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The Journal of Philanthropy

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**Vera Institute: Balancing the Scales of Justice**  
**Executive Assistance: An Idea Whose Time Has Come**  
**Flexner Report: Taking a New Look**

March-April 1981  
Volume 22, Number 2





*Upon release from jail, this man found work immediately through the Neighborhood Work Project.*

The mayor of New York City is very angry these days. There is too much crime, he says, and too little being done about it.

So Mayor Edward Koch has written to more than 100 state and city officials in the courts and law-enforcement agencies and told them he wants to know who is to blame and what can be done.

"Crime is increasing," Mayor Koch notes in his letters, "and the criminal justice system is unable or unwilling to protect the public." To document this thesis, Koch asks for "specific examples of people or agencies who seemed to mishandle criminal cases."

The mayor also carried his crusade to a special state senate committee hearing on the criminal justice system in New York City, reminding them that crime remains "the complaint most often made" by New Yorkers.

"Knowledgeable individuals, without exception, agree that the criminal

justice system does not function as well as it should," says the mayor. Koch and the committee do have at least one very good source of such information: the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York-based organization that over the past 20 years has found answers to a number of questions bedeviling the mayor and judges, district attorneys, and police, parole, and corrections officials he has been prodding.

The mayor, of course, is fully aware of Vera's record, as one of his closest advisers, Herbert J. Sturz, his first deputy mayor for criminal justice, set up and headed Vera until he accepted the city job more than three years ago.

One of Vera's staunchest admirers is Mitchell Sviridoff, until recently vice president for national affairs of the Ford Foundation, which has been Vera's biggest nongovernment funding source (more than \$5 million) since its inception in 1961.

"It's an extraordinary organization," says Sviridoff, "with extraordinary skills and an extraordinary record of accomplishment. It has a style that is unique in its modesty and understatement, considering its record of accomplishment. It really has everything—competency, depth, creativity, and imagination."

Vera has applied these considerable talents to dozens of programs designed to provide better treatment for those caught up in the criminal-justice system, and to make the system itself more efficient. Many of its programs have been duplicated in cities throughout the country, and some have made their way to Europe.

"Vera has a reputation that is worldwide," says Sviridoff. "It is without question the best center for research and demonstration, not only in the area of criminal justice but in problems relating to the underclasses generally."

Vera has been drawing this kind of

praise from a variety of sources ever since the late Louis Schweitzer, a Russian immigrant who made a fortune in this country as a chemical engineer and manufacturer of cigaret paper, became incensed over the prevailing bail system of his day.

In 1960, Schweitzer, then 61, discovered that many poor people were kept in jail to await trial after they were arrested simply because they couldn't raise bail.

At the same time, Schweitzer became friendly with Sturz, a young editor at *Boy's Life* magazine who had written about criminal justice.

Schweitzer gave Sturz \$500 to help fund a conference and an invitation to visit New York City jails. Both men were disturbed by what they saw, and Schweitzer hired Sturz to explore the bail problem and find a solution. That initial program became known as the Manhattan Bail Project. The manner in which the project was set up promoted and set the pattern of others to follow.

Sturz talked with those involved in the criminal-justice system from judges to suspects. Most lawyers, bail bondsmen, and corrections officials were fatalistic. Many said pretrial detention had always existed and probably always would. Some suggested it might even be a good idea.

The obvious approach to Sturz and Schweitzer, who refused to accept the prevailing attitude, was to establish a special fund for bail money. Someone then suggested another approach: Release more prisoners without bail if they appeared to be trustworthy. Such a novel concept would, of course, require some basic statistics to gain support.

With the help of some law students, Sturz researched court records extensively and conducted hundreds of prison interviews. Their studies showed many people awaiting trial in prison had strong family and community ties and held regular jobs. If such ties were verified at the time of arrest, the judge would have solid in-



*Herbert Sturz (left), first director of the Vera Institute, with New York Mayor Ed Koch.*



*Criminal Justice Agency employee interviews an arrestee before arraignment, to help speed processing.*

PHOTO BY BILL POWERS/CORRECTIONS MAGAZINE





Left: In the Metropolitan Museum, a Job Path trainee fills poster orders for the Tutankhamen exhibit. Below: Former inmates make repairs at the Bronx Botanical Gardens for the Wildcat Service Corporation.



formation upon which to base release without bail. Sturz's law students began to check the backgrounds of people who were arrested and make recommendations to the judges.

Schweitzer created a private, non-profit foundation to run the project for three years and named it after his mother. During the first year he supported it with \$95,000 of his own money. One year later the Ford Foundation provided \$115,000, and after two more years, the city took over its operation.

Of the 3,500 people released without bail under the project during its first three years, only 56, or less than 2 percent, failed to show up for their subsequent court appearances. This was lower than the rate for those who were able to post bond.

The project's success could not be denied. In 1966, the Federal Bail Reform Act, based on Vera's work, was passed, and since then nearly 200 communities throughout the country have developed similar programs. Some form of bail reform also has been set in motion in several other countries.

The way in which Vera now operates (in 1966 it changed its official name from the Vera Foundation to

the Vera Institute of Justice) grew out of this initial project. After considerable research financed with private and government funds, Vera makes a proposal, works out the details with private and government agencies, then oversees the absorption of the project by traditional institutions.

The guiding principles behind each project are humane and practical, an approach that effectively meets the concerns of those involved in the criminal justice system. The staff of Vera tries to make sure that all persons caught up in the judicial system are treated fairly either directly, as in the bail project, or indirectly, as when it trims the backlog of court cases and thus enables judges to spend more time on each one. Vera also helps the judicial system save money.

In the Station House Release Program, for example, an outgrowth of the bail project, police officers fill out questionnaires at the time of arrest and make a decision, as to whether the suspects should be released immediately on their own recognizance. Savings on police time alone in New York City amounts to several million dollars a year.

Another example of how Vera

helps those who are arrested while making the system more efficient is the Manhattan Bowery Project, which has been adopted in many cities. It is estimated that a third of all court cases involve public intoxication. The traditional approach is purely cosmetic: An alcoholic is arrested, taken into court, sent to jail, and released, usually to return for the same time-consuming, expensive process.

Vera decided to substitute medical treatment for the court process. With funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, the state's Bureau of Alcoholism, and the city's Community Mental Health Board, a clinic was set up and alcoholics were approached on the street and asked if they wanted treatment. Those who did volunteer went through a detoxification process over several days before being released, and never saw the inside of a police station or court. Arrests for public drunkenness dropped by 90 percent.

No one is prepared to say that the program cured everyone who went through it. But many participants have gone on to more productive lives, and at the least the program took alcoholics out of the criminal process and freed police, judges, and

Below: Michael Smith, Director of the Vera Institute.  
right: A Job Path trainee works with an addressograph machine  
in the printing department of Chemical Bank.



PHOTO BY MEG HELLMAN



corrections officials to concentrate on other cases.

The building in which Vera develops these programs mirrors the institute's approach to its work, which one observer has described as a blend of "practicality, reasonableness, and low-key style."

A small, nondescript name plaque is easily missed as it blends into the outer wall of a plain, aged brownstone on a busy cross-street on the East Side of mid-Manhattan. The tone inside is friendly and quiet, with few frills. It is far from obvious that this is an organization that the Ford Foundation's Sviridoff says has had "as much impact on policy in a positive way as any major national research organization."

"We're free to do the things that excite us," says Michael Smith, Vera's current director, a former civil liberties lawyer.

And what excites Vera appeals to a great many people in the criminal justice system here and abroad. Its programs are being tried in hundreds of communities around the country, and Vera has an office in London, works closely with German agencies, and consults regularly with officials from other countries. (A

Paris office was closed last year, although a pretrial diversion program that Vera introduced there is still "flourishing.")

Among the programs that have helped change the views of many on criminal justice reform range from a program that keeps police officers out of court except when they actually are needed to find jobs for persons awaiting trial in the hope that they will straighten out their lives.

Other projects make it easier for civilian witnesses to appear in court; many cases founder because witnesses fail to show up for reasons ranging from fear to having no babysitter. Vera also has worked on temporary release programs, helping prisoners make the adjustment to a new life through educational programs or time off to find work. In one of its more recent programs, Vera arranged for persons with prior criminal records who were charged with misdemeanors to serve their sentences by working at community centers, instead of receiving short-term jail sentences.

Vera manages all these efforts on a rather small budget, when one considers its impact. For the five years ending in June 1980, Vera received

some \$21.7 million, of which \$19.2 million came from local, state, and Federal agencies.

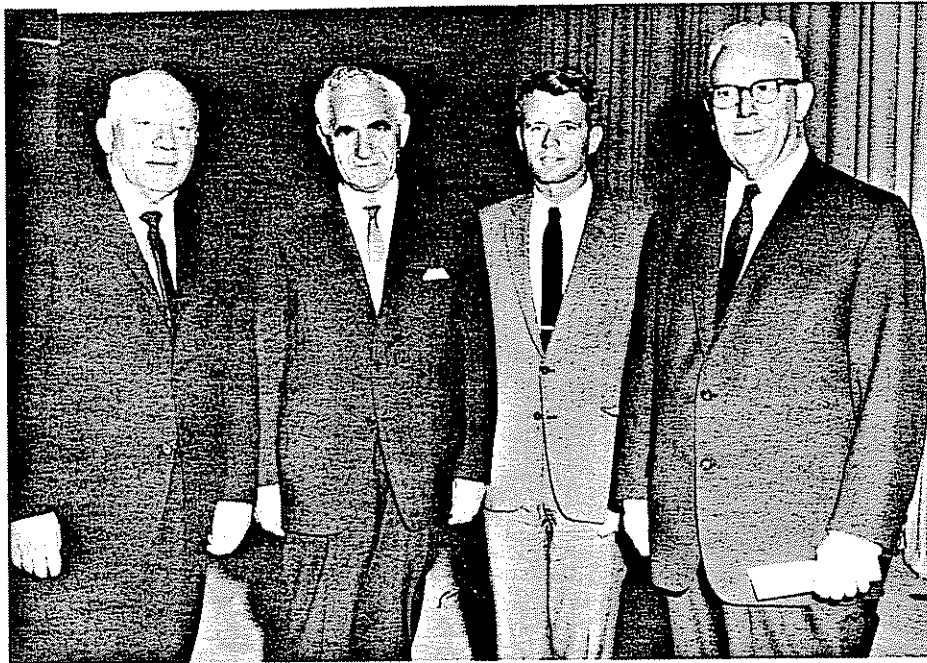
"Anyone can get up a shopping list of needs," says Smith as he tries to explain Vera's view of the field. "The problem is how to deliver the service. People don't know how to get things done. It requires experimentation."

Vera's workshop is New York City, a natural starting point that helps provide a narrow but clear focus for its work.

"New York City is a marvelous laboratory to learn how to do things better or whether to do them at all," says Smith.

But even the most narrowly focused project tends, through the vision of Vera, to open doors to much broader horizons, such as the concept of "supported work" and an influential study on the disposition of felony cases in New York City. These two programs, more than most, effectively sum up Vera's style and impact.

Supported work began with a simple concept: a messenger service to help former offenders and addicts improve their lives by working at paying jobs in typical work settings. This was not to be a make-work program, with artificial props. It was an effort



*In the early '60s, Louis Schweitzer, Vera's founder, stood with Judge Bernard Botwin, president of the institute, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Chief Justice Earl Warren.*

to help people who ordinarily are not hired by anyone learn how to get and keep a job. Soon many other jobs, most with city agencies but some with private employers, involved several thousand people.

One of the more innovative aspects of the program was that each worker's salary included welfare money, which was one of the first efforts to divert welfare payments to people in a position to earn them. "It's not yet led to any kind of major, universal change," says Sviridoff, "but it's sure pointing in that direction."

The direction that supported work has taken is very broad indeed. Six Federal agencies and the Ford Foundation provided more than \$80 million to expand the concept to 15 communities around the country, adding young people and welfare mothers to the target groups. A separate agency, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, was set up to run the program, which ended its first five-year breaking-in period last year. Research findings are mixed but promising, and the experiment to find work for some of the more hard-core "underclasses" is

continuing.

Supported work fits neatly into the thesis advanced by Charles E. Silberman in his monumental work on the system, "Criminal Violence, Criminal Justice," in which he said that "... the character of a society is judged by the way that society treats the least of its members. The close association of violent crime with urban lower-class life is a direct result of the opportunities that are *not* available."

Silberman also relied heavily in his book on a report from Vera on what happened in the odyssey of some 100,000 felons who passed through the criminal justice system in New York City. Though the study is seven years old, it is cited frequently.

The study tackled the complaint of many that courts coddle criminals, and that many dangerous persons never even go to trial, or are let go when they do. Or, as the study posed its central question: "Are serious felons getting away with it?"

The exhaustive study concluded that most felony cases, from robbery to rape to murder, involve individuals with a "prior relationship." As a result, many victims are reluctant to

pursue the case once their anger is spent, and it is dismissed. This led Vera to suggest and then to test a simple but revolutionary approach: mediation and arbitration instead of a trial.

It also noted, therefore, that "if criminals are 'getting away' with it, they may be getting away with it more on the streets than in the courtroom." The problem, suggested Vera, is not that some people who shouldn't be are let go, but that "many felons who *are* caught are not the ones we fear and dread—the ones that law is meant to incapacitate and punish."

But some views are hard to dispose of. Recently in New York State's Mid-Hudson Valley, a state legislator said, "Judges are corrupting the (justice) system. We've got too many 'Turn 'em loose Bruces' in New York. We've got to have the death penalty to deter crime."

At the same time, a local resident wrote in one of the papers that brain surgery would cure crime. Another reasoned that crimes are committed primarily by people "who are confused by a little liquor and have access to guns"; eliminate both and you cure crime.

Smith, undaunted, says Vera will continue to study a problem, develop a program to deal with it, and then ask, calmly, carefully, and most matter-of-factly, "What can I learn from this program that will help you to make better judgments and better program designs?" fn

#### About the Author

John LaHoud, a free-lance writer, has written for The National Observer and the Ford Foundation and evaluated programs for the Peace Corps. LaHoud also serves as a panelist for the New York State Council on the Arts and teaches at Ulster County Community College.

