Vera Action continues to advocate with Governor Janet Mills to pass a modified version of the bill that will likely result in few to no girls incarcerated in the state.

What Do We Mean When We Say “Strategic Advocacy”?



AN INTERVIEW WITH YOLANDE CADORE

Photos by Jeanette Spicer.

Yolande Cadore is Vera’s new director of movement strategy, connecting the organization’s internal advocacy strategy to broader movement goals to end criminalization and mass incarceration in the United States. In this role, she works to ensure that the goals of Vera’s advocacy campaigns align with the vision of the people and communities most impacted by criminal legal and immigration policies. Prior to joining Vera, Yolande served as the director of strategic partnerships at the Drug Policy Alliance, where she connected local drug policy reform partners to the alliance’s national and broader drug policy reform movement goals. In this Q and A, she discusses her new role at Vera and her vision for what makes an effective advocacy campaign.

As a longtime organizer and advocate, why the shift to Vera?

The decision to make Vera my professional home was an easy one for me. Vera is known nationally in the criminal legal and immigration justice field as a strong and effective defender of justice-involved people. I am also drawn by the organization’s compelling vision and mission, which I see as relevant and timely given the dire state of the criminal legal and immigration systems.

Also, Vera’s reputation for providing data and evidence needed to effect change in the criminal legal and immigration systems was another big draw for me. I believe Vera is strategically positioned to play an important role in the reform movement by collaborating with impacted individuals and communities to reframe the conversation on safety, fairness, and justice. Aligning its 60 years of government insights and learning with people power can drive much-needed change in the criminal legal and immigration systems.

This is a brand-new role in Vera’s Advocacy and Partnerships department, a department that is also quite new. What’s been the most exciting part of building out advocacy in this organization? And what has been most challenging?

What is most exciting about building out advocacy at Vera is the immense possibility and potential to energize and mobilize colleagues to become change agents. We have the opportunity to leverage their skills and expertise to dismantle the criminal legal and immigration systems and to reimagine and advocate for new approaches to addressing the issues of crime and immigration.

I am also excited about working with colleagues to think strategically about ways to leverage Vera’s power and access to powerful people to open doors that remain closed to poor and Black and brown people—people who have been shut out of places where decisions about their fate and futures as justice-involved people are made.

As for the challenge, this is a new role and a different approach to driving change for many Verans. I have learned from past experiences that becoming an effective advocate takes time. It is a process of unlearning what we once thought was true about social change processes and what it takes to change hearts and minds, and reeducating and re-grounding ourselves in a different set of beliefs about power, positionality, and what it means to collaborate and share power with people who are considered invisible and without voice by those in positions of political power.

In trying to address this challenge, I am aware that we are working to dismantle systems with deep roots and that we are fighting opponents of our vision who have a dogged commitment to maintaining the status quo—where poor and Black and brown people are systemically marginalized, deemed invisible, and without voice or vision. We are fighting opponents who see criminalization, detention, and incarceration as forms of racial and social control. To win, we must remain focused, be disciplined, and be committed to our vision, goals, and agenda for change. As Dr. Martin Luther King reminded us, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

What would you say are the most critical features of a well-run advocacy campaign?

In deciding on an advocacy campaign, the first question I ask is: is this issue winnable? The second question is: will it make a real, meaningful, and measurable difference in the lives of people that we are organizing or advocating with in communities? The third question is: will the power dynamic shift in that community?

I believe that the work of effective advocates is to alter power relationships between individuals with power and people with little or no power to decide, determine, and plan for themselves, their families, and communities their current lived realities and their futures. At the end of our advocacy campaigns, my hope is that our partners and allies in government will have a new way of relating to and engaging with individuals who are impacted by their laws and policies. I hope they see community leaders as partners and collaborators who have agency and can speak for themselves and decide for themselves their desired reality. I hope they understand that when

we share power, everyone wins.

Other critical features of a well-run advocacy campaign are being clear about the problem you are trying to solve (conducting a thorough problem analysis); having a clear understanding of the social, economic, and political factors shaping the landscape in which the problem exists; and understanding why reshaping the landscape—reallocating resources, organizing unorganized people and allied organizations and aligning key and influential stakeholders as advocates—will lead to desired outcomes that transform individuals and communities. Also, at the end, evaluate the campaign. Take any lessons learned and use those lessons to develop more robust and effective campaigns in the future.

One of your responsibilities is to help build the skills that Vera staff need to engage in effective advocacy, whether that's working on a campaign, passing legislation, partnering with movement allies, etc. How do you translate your experience as a doer - someone who has developed, led, and won campaigns - to the role of teacher?

The translation is less from doer to teacher and more from doer to coach and collaborator. Coaching Verans on this new journey is an opportunity for me, as well as my colleagues, to “make this road by walking.” That means acquiring the skills needed to drive change, strategically and effectively, while centering the experiences and stories of those with the most to gain when we win!

I look forward to making “good trouble” with an amazing group of colleagues who share a commitment to dismantling the criminal legal and immigration systems and to collectively advocating with them for a society that is just, fair, and equitable. **V**



“I am excited about working with colleagues to think strategically about ways to leverage Vera’s power and access to people in positions of power to open doors that remain closed to poor and Black and brown people—people that have been shut out of places where decisions about their fate and futures as justice-involved people are made.”

FINANCIAL INFORMATION 2021

REVENUES BY TYPE

Federal	\$142,700,000	75.9%
Foundations	\$21,200,000	11.3%
Contributions	\$15,600,000	8.3%
Individual & others	\$2,200,000	1.2%
State & city	\$6,400,000	3.4%

TOTAL **\$188,100,000** **100%**

Pass-thru funding: \$119,100,000

EXPENSES

Programs	\$165,100,000
Program support and management	\$18,100,000
Development/fundraising	\$1,700,000

TOTAL **\$184,900,000**

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