

THE VERA INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

Brief Statement of Mission and Method

The Vera Institute of Justice is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of urban life and to fostering efficiency, accountability and economy in public agencies. Vera works with government to introduce innovations in policy and practice that reduce crime, raise the quality of justice, conserve scarce resources, and remove obstacles to productive lives for those who have become dependent on the public purse.

Over the past twenty-five years, in scores of experiments and demonstration programs, Vera has combined direct action with sustained research to fashion ways for government to work better. **Vera's** experience teaches that private citizens, with the patience to probe the roots of problems, with the right combination of skills and methods, and with freedom **from** the constraints that crisis management regularly imposes on public officials, can often break down complex policy dilemmas into manageable issues. By staying with an issue until their effort yields a workable solution, by taking responsibility for field testing new approaches, by accepting the risk of failure which makes innovation difficult, and by insisting that failure along the way

be analyzed and used to refine program design, a private agency can help bring about specific, practical changes for the better. As a creative, independent partner with government and with service-providers in the voluntary sector, Vera has been the catalyst for just such changes in areas of social policy where the problems are often thought to be intractable.

Vera's experience is that, when innovative solutions are designed, tested and refined in partnership with government, they can be introduced for systematic use by existing public or private agencies, or by a newly created non-profit enterprise. Over time, the Institute has found that following these techniques in New York City often provokes adaptation of the work to other urban settings, in this country and abroad. Vera contributes to this diffusion of practical knowledge by publications that document the underlying problems, detail the trial-and-error process, and report the results of research on the effects of the reforms.

Vera's mission is deliberately kept broad, so that the Institute may assist wherever the need for its particular approach -- practical action combined with sustained research -- matches its capacities and policy concerns. Yet, at any given time its portfolio of program development efforts contains only a handful of sharply defined issues. This focus permits Vera to give sustained attention to problems that defy quick solution and that are particularly difficult for crisis-driven urban governments to solve.

WHAT VERA IS AND IS NOT

Vera is a catalyst for change, a demonstrator of innovative approaches, a source of practical knowledge. It takes the time to research problems for itself, after reviewing what is already known. It takes responsibility for testing and refining the ideas that emerge from its work and for institutionalizing the resulting reforms. Vera's working relationships with government agencies give responsible public officials access to independent judgment on matters about which Vera staff are informed and experienced. But Vera is not a consulting firm. It does not do a quick study, offer advice and move on.

Vera changes things. The focus of all its work, including its research, is on action; the rationale for its work is reform. It doesn't just study things. Vera is not merely a "think-tank."

Vera works quietly with public agencies in such a way that, when a new approach has been satisfactorily demonstrated, officials can redefine problems and can respond positively to pressure for reform arising from whatever quarter. The Institute does not come to this partnership with an agenda of preconceived solutions; it is not burdened with an ideology of left or right.

Vera creates independent non-profit agencies to carry on some of the new approaches it develops; others become standard operating procedure in existing government or voluntary agencies. By "spinning off" reforms when they are ready, Vera can free its core staff of operational responsibilities so that they can devote their energies to further innovation. Thus, Vera does not aim to be a holding company for service-providing subsidiaries. At the same time, it retains an active interest in the independent non-profit agencies it has created and in the new knowledge generated by them.

Vera's core staff of professionals is supported by foundation grants. From that small but experienced base, the Institute enters into contractual relationships with the federal, state and local agencies of government responsible for addressing the social and fiscal problems in which Vera takes an interest. When the statutory mandate of such an agency identifies it as the ultimate consumer of the kind of usable knowledge Vera can generate, the willingness of the agency to join Vera in a program development effort is taken as a sign of its openness to adopting new approaches that Vera might develop.

Vera's resources are its personnel, its experience, and its reputation. Up to now it has not possessed an endowment with which to ensure its survival. It is currently seeking sufficient endowment for the endowment income to replace the general support grants on which it has depended year to year, to maintain its core staff.

WHAT VERA HAS DONE

A brief history of Vera illustrates its techniques and its areas of concern. Vera began its course of action-research in 1961, with the Manhattan Bail Project. Overcrowding of the local jail was threatening the public purse and putting severe pressures on the quality of justice. Rising numbers of poor, mostly minority defendants were being detained for long periods, pending court action on charges -- many of them minor charges -- of which they had not been found guilty and for which jail sentences were unlikely in the event of conviction. Their imprisonment at high public expense was the result of their inability to pay the fees of bail bondsmen.

After careful digging for facts and discussions with judges and other responsible public officials, Vera staff concluded that, for many, detention was unjust to the individual and wasteful to the larger community. Money bail was unnecessary for individuals so firmly tied to their communities that they would not abscond; money bail was unjust because inability to pay fees was thwarting the principle that an accused is innocent until proven guilty; and money bail was inefficient because the high capital and operating costs of jails were being wasted on holding persons who were likely to return for trial on their own.

Vera's staff devised an experimental project in which judges were systematically presented with verified information about the community ties of defendants for whom pretrial money bail seemed unnecessary. In the pilot project, only 56 of the first 3,505 persons released without bail willfully failed to return to court. Because Vera had conducted the pilot as a proper experiment, subjecting the new procedures to controlled research, the impact was clear and the findings were credible to others. The experiment in New York triggered systemic reform throughout hundreds of U.S. jurisdictions and in several foreign countries as well. Vera "spun off" the Manhattan Bail Project in 1964, when responsibility for its City-wide operations was placed with the Department of Probation. That attempt at institutionalizing the reform failed, and in 1972 the City asked Vera to try again. The result was Vera's Pretrial Services Agency, which has been an independent, non-profit agency since 1977 (the New York City Criminal Justice Agency).

Another result of the Manhattan Bail Project was to launch Vera on a series of reform efforts similarly constructed, making use of the same basic action-research technique.

Vera's Bowery Project sparked a national shift to substitute simple but humane detoxification facilities for the inappropriate and overburdened arrest and court processing of derelict alcoholics. Vera developed a technique, now called "supported work," for moving welfare-dependent populations into the labor

force and keeping them there. In New York, Vera has applied this technique successfully to the mentally retarded, the blind, the deaf, the formerly addicted, the recently imprisoned and other chronically unemployed and under-employed groups. These demonstrations have, in turn, been adapted to conditions in more than a dozen cities and have inspired revision of federal and state statutes. A score of other projects, covering pre-trial diversion, mediation, community service sentencing, court administration, prosecutorial case management, correctional administration and parole decision-making have led to wider reforms that reduce costs, enhance the quality of justice, and increase public safety.

Vera's design and pilot operation of a general transportation system for the frail elderly and the handicapped, using mini-vans equipped with wheelchair lifts, sophisticated computer programs and complex financing and billing programs, has brought mobility to 8,000 homebound New Yorkers at surprisingly low cost; the State last year mandated extension of this service to the rest of the City. Vera's current demonstration programs in the supervision and employment of ex-offenders and its development of new financing and management arrangements for creating low-cost, permanent housing for the homeless hold promise of other useful reforms where the City's need is acute.

In the mid-1970's, Vera's Victim/Witness Assistance Project served as a laboratory for development of knowledge about victims' needs and hardships and about techniques to relieve them. Now the New York City Victim Services Agency, this project has helped provoke and shape a national effort to respond comprehensively to victims' needs and to make the criminal justice system itself less burdensome and less costly to them and to other witnesses.

The Institute collaborated with the New York City Police Department in a string of projects that began in the mid-1960's. This partnership has covered virtually all aspects of urban policing, from rules on the use of deadly force to techniques for keeping officers with court cases on patrol except when actually needed at the courthouse.

In recent years, the Institute has been assisting the Police Department to develop, test, and implement throughout the city new techniques for detectives' handling of felony arrests and new strategies for deployment of the patrol force. Again, other jurisdictions have kept abreast of this program development work and have used the knowledge emerging from it to improve the performance of their police forces and the safety of their streets.

HOW VERA MAKES PROGRAM DECISIONS

1. Criteria

The Institute attempts, while retaining its essentially entrepreneurial character, to focus program development where the following criteria are met:

- a) Vera's own research or project work suggests that a serious social policy problem persists and is not receiving adequate attention.
- b) Solution of the problem would reduce public expenditures or would make more efficient use of scarce resources (e.g., police officers, prosecutors, judges, social workers) and would help relieve injustice or hardship among the chronically out-of-work, the handicapped, the homeless, the infirm, or the victims and offenders enmeshed in the criminal justice system.
- c) Vera's staff have come upon a remedial idea for which further development is necessary.
- d) The idea is one that, if it works, would benefit directly or indirectly the entire community.
- e) The idea is not being adequately developed, tested or demonstrated elsewhere or by public agencies in New York.
- f) The idea is one for which New York City provides a suitable test or research site, or, if there is a better site elsewhere, New York City is likely to benefit from the knowledge generated.
- g) The problem and the remedial idea are suited to Vera's action-research approach, and the Institute's core staff can carry it through.
- h) There exists or can be created sufficient government interest in the idea to make its ultimate incorporation into practice or policy plausible.
- i) The proposed effort builds upon or can be integrated with the corpus of Vera's work to date, and embarking on it will leave Vera with the staff resources necessary to carry through the other developmental efforts underway.

2. Board Review

The Institute's Board of Trustees, acting through its Program Committee, reviews proposed program development efforts against these criteria. It emphasizes efforts that would build upon Vera's store of experience in crime control and the administration of justice. When a program development effort calls for a pilot or demonstration project, this committee sets a date -- usually no less than two and no more than five years away -- for either terminating the program or spinning it off into a government agency or as an independent non-profit agency.

Spin-off or cessation of operational responsibility for action projects is, ultimately, essential to preserve Vera's vitality as a source of innovation; the allegiance of Vera's core staff must be to the future, not the past. But the Board, acting through the Program Committee, can change the sunset date of a project, as evolving conditions require: A program that no longer appears likely to produce usable knowledge or practical reforms can be terminated early. Spin-off of a demonstration can be delayed where premature severing of Vera's direct management responsibility would injure the program or the Institute.

The Program Committee assesses the soundness of research designs and the feasibility of plans for operational tests of new practices. For both of these functions, it often secures the assistance of outside, project-specific advisory committees.

Since most Vera program development efforts require interplay between formal research and the practical experience of managing pilot and demonstration programs, the Program Committee has responsibility for productive integration, over time, of the action and research components of Vera's work.

3. Dissemination

In New York, Vera works directly with the agencies responsible for assessing the merits of new approaches and, if they are found to be helpful, implementing them. The Institute also attempts to make the knowledge, developed in the large urban laboratory provided by New York City, available in usable form to other cities. The Program Committee sets policy for this dimension of the Institute's work. From time to time Vera dispatches technical assistance staff from New York to jurisdictions that seek assistance, but the principal method for disseminating the knowledge and inspiring reforms elsewhere is the Institute's publications program.

THE NEED FOR A VERA INSTITUTE

Cities are complicated, stressed and difficult to manage. These conditions burden citizens and officials alike, but they can and should inspire innovation and reform as well. Public officials, for whom crisis is a norm and the risk of failure is high, often need some confidence that a plausible solution is at hand before they can reasonably be expected to redefine the

problems faced by agencies under their control, and before committing government to reforms. Because government has this need for the sort of partnership offered by Vera, the Institute has been able to play a useful role in efforts to improve the conditions of urban life and to heighten the efficiency, accountability and economy of government.