

**Opening Doors to Housing
Request for Proposals (RFP) for Technical Assistance**
Applications will be accepted until December 1, 2024, at 11:59 p.m. PST
Applications should be submitted via email to openingdoors@vera.org.

Questions about this solicitation should be directed to cstrumph@vera.org.

I. Background

Safe, affordable housing is essential for the success and well-being of the 79 million people navigating life with a conviction or arrest history in the United States.ⁱ Access to housing is associated with positive outcomes, including greater access to family support, higher likelihood of employment, better ability to rebuild supportive social networks, and lower likelihood of further criminal legal system contact. However, people with conviction histories face barriers when trying to secure housing. These barriers impact public safety and community well-being and contribute to the cyclical relationship between housing insecurity and criminal legal system involvement: people with conviction histories are 10 times more likely to be homeless, and people who are homeless are 11 times more likely to interact with law enforcement.ⁱⁱ It is unclear exactly how many people with a criminal record are impacted by exclusionary housing policies, however, the incidents of people denied housing because of their conviction histories—often decades-old records—are a frequent occurrence nationally.

There is growing interest nationally to remove barriers to housing for people with conviction histories. For example, in April 2024, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) proposed regulations to remove barriers to HUD-subsidized housing. The proposed rules protect people with conviction histories from automatically being denied from HUD-assisted housing solely on the basis of their arrest and conviction records.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2021, the Louisiana Housing Corporation (LHC) adopted a new tenant screening policy that increases housing access for people with conviction histories for all housing supported by LHC. Similarly, the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority implemented changes that require a “low barrier” screening process for supportive housing. Several other states have also implemented inclusive screening policies for people with conviction histories (policies of other state agencies can be found in [Opening Doors to Affordable Housing: The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program and People with Conviction Histories](#)).^{iv}

II. Opening Doors to Housing Initiative

Founded in 1961, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) is a national nonprofit organization that partners with local organizations, impacted communities, and government agencies to end the overcriminalization and mass incarceration of people of color, immigrants, and people experiencing poverty. The Opening Doors to Housing Initiative (Opening Doors) at Vera seeks to remove barriers to housing, as a person’s conviction history should not be a barrier to having a roof over their head. Since 2017, Vera has collaborated with public housing authorities (PHAs) in 12

states to decrease housing barriers for people with conviction histories. Opening Doors is now working to increase statewide housing access through policy change in state legislatures and technical assistance with state housing finance agencies. Vera also produces research that brings attention to the challenges faced by people with records when trying to obtain housing, the impact of housing barriers for people with conviction histories, and best practices for creating inclusive communities that increase public safety and community well-being.

In 2023, Vera selected Maryland's Department of Housing and Community Development as the recipient of 12 months of technical assistance. During this time, Vera interviewed key stakeholders from the system-impacted, housing discrimination, and housing development communities. Vera also conducted research into Maryland's housing landscape and existing policies that limit, or not, the housing opportunities of the state's justice-involved population. Vera then developed a series of recommendations on how the Department of Housing and Community Development could expand access to housing for this population.

III. Technical Assistance to Housing Finance Agency

A. Eligibility

Through this RFP, Vera will select state housing finance agencies (HFAs) that are interested in receiving and would benefit from at least 12 months of technical assistance to design programs to increase housing opportunities and/or analyze and modify their policies to codify or expand housing opportunities for people with conviction histories. Applications can be submitted in partnership with community-based organizations, but the lead applicant must be a state housing finance agency. **There is no financial commitment required from the HFA.**

B. Overview of Technical Assistance

Vera will work with each selected site to develop a technical assistance plan. That plan may include some of the activities listed below. The actual work to be performed for each selected site will be specified in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Vera and the site.

Meetings with the housing finance agency: Vera staff will meet with the HFA to understand its goals for the project as well as its concerns and anticipated challenges. Meetings with Vera and HFA will occur monthly.

Meetings with stakeholders: Vera staff will also meet with the key stakeholders (such as reentry service providers, housing developers, fair housing centers, LIHTC property owners, tenant associations, home builders associations, property management associations, probation/parole officers, and corrections leaders) to learn about the unique needs, challenges, and opportunities in the state, and to build relationships that may support the goals of this project.

Policy and program assistance: Vera staff will review the HFA's existing policies governing LIHTC and other financing and will assist with the process of developing new policies and/or scoring

criteria. Vera will also review existing programs and may assist in the development of new programs to support the needs of people impacted by the criminal legal system.

Implementation assistance: Throughout the term of the project, Vera will provide assistance with planning and implementation of recommended policy changes.

Opportunities for cross-site exchange: Vera will help foster cross-site learning through various activities, including webinars to share promising practices and strategize about implementing programs and effecting policy changes.

C. Expectations for Participating Housing Finance Agencies

The selected HFAs will liaise regularly with the Vera team and develop, maintain, and support partners and stakeholders. The following components are also essential to the initiative:

Site lead: This person will be the primary liaison between the HFA and the Vera team and will participate in regular project management calls with Vera staff, help coordinate logistics for Vera site visits, and educate key stakeholders about the project.

Development of stakeholder group: Vera staff will work with the site lead to identify and develop a group of stakeholders who are interested in assisting with the reshaping of policy in order to better serve communities and people with conviction histories.

Policy documents: The HFA will provide or assist Vera in obtaining HFA policy documents in support of its technical assistance.

Publication rights: The HFA will grant Vera permission to publish reports, data analysis, and other publications related to the Opening Doors' technical assistance. The opportunity for review and commentary will be provided prior to any publication.

Meetings:

HFA will meet with Vera on a regular monthly basis. HFA will also attend at least one meeting with another HFA that has employed similar policy changes, facilitated by Vera. Vera will also plan and facilitate meetings with local advocates, non-profit leaders, and formerly incarcerated community members for the HFA to attend.

IV. Application Requirements

Eligible sites will be selected to receive technical assistance of the type outlined in section III.B above for a duration of up to 12 months. The actual duration may be extended if there are specific timelines associated with policy changes or any necessary approvals within the agency. The actual length of each project will be agreed upon in an MOU executed between Vera and each site.

Applicants must submit their application via email to openingdoors@vera.org. Applications must include: (1) a letter of intent and commitment, (2) an application narrative, and (3) letters of support.

1. Letter of Intent and Commitment: This is a collaborative effort, and its success depends on the commitment and engagement of the HFA. The Letter of Intent and Commitment should be signed by the HFA's executive director and indicate the HFA's commitment to:

- Modify its policies and/or QAP to codify or expand eligibility to affordable housing for individuals with conviction histories;
- Develop QAP criteria that incentivize developers and beneficiaries of LIHTC to construct affordable housing accessible to people with criminal conviction histories;
- Work with Vera to create an implementation strategy for relevant policy changes;
- Engage and collaborate with Vera as well as the relevant stakeholders throughout the project;
- Provide a suitable, proactive, and accessible site lead throughout the project;
- Identify and facilitate the involvement of supportive stakeholders throughout the project;
- Grant Vera permission to publish reports, data analysis, and other publications related to the Opening Doors' technical assistance (opportunity for review and commentary will be provided prior to any publication); and
- Enter into an MOU with Vera, formalizing these commitments and other details regarding the project.

2. Application Narrative: The items listed below should be submitted as a narrative. (Copies of relevant documents or sections of documents may be included as attachments.) The narrative, excluding attachments, should not exceed 5 pages, utilize a 12-point font, maintain 1-inch margins, and be double-spaced.

Statement of the problem and goals: The statement of the problem should provide a brief overview of the HFA's reasons for applying and its goals for this reform effort. This section should also detail the HFA's current policies regarding tenant screening criteria for people with conviction histories in developments, programs, and properties funded, owned, and/or managed by the HFA. An overview of the LIHTC application and review process should include how criminal background check criteria are scored or evaluated, if applicable.

Application reviewers are looking for applications with 1) a clear explanation of why the HFA wants to revise its policies to increase housing access for people with conviction histories; 2) a clear indication of their willingness to understand the current reentry housing landscape within their state and collaborate across sectors; and, importantly, 3) why the timing is right to engage in this work now.

Policy change process: This section should describe who needs to review and approve policy changes (for example, board members or commissioners).

Staffing: Please identify the proposed site lead for this project and describe why that person has been selected. Describe how the HFAs leadership and staff will support the site lead, and please provide a description of the site lead's other responsibilities and availability to commit to this project over the 12-month period.

3. Letters of Support [optional]: The HFA may submit additional letters of support from other partners, such as reentry service providers, housing developers, fair housing centers, LIHTC property owners, tenant associations, home builders associations, property management associations, probation/parole officers, and corrections leaders.

V. Selection Decisions: Timeline and Process for the Selection of TA Sites

Applications will be accepted until **11:59 p.m. PST on December 1, 2024**. Vera staff will review and score all of the proposals and will conduct telephone conversations with short-listed applicants to discuss the initiative, ascertain the strength of commitment, and resolve any unanswered questions or concerns. Applications will be scored on the basis of each site’s articulated commitment to the goals described in this RFP; the site’s need, as well as openness and readiness, for technical assistance to accomplish its goals; demonstrated ability to carry out policy change; and clear indication and evidence of support.

Below is the anticipated timeline for the application process:

- October 1, 2024: Applications open
- December 1, 2024: Submission deadline
- December 20, 2024: Completion of semi-finalist review
- January 15, 2025: Notification of selected proposals.

Vera will publicly announce the selections by February 2025 .

Terms of RFP

Vera has the right to amend or cancel this RFP at any time. Any changes to this RFP will be made in writing. Vera reserves the right, at the time of evaluation of any response, to request any additional information it deems necessary. Vera will be the sole judge of responses received. Any response that does not comply with the terms of this RFP, including deadlines, may not be considered. Vera will not return any materials it receives and will not reimburse applicants for any costs incurred in developing a response.

ⁱ The Prison Policy Initiative, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024,” March 14, 2024, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html>

ⁱⁱ For likelihood of experiencing homelessness, Lucius Couloute, “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among Formerly Incarcerated People,” Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018, <https://perma.cc/2JST-EEJC>. For increased interactions with law enforcement, Tristia Bauman, Rajan Bal, Karianna Barr, et al., Housing Not Handcuffs 2019: Ending the Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities (Washington, DC: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2019), 50, <https://perma.cc/A7JU-5HDL>.

ⁱⁱⁱ 89 FR 25332, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/10/2024-06218/reducing-barriers-to-hud-assisted-housing>.

^{iv} John Bae, Opening Doors to Affordable Housing: The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program and People with Conviction Histories (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2023), 9-10, <https://perma.cc/U6L7-48LN>.