

Dignity Principles

**A Guide to Ensure the Humane Treatment of
People in U.S. Carceral Settings**

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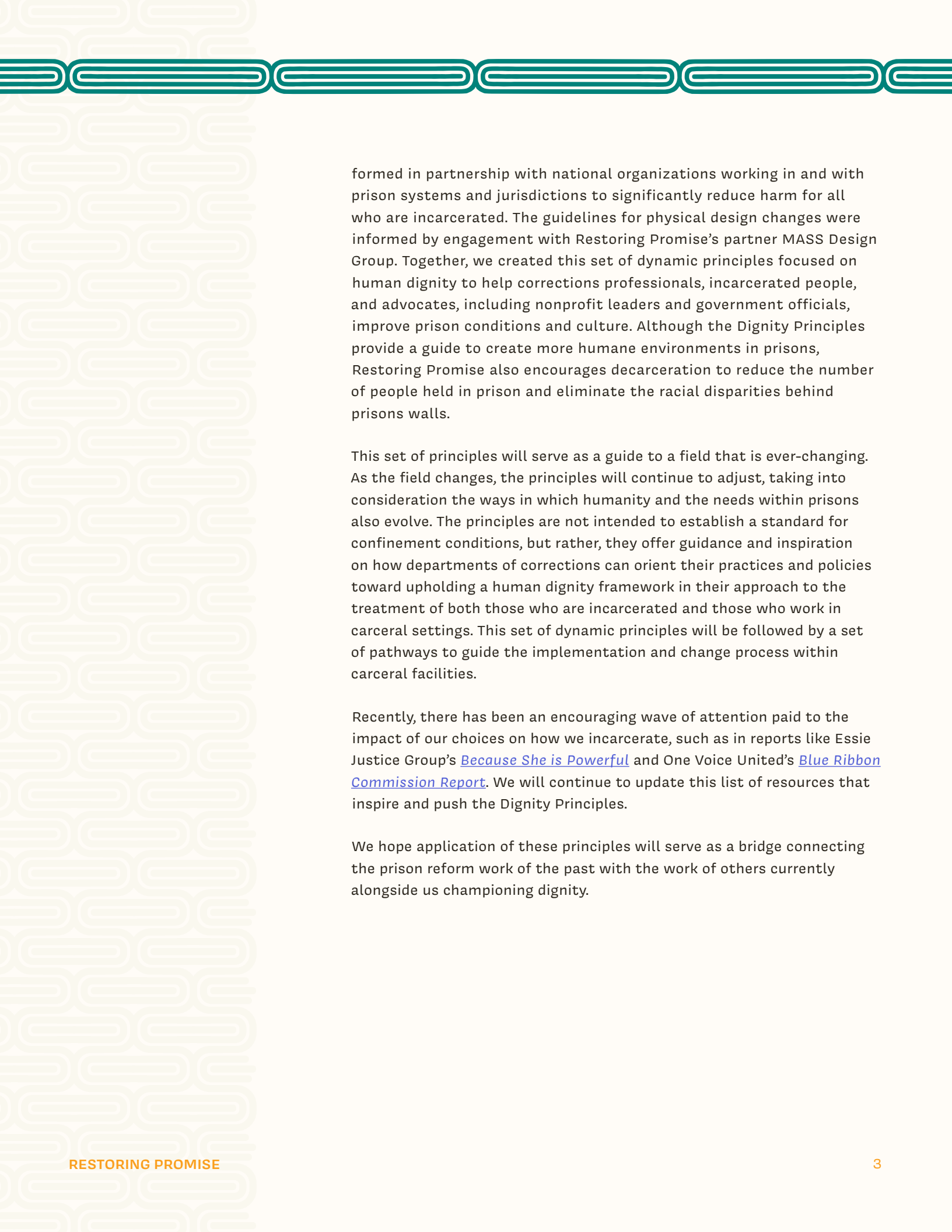


Introduction

Restoring Promise is an initiative of the Vera Institute of Justice that seeks to transform prison cultures, climates, and spaces by partnering with correctional leaders to reimagine housing units for young adults and realign corrections policies and practices with a commitment to human dignity. Transforming the United States prison system has been the goal of Vera's groundbreaking work with corrections agencies since 2016, when Vera and the [MILPA Collective](#) opened the first of now seven young adult housing units in five states. Testimony from corrections staff and incarcerated people and results from [a randomized control trial](#) of Restoring Promise units in South Carolina demonstrate what Vera knows to be true: when we treat people with dignity, we can create a sense of purpose beyond custody and control, forge community, and make prisons safer.

We connect the root causes and consequences of mass incarceration to explore how it manifests in the conditions of those working or incarcerated in carceral settings, and work to shift correctional culture to ensure that if people are confined, they are treated with dignity.

[*The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*](#), also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, are a set of international guidelines that outline standards for housing and treatment of incarcerated people. These Dignity Principles draw inspiration from the Nelson Mandela Rules, build on lessons from our work to open young adult housing units in prisons and jails, and were



formed in partnership with national organizations working in and with prison systems and jurisdictions to significantly reduce harm for all who are incarcerated. The guidelines for physical design changes were informed by engagement with Restoring Promise's partner MASS Design Group. Together, we created this set of dynamic principles focused on human dignity to help corrections professionals, incarcerated people, and advocates, including nonprofit leaders and government officials, improve prison conditions and culture. Although the Dignity Principles provide a guide to create more humane environments in prisons, Restoring Promise also encourages decarceration to reduce the number of people held in prison and eliminate the racial disparities behind prisons walls.

This set of principles will serve as a guide to a field that is ever-changing. As the field changes, the principles will continue to adjust, taking into consideration the ways in which humanity and the needs within prisons also evolve. The principles are not intended to establish a standard for confinement conditions, but rather, they offer guidance and inspiration on how departments of corrections can orient their practices and policies toward upholding a human dignity framework in their approach to the treatment of both those who are incarcerated and those who work in carceral settings. This set of dynamic principles will be followed by a set of pathways to guide the implementation and change process within carceral facilities.

Recently, there has been an encouraging wave of attention paid to the impact of our choices on how we incarcerate, such as in reports like Essie Justice Group's [Because She is Powerful](#) and One Voice United's [Blue Ribbon Commission Report](#). We will continue to update this list of resources that inspire and push the Dignity Principles.

We hope application of these principles will serve as a bridge connecting the prison reform work of the past with the work of others currently alongside us championing dignity.

1. Safety

Correctional environments must be free of violence. This foundation is necessary for any improved conditions and culture to thrive. Leadership should understand the connection between safety and positive relationships rooted in care and trust among those who live and work in correctional settings.

Safety principle resources

- Drake, Deborah H., “Staff and Order in Prisons,” in *Understanding Prison Staff*, edited by Jamie Bennett, Ben Crewe, and Azrini Wahidin (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 153-167.
- Hopwood, Shon, “[How Atrocious Prisons Conditions Make Us All Less Safe](#),” Brennan Center for Justice, August 9, 2021.
- Krueger, James, and John A. MacAllister, “[How to Design a Prison That Actually Comforts and Rehabilitates Inmates](#),” *Fast Company*, April 30, 2015.
- MASS Design Group, [The Role of Architecture in Fighting COVID-19: Carceral Environments and COVID-19](#) (Boston: MASS Design Group, MILPA, and Vera Institute of Justice, 2020).
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [Handbook on Dynamic Security and Prison Intelligence](#) (Vienna: UNODC, 2015).

2. Human Dignity in Carceral Settings

Correctional environments should reflect a commitment to human dignity. Carceral conditions—including the built environment, as well as the facility’s policies, procedures, and practices—should encourage supportive treatment. The environment should reflect the inherent value of all people and demonstrate that the agency’s priority is the health and wellness of all who live and work there. Equitable treatment and access to opportunities must include those who have disabilities or mental health conditions. All correctional settings must provide equal opportunities that comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility regulations and foster gender and racial equality.

Human Dignity in Carceral Settings principle resources

- American Civil Liberties Union, [The Unequal Price of Periods](#) (New York: ACLU, 2019).
- Association for the Prevention of Torture, [“Material Conditions of Detention: Lighting and Ventilation,”](#) accessed April 24, 2023.
- Ball, Walter, [“Increasing Prison Wages to Dollars Just Makes Sense,”](#) Vera Institute of Justice, February 7, 2023.
- Chamamah, Maurice, [“Prison without Punishment,”](#) The Marshall Project, September 25, 2015.
- Delaney, Ruth, Ram Subramanian, Alison Shames, and Nicholas Turner, [“Human Dignity as the Guiding Principle,”](#) in *Reimagining Prisons* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018).
- The Fortune Society, [Words Matter](#) (Long Island City, NY: The Fortune Society, 2017).
- Impact Justice, [“Bringing the Movement for Food Justice Inside Prisons and Jails,”](#) accessed April 24, 2023.
- The Opportunity Agenda, [“Respecting the Dignity of Incarcerated Individuals,”](#) accessed April 28, 2023.
- Sawyer, Wendy, [“Food for Thought: Prison Food Is a Public Health Problem,”](#) Prison Policy Initiative, March 3, 2017.
- Shlafer, Rebecca J., Jamie Stang, Danielle Dallaire, et al., [“Best Practices for Nutrition Care of Pregnant Women in Prison,”](#) *Journal of Correctional Health Care* 23, no. 3 (2017), 297–304.
- Subramanian, Ram, [“How Some European Prisons Are Based on Dignity Instead of Dehumanization,”](#) Brennan Center for Justice, November 29, 2021.
- Vera Institute of Justice, [“Human Dignity and Prison Design,”](#) accessed April 24, 2023.

3. Morale and Well-Being

A healthy correctional work environment fosters psychological and physical safety. Corrections professionals should understand their role as one that promotes human rights for all, be empowered and valued by leadership, and be supported in healing processes needed to address traumas from the workplace.

Morale and Well-Being principle resources

- Chicago Beyond, "[Do I Have the Right to Feel Safe?](#)" accessed August 21, 2023.
- Lambert, Eric G., Nancy Lynne Hogan, and Shannon M. Barton, "[Satisfied Correctional Staff: A Review of the Literature on the Correlates of Correctional Staff Job Satisfaction](#)" *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 29 no. 2 (2002), 115–143.
- Michigan Department of Corrections, "[MDOC Response and Information on Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)," updated April 6, 2023.
- Spinaris, Caterina, "[A Family Affair](#)," *Correctional Oasis* 18, no. 9 (2021), 5–8.
- Spinaris, Caterina G., Michael D. Denhof, and Julie A. Kellaway, [Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning](#) (Florence, CO: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, 2012).

4. Fairness

Correctional environments should be a place where incarcerated people and corrections professionals are heard, respected, and included in decision-making. Accountability, not punishment, should be central to all agency policies and procedures. Equitable treatment for all people—without personal biases, discrimination, or judgment—should be a core value.

Fairness principle resources

- Bonnie, Richard J., Robert L. Johnson, Betty M. Chemers, and Julie A. Schuck, eds., [Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach](#) (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2013).

- The Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce, [A Blueprint for Ending Solitary Confinement by the Federal Government](#) (Washington, DC: ACLU and The Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce, 2021).
- James, Kayla, and Elena Vanko, [The Impacts of Solitary Confinement](#) (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2021).
- Shames, Alison, Jessa Wilcox, and Ram Subramanian, [Solitary Confinement: Common Misconceptions and Emerging Safe Alternatives](#) (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2015).

5. Purpose

Correctional environments should cultivate an atmosphere in which people can pursue personal goals and self-discovery through a meaningful and consistent daily schedule that includes workshops and educational opportunities. Correctional environments should also provide opportunities for those who are incarcerated to have a voice and choice in decisions that impact them.

Purpose principle resources

- Delaney, Ruth, Fred Patrick, and Alex Boldin, [Unlocking Potential: Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education](#) (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019).
- Duwe, Grant, [The Use and Impact of Correctional Programming for Inmates on Pre- and Post-Release Outcomes](#) (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2017).
- Gibbons, Alexandra, and Rashawn Ray, “[The Societal Benefits of Postsecondary Prison Education](#),” Brookings Institution, August 20, 2021.
- Maine-Wabanaki REACH and Rachel C. Casey, “[Healing Circles in Maine Prisons: Connecting Native People with Community and Culture](#),” Wabanaki REACH, February 5, 2020.

6. Family and Community Partnership

Correctional agencies should partner with families, community organizations, and those most impacted by incarceration in ways that acknowledge, respect, and facilitate strong connections between incarcerated people and their loved ones and support systems. Visitation spaces in correctional environments should be designed with care and evoke a sense of beauty and belonging so people using them can feel welcome and hopeful. Facilities should keep in mind not only the visitation space itself, but the experience of visitors arriving and walking to and from the space.

Family and Community Partnership principle resources

- Dholakia, Nazish, [“More and More Prisons Are Banning Mail,”](#) Vera Institute of Justice, March 1, 2022.
- Fuller, Cymone, Lanora Franck, and Ryan Shanahan, [Building on Family Strengths for Better Outcomes: Involving More Families, More Often, for More Youth](#) (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018).
- Wang, Leah, [“Research Roundup: The Positive Impacts of Family Contact for Incarcerated People and Their Families,”](#) Prison Policy Initiative, December 21, 2021.

7. Transparency

Correctional agencies should consistently share information with the public about policies, practices, and operations, as well as conditions within facilities, to promote accountability and continuous improvement of correctional culture.

Transparency principle resources


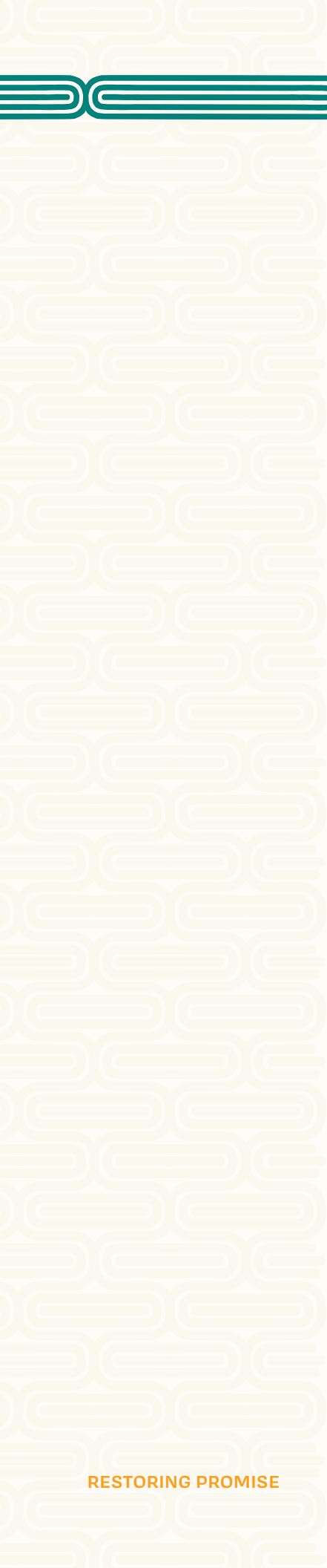
- Deitch, Michele, [“Independent Oversight Is Essential for a Safe and Healthy Prison System,”](#) Brennan Center for Justice, November 3, 2021.
- Open Government Partnership, [“Justice Policy Series, Part II: Open Justice,”](#) December 14, 2020.

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 - Amend
 - Black & Pink
 - Flikshop
 - Impact Justice
 - Incarceration Nation
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 - Maine DOC
 - MASS Design Group
 - Prison and Jail Innovation Lab
 - Tyrone Walker
 - Unlock the Box Campaign

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CREDITS

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For more information or to provide feedback on these dignity principles, contact Clinique Chapman, associate director, Restoring Promise, at cchapman@vera.org.

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