

Justice for All

Annual Report 2016



Vera
INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

From the President



Nicholas Turner, president

At the 1963 March on Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of “the fierce urgency of now.” And as a friend of Vera, you know that we are in a moment of painful and potentially perilous urgency. This could not be more evident as we reflect on 2016—a transformative year both for the nation and for Vera.

2016 saw renewed attention to and desire for reform around the country. Many Americans—from across the political and ideological spectrum—now recognize criminal justice reform as one of the most pressing issues of our day. We saw this in the resurgence of the 1994 Crime Bill as a defining issue in our presidential elections; in the horrific shootings of police and by police, which left relations between police and the communities they serve at a dangerous point; and we saw it in President Obama’s groundbreaking announcement of reforms to solitary confinement at the federal level, recognizing that human dignity must be respected in our nation’s prisons.

We’re working on all of these issues at Vera—ending mass incarceration; improving conditions of confinement; and promoting safety, trust, and justice in a diverse America. We run in a special, inside lane to help public sector leaders change the systems they control—studying problems that impede justice, piloting transformative and achievable solutions, and using what we learn to inform public debate and drive effective policy and practice.

With increased attention to our issues and new tools at our disposal, we’re finding innovative ways to do this—mining big data to unearth

injustice, using competitions to find the most motivated government partners for reform, and recognizing the importance of communications to engage a broad audience.

And, reflecting our commitment to reframe justice, we launched a redesign of our website to communicate our issues and leverage our voices more effectively. We’re asking big questions and suggesting big answers. We’ve made progress, yet we know there is still lots of work to be done.

To do our work, we count on two things: a great and motivated staff, and the support of friends and funders who believe in our work—who believe in us. These funders include government at all levels, as well as a large number of foundations, and individual donors. What we all have in common is a belief that we can and must take action to improve the delivery of justice in our country. While 2016 demonstrated that change may be difficult, it also demonstrated that change is possible. And that every person touched by our justice system deserves to be treated with dignity and respect—a belief that has driven Vera’s work for 55 years.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicholas Turner". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Nicholas Turner
President, Vera Institute of Justice

Our mission

To drive change. To urgently build and improve justice systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities.

From the Board Chair



John F. Savarese, chair

Friends,

It has been both an honor and privilege to have served on Vera's Board for more than two decades.

I am proud of what Vera accomplished in 2016, and these successes could not have been achieved without the continued dedication of our staff, and the generous support of my fellow trustees and our funders and donors. Thanks to that help, our achievements in 2016 have laid the groundwork for expanded efforts and continued success in 2017.

This year was a transformative one for justice reform. We saw corrections agencies embrace collaboration with reformers to improve life behind bars, and prisons embrace transparency by opening their doors to local leaders, business people, health care professionals, and teachers.

We also saw horrific shootings of police and by police, reflecting the perilous state of relations between police and the communities they serve. Never has the need for reform been so urgent. At Vera, we are using this urgency to ensure the great institutions of our country live up to its ideals of justice. We're working to change systems from the inside-out—partnering with government and community leaders to implement reforms that have lasting, sustainable impact.

Founded in 1961, Vera has been at this work for 55 years. It is as important today as it was more than half a century ago, and Vera remains resilient, vibrant, and driven by our commitments to secure equal justice, end mass incarceration, and strengthen families and communities. These commitments uphold our belief that we can—and must—achieve a society that respects the dignity of every person and safeguards justice for everyone.

Under the strong direction of Nick Turner, I am confident that Vera is poised to make even more progress in the coming year. I thank you for continuing to work with us to create a brighter future for us all.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Savarese". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

John Savarese
Chair, Vera Board of Trustees

Achieving Our Mission

We work with others who share our vision to tackle the most pressing injustices of our day—from the causes and consequences of mass incarceration, racial disparities, and the loss of public trust in law enforcement, to the unmet needs of the vulnerable, the marginalized, and those harmed by crime and violence.



Seizing the Moment

President Obama was the first sitting president to visit a federal prison ... shootings by police and of police shocked the nation into conversation about the role and responsibility of law enforcement...a documentary film traced the roots of mass incarceration to a loophole in the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery. In 2016, criminal justice captured the national conscience and culture—and the issues Vera has addressed for half a century took on new energy. We renewed our mission to more accurately state what we do and strive for: to drive change. To urgently build and improve justice systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities. This is reflected in our new virtual home, our website—highlighting our commitments to Ending Mass Incarceration, Securing Equal Justice, and Strengthening Families and Communities.

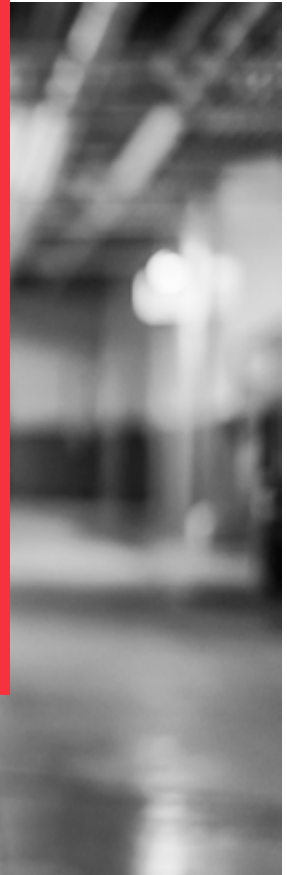
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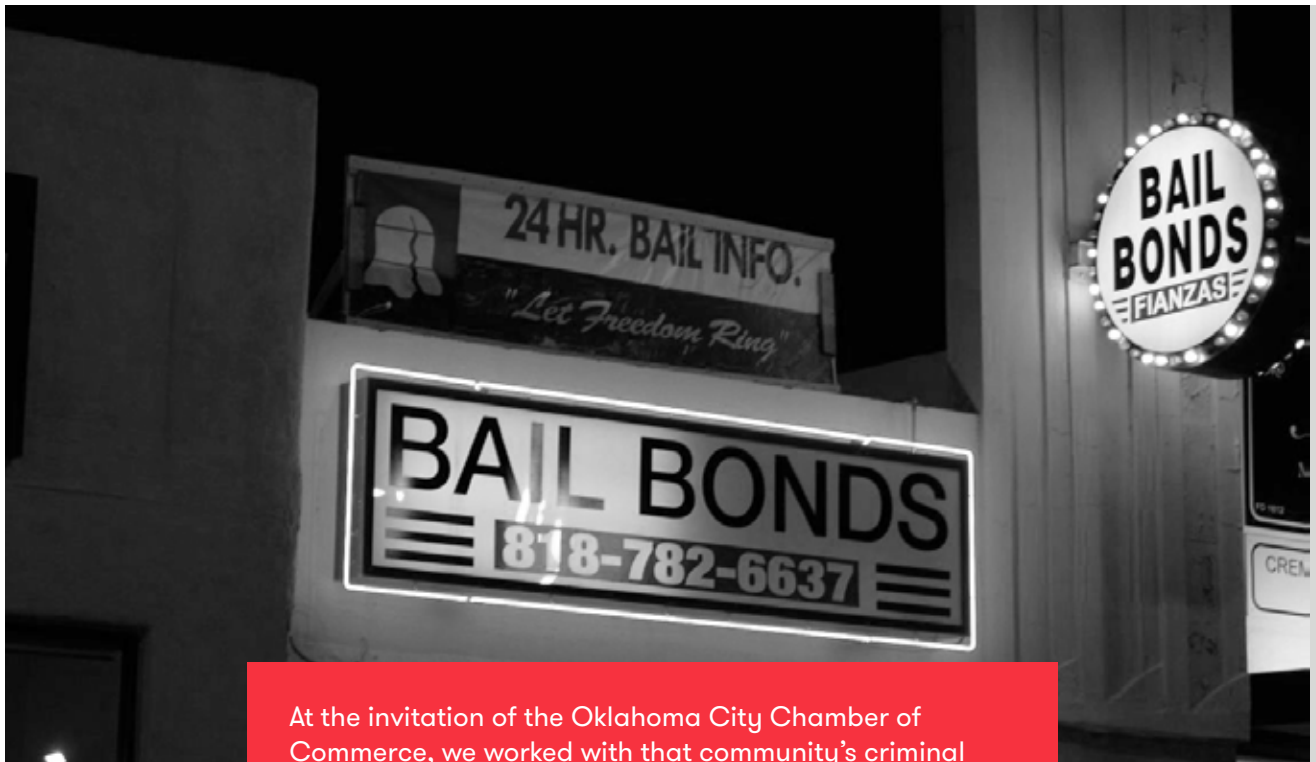
WHAT WE'RE DOING ...

to end mass incarceration

Around the country, we're working to close incarceration's front door by significantly reducing the use of jails. It starts with people understanding what the problem is, and our groundbreaking Incarceration Trends Project delivers new insights on how jail populations have grown, county-by-county.

Across the nation, counties took notice, and Vera got to work. In New York City, we worked to reduce the use of cash bail and pretrial detention, by training judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers on alternative forms of release, and by studying what happens when judges set bail that considers the financial circumstances of the people expected to pay it. We also played—and are continuing to play—a crucial role on the New York City Council's Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform—also known as the Rikers commission—with Vera President Nick Turner serving as a commissioner and Vera staff supporting its work. Over the past decade of our work in New Orleans, we have led efforts to reduce the jail population there by nearly 70 percent, and our efforts on pre-booking diversion and bail, fines, and fees will continue to drive down the overuse of incarceration.





At the invitation of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, we worked with that community's criminal justice system stakeholders, local government officials, and business leaders to develop alternatives to building a bigger jail, and we analyzed the jail population of Tulsa, identifying ways to reduce the flow of people into its jail. Through the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge, we worked with six jurisdictions to accomplish this same goal. We helped Philadelphia create a plan to reduce its jail population by 34 percent in three years, by reducing the role of cash bail, expanding diversion from jail, and creating more efficient case processing. We worked with Milwaukee to reduce its jail population by creating strategies to reduce the over-incarceration of people with mental illness. And, we helped Shelby County, Tennessee implement a risk assessment tool as an alternative to cash bail.

We're also striving to improve conditions for those behind bars—so that people who leave prison are prepared to successfully reenter their communities. Our College in Prison work expanded when the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education turned to us after President Obama's announcement of the Second Chance Pell Pilot program. The government enlisted Vera to support the 69 participating colleges and universities newly providing post-secondary education in correctional institutions. That means we're helping provide access to college in prison for an estimated 12,000 students in 28 states.



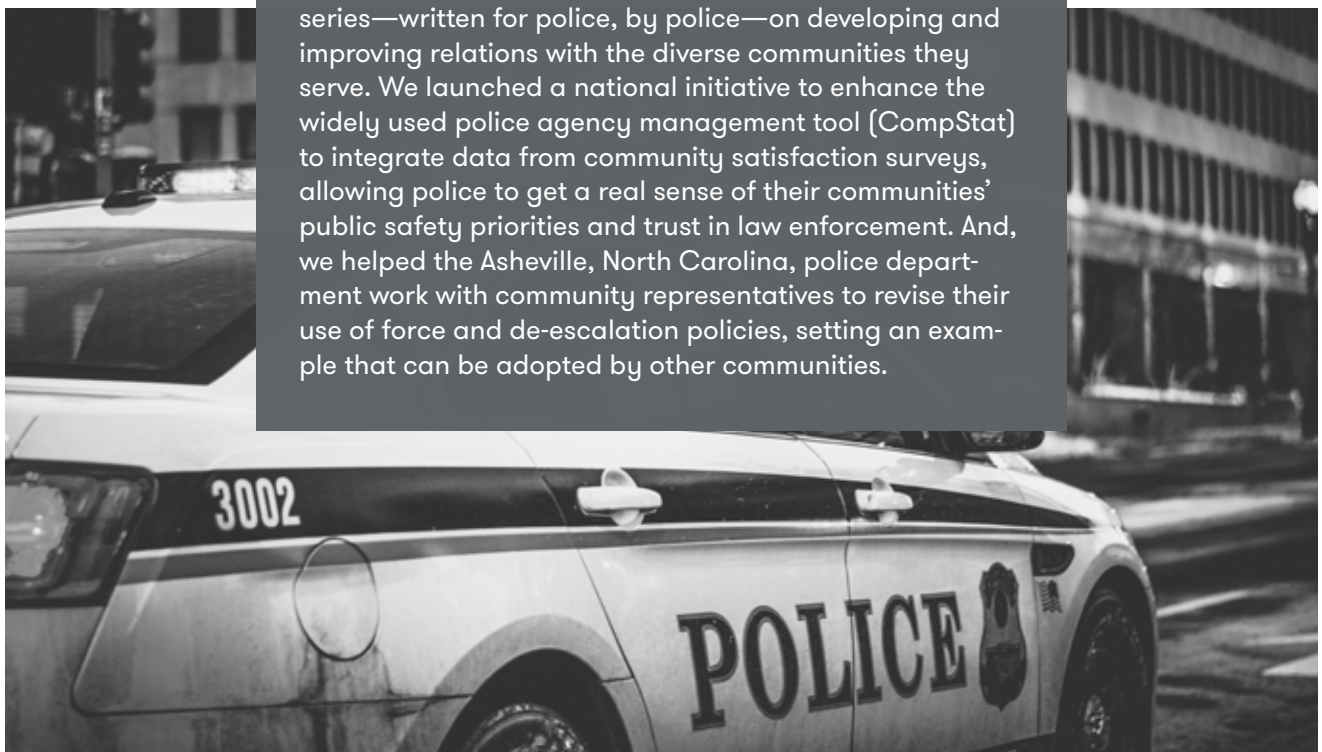
We further worked to improve conditions of confinement by addressing one of the justice system's most significant affronts to human dignity—solitary confinement. We're partnering with correctional leaders in five jurisdictions to find Safe Alternatives to Solitary: Oregon, Nebraska, North Carolina, New York City, and Middlesex County, New Jersey. North Carolina and New York City have ended the use of solitary for juveniles, and Nebraska now uses the practice solely for safety and security purposes, not as a form of punishment.

And, we're looking at the big picture with Reimagining Prison—a bold new initiative to shift the nation's culture of incarceration from punishment to restoration. Our 18-month initiative launched in June at the symbolic Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia—the nation's first modern prison—with remarks from Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney. The first phase culminated in November with Prison Visiting Week, when prisons and jails in more than a dozen states embraced greater transparency by opening their doors to the public. In April, CBS's *60 Minutes* featured Vera's 2015 tour of German prisons to reimagine what prison could look like here in the United States. Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy accompanied Vera on that tour and later proposed numerous reforms for his state, like providing age-appropriate services for incarcerated young adults aged 18 to 25. Vera is now working with Governor Malloy to develop and implement a ground-breaking and innovative model for serving young adults that will adopt best practices from developmental science research and prioritize family engagement.

WHAT WE'RE DOING ...

to secure equal justice

America is facing a crisis of trust between police and the communities they serve. Recent events surrounding civilian fatalities have fueled intense nationwide scrutiny of police and further inflamed police-community tensions. In many disadvantaged neighborhoods where police services are most needed, tensions often manifest as community mistrust of police officers. This has shaken the foundation on which public safety stands: public perception of police legitimacy. That's why Vera expanded our police portfolio to build on our history of working on police-community relations. We published a guidebook series—written for police, by police—on developing and improving relations with the diverse communities they serve. We launched a national initiative to enhance the widely used police agency management tool (CompStat) to integrate data from community satisfaction surveys, allowing police to get a real sense of their communities' public safety priorities and trust in law enforcement. And, we helped the Asheville, North Carolina, police department work with community representatives to revise their use of force and de-escalation policies, setting an example that can be adopted by other communities.



“Vera expanded our police portfolio to build on our history of working on police-community relations.”

We're also laboring to keep immigrant families together by providing defense services for every indigent immigrant detained in New York City, and in the Batavia and Ulster County immigration courts in New York State. The success of the program we help lead—The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project—has inspired other jurisdictions to enact similar programs around the country. One is currently in place in Alameda County, California, and there are additional plans for programs in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Boston. Vera also became a founding member of the California Coalition for Universal Representation, urging state and local officials to create publicly funded representation programs similar to New York's.



WHAT WE'RE DOING ...

to strengthen families and communities

Involvement in the criminal justice system can tear communities apart and damage the lives and livelihoods of families for generations. We're working to close the courtroom door for young people who skip school, run away, or cause problems at home by developing alternative, community-based responses. Working with three jurisdictions in Georgia and Wisconsin to address these so-called "status offenses," which are illegal only because of a person's age, we are helping local systems design and implement reforms to be used as models statewide. To assist additional jurisdictions in their reform efforts, we selected representatives from five states to participate in our first Status Offense Reform Academy.

“We're working to close the courtroom door for young people who skip school, run away, or cause problems at home ...”

Reaffirming our belief that every person deserves a second chance, we partnered with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to offer second chances for people with conviction histories to reunite with their families by being allowed to live in public housing. Formerly incarcerated people are regularly banned for life from public housing, which can cause instability and make reentry difficult. And, our work with the Housing Authority of New Orleans culminated in their decision to eliminate a ban on public housing assistance for people with criminal records.

“Reaffirming our belief that every person deserves a second chance ...”



Credit: "I Just Want To Come Home" Groundswell © 2015


SPREADING *THE WORD*

The expansion of our work across multiple fronts of the criminal justice system received extensive media coverage in 2016—particularly as current events highlighted urgent criminal justice issues. Vera’s work has been covered in

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The New York Times

theguardian 

The Washington Post 

marieclaire *The Atlantic*

60
MINUTES


THE
HUFFINGTON
POST

We’ve also had the opportunity to present our work around the country, including at South by Southwest (SXSW), Aspen Ideas Festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music, American Repertory Theater, National Action Network, Yale Law School, Living Cities, Google, and Philanthropy New York.

LOOKING AHEAD TO /17

While the recent election is likely to create change in many areas—including the justice system, which together we've been striving to reform—we are confident that the movement for justice reform will remain strong and persistent.

With recognition and support from the U.S. Department of Justice, our efforts to reduce the use of solitary confinement will expand to reach as many as five additional jurisdictions. We will grow our public housing work by partnering with additional housing authorities, helping to plan and implement reform policies across the nation. We will continue our commitment to close incarceration's front door by extending our work to reduce local jail populations in new jurisdictions. Our campaign to reimagine prison will culminate with a vision for how incarceration can truly restore people, provide for public safety, and honor human dignity. And, our police portfolio will continue to grow into a broader initiative aimed at improving police-community relations through the implementation of several additional projects.

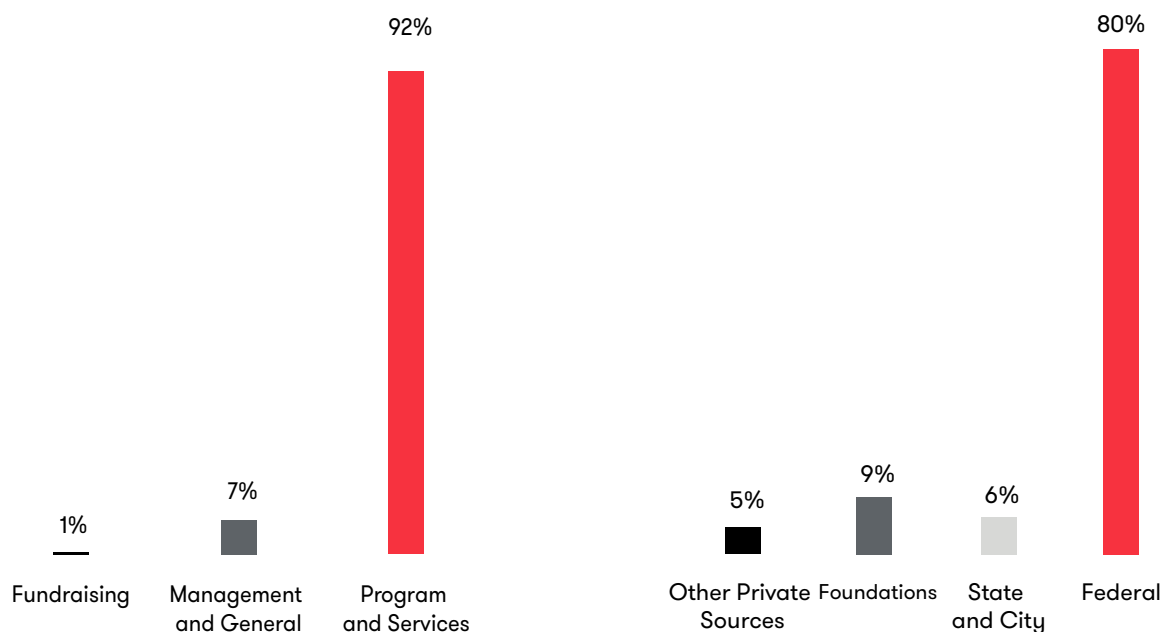
Fiscal Year 2016 Financials

How we spend our funds

Programs and Services	92%	62,454,414
Management and General	7%	4,497,785
Fundraising	1%	640,201
		67,592,400

Sources of grants and contributions

Federal	80%	55,207,924
State and City	6%	4,198,424
Foundations	9%	6,523,161
Other private sources	5%	3,366,538
		69,296,047



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