



Fairness to Freedom
The Campaign for Universal Representation
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Vera NPNA

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Vera NPNA

Annual Report

2023

Vera
INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

Photo by Obed Obwoye.



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A Letter from the Board Chair

In 2023, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) saw major victories from seeds planted long ago.

In July, more than 760,000 people in prison became eligible for Pell Grants as the result of a years-long campaign Vera and partners led to end the counterproductive ban on federal education aid for incarcerated people. Moving forward, Vera is working with colleges, universities, and corrections departments to improve and increase access to high-quality college courses in prisons around the country. Clear evidence shows that higher education gives incarcerated people a far greater chance of breaking the cycle of incarceration when they are released—as most will be. As a result of this work, more people will leave prison with skills that can help them thrive and support their families.

Vera and the MILPA Collective's Restoring Promise initiative has spent years working in prisons

around the country to shift prison culture away from a focus on punishment to a focus instead on human dignity, accountability, and growth. In 2023, a randomized control trial in South Carolina prisons showed that living in a Restoring Promise unit decreased young adults' odds of being convicted of a violent infraction by a remarkable 73 percent. This model is being lauded and emulated by corrections officials who see it as a clear way to create safer environments for all who live and work in prisons.

Two years ago, Vera helped Ramsey County, Minnesota, District Attorney John Choi launch a policy to end low-level traffic stops that have nothing to do with safety. These traffic stops exacerbate racial disparities in traffic enforcement around the country and, in far too many cases, they end in harm or death. Since the policy was implemented, non-public safety traffic stops fell 86 percent, with Black drivers experiencing the largest decrease in these types of stops and related searches. Jurisdictions that did not implement the change saw a

greater increase in violent crime than jurisdictions that implemented Choi's policy.

The data is clear. Making the criminal legal system more just and humane leads to better outcomes. Vera's approaches are working. Thanks to Vera's community, fewer people are languishing in immigration detention and face deportation without an attorney to protect their rights in court, fewer people are facing unnecessary and traumatic police stops and harmful legal system fines and fees, fewer girls are being sent to prison-like environments for no reason other than their "protection," and prisons across the country are producing scholars.

As the chair of Vera's board, I am proud of the work that Vera is doing to reform harmful systems and spark structural transformation. Demographics are in our favor, and young people, who have learned the lessons from the twin tragedies of George Floyd's murder and the COVID-19 pandemic, are ready for change. The generation that is entering the workforce and the voting booth is not going to be complicit in maintaining an unjust status quo.

In this climate, there is great opportunity for change, and Vera is poised to continue advancing messages, policies, and programs that prove that true public safety and justice go hand in hand.

With your support, we can continue to mitigate the harms of systems that punish when they should aid. With your support, we can continue fighting for systems that deliver safety and justice for all.



Damien Dwin
Board Chair

A Letter from the President

When I rejoined the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) as president 10 years ago, I was motivated by the horrific statistic that a Black baby boy had a staggering one in three chance of imprisonment in his lifetime. It is now one in five. This is a signal and an important improvement that is a result of our collective work.

The Vera Institute of Justice is unrelenting in our efforts to continue this progress. Together with countless activists, lawmakers, nonprofit organizations, and community groups, we are shrinking the mass incarceration apparatus in the United States. The total incarcerated population—while still unconscionably high—has declined more than 20 percent from its peak level in 2008. We celebrate this progress while recognizing that much more remains to be done.

Over the past year, Vera has focused on real solutions that deliver safety, accountability, and justice. We

have aided police in getting out of the business of enforcing trivial traffic violations, which produce significantly racially disparate harm. And we have proved that we can make prisons safer and more humane, minimizing violence and solitary confinement. These accomplishments materialized during a year when the public was more concerned about crime and safety than it has been in decades.

The conventional wisdom is that crime concerns deplete the public's belief in the necessity of justice. But in fact, the public supports our efforts to promote true public safety by redirecting resources wasted on mass incarceration toward solutions that instead focus on the root causes of society's problems.

Today's voters have seen the abject failure of the 50-year-old "War on Drugs" and the 1994 Crime Bill. They know that it is counterproductive and harmful to send people to jail and prison due to behavior rooted in poverty, homelessness, mental illness, and substance use—the outcomes of woefully insufficient investments in community health and well-

being. They recognize the racist roots of the current criminal legal system and its unjust punishments. Research from Vera Action, Vera's sister 501(c)(4) organization, shows that a majority of voters want leaders to make strategic investments to prevent crime in the first place, not simply respond with police and prisons after harm is done.

As the 2024 presidential election approaches, this truth about what people want will likely be obscured. You will hear racist dog whistle "law and order" messages from candidates, and the media will privilege the sensational and the shocking. It is hard to teach old dogs new tricks. But know this: our groundbreaking research shows that fearmongering messages are less effective, especially with young people and especially in communities of color that have borne the brunt of so-called tough-on-crime policies that separate families, drain resources, and fail to deliver safety. Voters are looking for leaders to provide solutions that get tough on the root causes of crime and focus on accountability

rather than harsh punishment. Vera is doing this work. Across the country, we are building programs and policies that support instead of punish; that prevent harm instead of react in its aftermath. I offer sincere thanks to Vera's staff, partners, friends, and supporters who made the accomplishments of 2023 possible. You have helped keep families together, spare people from unnecessary punishment, and rebuild lives after incarceration. We have come far since the darkest days of mass incarceration, when a record 2.3 million people were held behind bars.

Together, we can keep striving for freedom, justice, and a future bright with possibility for all communities. Thank you for joining us on our path there.



Nicholas Turner
President and Director

Shrinking the Machinery of Mass Incarceration to Build True Public Safety

Decades of evidence show that so-called tough-on-crime policies devastate communities and don't deliver safety. Yet, the United States still puts a greater percentage of its population behind bars than almost any other country. If mass incarceration prevented harm, the United States would be one of the safest nations in the world. Instead, we have higher rates of crime than several countries that arrest and incarcerate far fewer people.

A growing number of people recognize that the path to true public safety is to prevent crime by investing in healthy communities, not by locking people up. The total U.S. incarcerated population, while still unconscionably high, has declined more than 20 percent from its peak in 2008, when close to 2.3 million people were held behind bars. In 2023, Vera worked hard to build on this momentum by reforming, reducing, and remaking criminal legal and immigration systems that have harmed far too many. By shrinking the machinery of mass incarceration, we are freeing up resources for investments toward true public safety.

Jamie Gregrich had been out of prison for only three days when she enrolled in the Anchor Program, which provides support to students after incarceration as they complete their degrees with Shorter College, a historically Black junior college in Arkansas. She has since graduated with an associate's degree in entrepreneurial studies and is now pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock while she works as a reentry program specialist for Goodwill. Photo by Jenn Terrell.



In the pages that follow, read about Vera's efforts in pursuit of the following goals:

1

Promoting safety by investing in communities.

Too often, the United States has used police and prisons to deal with problems driven by economic instability, untreated mental illness, and substance use. True public safety comes from investments that build healthy communities, including jobs, health care, education, and first responders who are trained for specific community needs. Vera fights unjust policies that unnecessarily incarcerate while advocating for the direction of resources toward evidence-based solutions that aid rather than punish.

2

Decreasing legal system contact through diversion.

Harsh treatment and a default to incarceration go against the wishes of survivors of crime. A majority of [crime survivors](#) prefer that the criminal legal system focus on restoration over punishment; prioritize shorter sentences over long ones; and hold people accountable through alternatives to prison like drug and mental health treatment, community service, and [restorative justice](#).

3

Protecting the rights of immigrants facing deportation.

Vera keeps families together and fights the criminalization of immigrants by advocating for attorneys for all people facing deportation, regardless of their ability to pay.

4

Ensuring that people leave prison and jail with a fair chance to thrive.

[At least 95 percent](#) of people in state prisons will one day be released, rejoin our communities, and shape our shared future. Vera works with corrections departments across the country to expand access to postsecondary education and build cultures that center humanity, accountability, and growth behind bars. By increasing education and personal growth opportunities in prisons, Vera is helping people develop their potential and break cycles of incarceration. Vera is also successfully advocating against discriminatory housing and financial policies that make it harder for people to fully rejoin their communities when they come home.

Promoting Safety by Investing in Communities

Redefining Public Safety

Governments across the country rely on policing as the primary public safety tool, despite centuries of examples illustrating its inadequacy and the harms it can cause. The overreliance on policing, coupled with underinvestment in public health and human services, particularly harms Black people and other communities of color. Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative focuses on new approaches to keeping our communities safe by increasing crisis response alternatives and government investments in violence prevention and neighborhood safety while narrowing the role and scope of policing. Through research, evidence-based policy recommendations, and real-world collaborations with local governments, Vera helps communities redefine public safety by finding alternatives to policing that truly keep us safe while helping to end racial injustice.

In 2023, Redefining Public Safety advanced these goals by:

- **Helping New Orleans partners launch the Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit (MCIU).**

In June, New Orleans began dispatching specialized civilian responders—instead of police—to mental health calls. These responders, known as the Mobile Crisis Intervention Unit, ensure that people who call 911 during a mental health crisis receive care tailored to the situation, rather than a law enforcement response. That makes sense: law enforcement is often not trained to respond safely and effectively to mental health crises, and police responses can even make situations more dangerous. Since its formation, the MCIU has responded to [more than 1,000 calls](#) and has been touted by local law enforcement as a significant aid in reducing officer burden for on-scene response. Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative plans to uplift and advance these contributions nationally so that communities across the country can similarly implement equitable and sustainable public safety strategies.

— Promoting Offices of Violence Prevention and Neighborhood Safety.

Offices of Violence Prevention and Neighborhood Safety (Offices) are community-centered, government-funded hubs that seek to prevent violence, rather than simply respond after harm is done. In November 2023, Redefining Public Safety published [Coordinating Safety: Building and Sustaining Offices of Violence Prevention and Neighborhood Safety](#), a report that synthesizes feedback from more than 40 Offices stakeholders, including Offices leaders and staff, community advocates, and national technical assistance providers, and offers recommendations to policymakers, Offices leadership, and community advocates for how to build and sustain Offices.



Vera's Redefining Public Safety initiative focuses on new approaches to keeping our communities safe by increasing crisis response alternatives and government investments in violence prevention and neighborhood safety while narrowing the role and scope of policing. Photo by Shoun Hill.

Vera California

Despite its progressive reputation, California incarcerates more people than every state but Texas. Its prisons have [required](#) federal intervention and its jails are notoriously deadly, with people in Los Angeles County jails [dying](#) at a rate of nearly one person per week. Vera California has successfully reduced the scope of these systems through its advocacy, exposing fewer people to California's deadly carceral practices while training its research lens on understanding how exactly these systems are broken—and how to fix them.

In the past year, Vera California has done this by:

— Taking a huge step toward ending money bail in Los Angeles.

Vera California was an important part of the advocacy coalition that won key money bail reforms in Los Angeles County last year by using its national bail expertise, understanding of the Los Angeles pretrial landscape, and [data skills](#) to help shape advocacy strategy. Thanks to the work of Vera and its partners, in July 2023 a judge [ruled](#) that a person's freedom should not be decided by the size of their bank account. That ruling went into effect in October 2023. Once the policy change was implemented, Vera spearheaded efforts to counter misinformation and fearmongering, helping to shape messaging, draft opinion pieces and talking points for allies, and act as a resource for media covering the issue.

— Increasing engagement with Spanish speakers to build a multiracial coalition to fight mass incarceration.

Vera is deeply engaged with organizing partners throughout California, particularly in Los Angeles. As part of that work, we have prioritized deepening ties with monolingual Spanish speakers in Los Angeles, recognizing that the Latino population is overrepresented in the legal system. Vera California has worked extensively with organizations like Gente Organizada, TransLatin@ Coalition, and Dignity and Power Now to do grassroots organizing in these communities, while also making

resources like the first-of-its-kind Los Angeles [data dashboard on jail populations](#) available in Spanish.

— **Publishing groundbreaking research on incarceration trends.**

This spring, Vera published *California: The State of Incarceration*, which puts the state's carceral practices under a microscope and unpacks the strain California's incarceration policies place on the people and budgets of each of the state's 58 counties. The data hub allows lawmakers and community members to see the granular impact of jail and prison practices both on their local counties and on the state as a whole. Since its launch, Vera has worked to get the tool into the hands of policymakers directly, which included hosting a launch event that brought an assembly member, advocacy organizations, and a representative from the Office of the State Public Defender together to discuss its findings. Vera California previously published data analysis on the [bail amounts set in Los Angeles County](#), which are astronomical—including when compared to other large, urban jurisdictions and have disparate racial impacts. It also [surveyed service providers](#) who offer alternatives to incarceration in Los Angeles County. Vera California used the responses to make [policy recommendations](#) for how the county can provide resources to these service providers to meet its stated commitment to a “[care first, jail as a last resort](#)” policy.



In 2023, 45 people died in Los Angeles County's Men's Central Jail. Vera California is part of a coalition demanding that the county follow through on its commitment to close the deadly facility and has worked to build sustainable and effective alternatives to incarceration in its place. Photo by Keith Birmingham/MediaNews Group/Pasadena Star-News via Getty Images.



Photo by Gerald Herbert.

Vera Louisiana

For decades, Louisiana had the [highest imprisonment rate](#) in the country and one of the highest in the world, earning it the title of “[the world’s prison capital.](#)” Vera Louisiana is working to change that, reducing racial disparities in jail populations and funding programs that address the root causes of violent crime.

This year, Vera Louisiana has done this by:

— **Supporting the launch of Louisiana’s first ever mobile crisis intervention unit.**

Vera Louisiana, in partnership with Redefining Public Safety, supported the launch of New Orleans Mobile Crisis Unit. In place of police, this unit sends specialized civilian responders to answer mental health calls. These responders are specially trained to aid people experiencing mental health crises, unlike police who often lack training to safely respond to mental health calls. In too many cases, police responses to mental health crises have made situations [more dangerous](#). Vera Louisiana supported MCIU’s implementation and is working with the New Orleans Health Department to form a Community Advisory Board that is gathering feedback on MCIU’s impact. The Community Advisory Board will continue to improve MCIU and ensure New Orleans has an effective response to community mental health needs.

— **Mapping incarceration parish by parish.**

In April, Vera released [Louisiana Locked Up: A Problem in Every Parish](#), a data hub that maps the state’s incarceration trends in granular detail. The tool [shows](#) that not only is the state jailing people who are presumed innocent at a rate twice the national average but that its mass incarceration problem is not confined to any corner of the state. In fact, Louisiana’s prison admission and pretrial incarceration rates are greater than the national average in nearly every parish and more than twice the national average in most of them. Moreover, the data hub places mass incarceration in historical context. Users can compare today’s carceral footprint to the 1853 plantation footprint and study the geographical overlap, laying bare the ongoing legacy of slavery. “The state’s largest jails and prisons are situated squarely on the same land where Black people were enslaved to sustain the state’s agricultural industry,” the hub explains. “These facilities now use the forced labor of incarcerated people (who are disproportionately Black) to sustain the ‘corrections’ industry.”

Vera released Louisiana Locked Up during the state’s legislative session and used the findings to advocate for essential reforms to reduce the state’s swollen jail and prison population—and fight against efforts to expand it further still.

— **Leading the Big Easy Budget Coalition to successfully advocate for \$41 million in American Rescue Plan Act and general budget funds for its priorities.**

The Big Easy Budget Coalition advocates for investment in solutions that address the root causes of violence, including systemic disinvestment, poverty, lack of economic opportunity, marginalization, and isolation. [These investments](#) include youth services, food programs, community violence interrupters, and affordable housing.

“The Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections pays local jails [\\$177 million](#) annually to hold more than half the people who have been sentenced to prison. But the people of Louisiana are losing. If incarceration created safety, Louisiana would be among the safest places in the world. Instead, making Louisiana a safer place requires scaling back its vast incarceration system and reallocating funds to the [things that actually make communities safe](#): jobs, housing, health care, good schools, and infrastructure.”

Louisiana Locked Up: A Problem in Every Parish

Greater Justice New York

While “law and order” proponents have relentlessly weaponized tragic incidents of crime and violence to stoke fears and advance false narratives about public safety, Vera’s Greater Justice New York (GJNY) team has worked tirelessly to insist on the truth: the status quo of mass incarceration does not keep our communities safe.

GJNY delivered that message this year while working to:

— **Protect bail reform and expand pretrial services.**

In 2019, New York passed historic bail reforms that have helped keep New York communities safe while [reducing](#) the number of people held waiting for their day in court in [often-deadly](#) jails. All told, the laws have [saved New Yorkers](#) \$104 million in bail money, returned more than 24,000 people to their homes before their day in court, and prevented 1.9 million nights in jail.

Despite its success in building a safer and more just New York, bail reform has been under attack from the moment it passed. In 2023, GJNY worked to successfully protect bail reform against continued efforts to undermine it. It also continued a four-year research project to understand the impact of bail reform on incarceration statewide and how bail works outside of New York City. The project will provide both policymakers and the general public with a more nuanced understanding of how these reforms and their implementation are working.

GJNY also worked to advocate for a \$50 million expansion of pretrial services, which data shows can be an [effective way](#) of delivering community safety and supporting people who are released pending trial, including low rates of re-arrest and high rates of court appearance. To support this work, GJNY began a one-year project to compare system-involved New Yorkers’ experiences with probation-run pretrial supervision versus community-based pretrial services. A properly funded, robust, community-based pretrial services system will support New Yorkers released pending trial, assure they stay safe in the community and return to court, and connect them to services they need to thrive in their communities.



Chaplain Dr. Victoria A Phillips, co-chair of the New York City Department of Correction Young Adult Task Force, during a rally in support of incarcerated people hunger striking to protest conditions on Rikers Island. Photo by Mary Altaffer via AP Photo.

— **Shift the narrative around public safety.**

This year, elected leaders have scored cheap political points and spread [misinformation](#) instead of doing the serious work of investing in ways to prevent crime before it happens. Vera spent the year fighting that misinformation, delivering factual, well-researched insight into what actually builds public safety to policymakers, the press, and the public. That work included reports on how much the state spends on its jails and prisons as well as the impact of bail reform. It also included extensive outreach to local and national media, with a focus on journalists covering public safety. To reach our neighbors across the state, GJNY facilitated or participated in 15 public forums around public safety, offering community members, advocacy partners, and local leaders an opportunity to discuss the support their communities actually need. The team also coordinated with organizers across the state to deeply engage elected officials at the city and state levels to discuss the facts around crime and shape policies into effective solutions.

— Close Rikers Island.

Twenty-eight people died on Rikers Island in 2022 and 2023. GJNY has worked extensively to put an end to the ongoing humanitarian crisis on Rikers, including meeting with City Council members to advance concrete steps the city can take to fulfill its commitment to close the deadly jail by 2027. GJNY supports Vera's President Nick Turner in his role in a revamped Independent Rikers Commission, reconstituted by New York City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams, to lay out a fresh blueprint of proven policies to ensure closure of Rikers Island under existing New York City law. Because the transition to a borough-based jail system will reduce the need for corrections officers, GJNY has also interviewed corrections officers and workforce development experts to understand how best to facilitate career transitions for New York City corrections officers, many of whom come from the communities most impacted by mass incarceration. Doing so will diversify New York City's workforce, increase equity for the New Yorkers of color who feel that corrections is their only career option, and reduce both jail overstaffing and overspending.



Bilal Malik is a VOCAL-NY leader whose relative has been held on Rikers Island. Photo by Reece T. Williams.

“There is no running water in the bathroom. You have three or four [people] using the shower area as a housing unit. It is a shame that people have to sit in their cells with no running water. They have to use plastic bags to relieve themselves ... I have been going to a lot of protests to close the facility down. It is not fair to have people locked up how they are.”

Bilal Malik

VOCAL-NY Leader

Decreasing Legal System Contact through Diversion

Reshaping Prosecution

The most effective prosecutors know that they cannot deliver public safety through crowded jails and increased prosecutions in overburdened courts. They are using their discretion to build more just and effective solutions like community-based [diversion programs](#) that address underlying drivers of crime and have been shown to increase community safety. Vera's Reshaping Prosecution initiative supports their work, partnering with offices across the country to reduce the number of people who enter the criminal legal system and build evidence that doing so is a better path to safety. This work helps to address racial disparities and increases prosecutors' accountability to communities most impacted by mass incarceration.

In 2023 Reshaping Prosecution helped prosecutor offices:

- **Reduce low-level traffic stops.**

In 2021, Reshaping Prosecution helped District Attorney John Choi of Ramsey County, Minnesota, develop and launch a policy to reduce the harms of low-level traffic stops for minor violations that have nothing to do with keeping roads safe. These traffic stops fail to improve public safety and exacerbate racial disparities in traffic enforcement—in fact, [just 0.3 percent](#) of the 20 million traffic stops every year lead to an arrest for contraband. This past year, Choi's [office released data](#) on the impact of two years of the new policy, which showed it to be a definitive success. Traffic stops not related to public safety fell 86 percent, with Black drivers experiencing the [largest decrease in stops](#) and related searches.

[The data also showed](#) that the new policy did not impact public safety. While Choi worked with several police departments in Ramsey County to implement his changes, not all local departments cooperated. The jurisdictions that did not implement change saw [a greater increase in violent crime](#) than jurisdictions that implemented Choi's policy. "This independent research shows we not only greatly reduced the unequal treatment of many in our community due to these stops, but also that

law enforcement has been able to move scarce resources to more serious issues,” said Choi.

There’s no evidence here that spending enormous amounts of public resources on low-level traffic stops builds safety, but plenty of evidence does show that it exacerbates racial disparities. Vera’s work with Ramsey County has illustrated a different way to build safe communities.

— Build new diversion programs.

In 2023, Reshaping Prosecution forged new long-term partnerships with prosecutor offices across the country to build diversion programs with community-based organizations. Diversion programs act as exit ramps, minimizing people’s exposure to the criminal legal system by offering an alternative to prosecution and incarceration. These programs target root problems and have been effective in building [sustainable public safety](#). Reshaping Prosecution’s new partners in Indiana, Hawai‘i, Minnesota, Texas, Virginia, and Vermont are working with Vera to build diversion programs that expand access to marginalized communities. They do so in two ways: not charging mandatory fines and fees, and not prohibiting people from diversion opportunities due to prior legal system involvement.

— Defend discretion from antidemocratic attacks.

One of the basic tools reform-minded prosecutors use is discretion, or the ability of elected prosecutors to decide how to allocate their resources in the interest of their community. In order to deliver both safety and justice, they use their discretion to set office policy, decide what cases to charge and how to charge those cases, and when to use other tools beyond prosecution to address a problem.

In Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas, so-called “tough-on-crime” legislators have spent the past year attempting to restrict local prosecutors from exercising their discretion to adopt evidence-based reforms that increase public safety. Much proposed legislation has centered around

prosecutors who have made clear they will not prosecute people who seek abortions. Since 2017, 17 states have [tried to pass](#) bills that undermine prosecutorial reforms designed to curb some of the injustices of the criminal legal system. Some of these bills would allow state officials to remove democratically elected local officials, severing the connection between the will of local communities and their elected prosecutors. Reshaping Prosecution worked closely with its partners in 2023 to push back against these attempts to undermine efforts to reform the criminal legal system.



Reshaping Prosecution has worked with Ramsey County, Minnesota, District Attorney John Choi (center) to develop and launch a policy to reduce the harms of low-level traffic stops for minor violations that have nothing to do with keeping roads safe. Photo by Steve Karnowski via AP Photo.

STOPS Project

Vera's STOPS (Sensible Traffic Ordinances for Public Safety) project helps jurisdictions across the country to end traffic stops for non-safety-related infractions such as a broken taillight, an expired registration, or a dangling air freshener. Evidence shows that these stops are not necessary for public safety and instead can create demonstrable physical, psychological, and economic harm. Eliminating non-safety-related stops can improve road safety as well as reduce racial disparities in who is being stopped.

In 2023, the STOPS project helped several jurisdictions to end categories of non-safety-related stops:

- Memphis, Tennessee, [eliminated stops](#) via local ordinance for violations of Memphis's traffic code, including driving with a single taillight or headlight and expired registration of less than 60 days.
- Ann Arbor, Michigan, [removed](#) several state vehicle law offenses from being the basis of a police traffic stop, also through a local ordinance.
- Shaker Heights, Ohio, [passed a resolution](#) directing police officers to concentrate their traffic enforcement on hazardous driving, defined as speeding, driving while intoxicated, distracted driving, and stop sign/red light violations.
- The Alliance, Nebraska, police chief instituted an informal departmental policy prohibiting stops for equipment violations.
- Seattle, Washington's police department [formalized a policy](#) prohibiting stops for expired or improperly displayed license tabs, rear window obstructions, or cracked windshields.

The STOPS project also worked on campaigns to end non-safety-related traffic stops statewide in California, Connecticut, and Washington state. In 2024, these statewide campaigns will continue, as well as advocacy in cities and counties across the country.

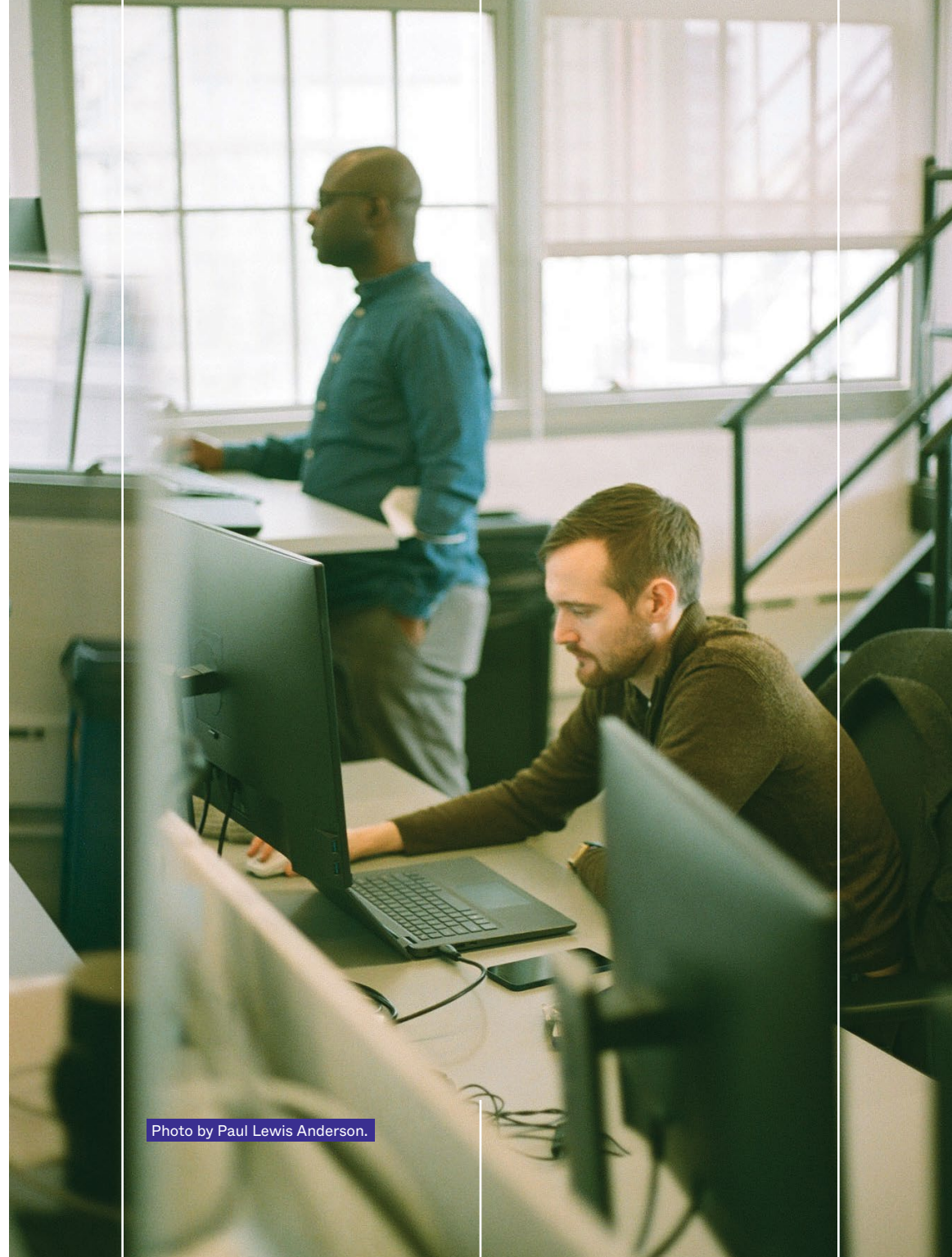


Photo by Paul Lewis Anderson.

Beyond Jails

Vera's Beyond Jails initiative aims to reduce jail populations and end the nation's dependence on jails to solve community problems. This practice has driven mass incarceration and disproportionately harmed people with mental health or substance use conditions, people who are unhoused, and communities of color—while failing to deliver safety.

In 2023, Beyond Jails fought to decrease the use of jails by:

- **Launching local partnerships in three states, covering 10 counties.**

In 2023, Beyond Jails launched nine partnerships with community-based organizations and a local government agency to cocreate county-level strategies to reduce jail incarceration. These collaborations span Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Texas and include supporting efforts to form a public defender office, pushing for changes in bail-setting practices, and advocating against a significant jail build, among others. All of the partnerships were selected due to their potential to contribute to practical and substantive changes within these regions, while also serving as a model for transformative justice practices on a broader scale.

“When members of the public believe their law enforcement organizations represent them, understand them, and respond to them, and when communities perceive authorities as fair, legitimate, and accountable, it deepens trust in law enforcement. This trust is essential to defusing tension, solving crimes, and creating a system in which residents view law enforcement as both fair and just.”

Brian Bierdeman

Maplewood Public Safety Director, Ramsey County, Minnesota

- **Advocating for affordable bail.**

Vera opposes the use of money bail because it criminalizes poverty. For jurisdictions that continue to use money bail, it is important to ensure that people can afford the amounts of bail that are set. In 2023, Beyond Jails trained judges, court staff, media personnel, and other stakeholders in the use of Vera's Ability to Pay Calculator, which has been adopted by the county government of Shelby County, Tennessee. This calculator helps courts determine a person's individualized ability to pay bail without undue hardship. It is based on two underlying principles: poverty should not result in pretrial jailing simply because someone cannot afford to pay bail and, in cases in which bail is paid, a person should have the capacity to do so without having to forgo paying for rent, groceries, child care, or other necessary expenses.

- **Introducing a major pretrial justice legislative proposal in Michigan.**

In Michigan, [38 percent](#) of people with money bail set at or below \$2,500 remained in jail until the resolution of their cases, meaning they were likely unable to pay even the \$250 required to obtain a surety bond (underwritten by a bail bond agent that requires the person pay 10 percent of the full bail amount). In early 2023, Vera introduced an eight-bill legislative package to expand pretrial justice, reduce wealth-based detention, and promote public safety in Michigan. Under the proposed legislation, judges may not set money bail for certain low-level, nonviolent offenses. In cases where money bail is still permitted, judges may only do so when there is clear and convincing evidence that the person poses a risk of harm to another person or the community at large, or there is a risk that the person will abscond.

- **Killing two regressive pieces of bail legislation in Texas.**

When two broad proposals to expand pretrial detention arrived in the Texas legislature, Vera capitalized on relationships built with legislators and provided research and suggestions to mitigate the harm of the proposed

bills. Vera submitted official testimony to the Texas Senate, met with Texas House lawmakers to push for significant changes, testified in House committee hearings, and consulted with advisors for the Speaker of the House. As a result of effective advocacy from Vera and partners, both pieces of legislation died on the House floor during the final day of the session.



Myles Martin was held in a Texas jail for 30 months because he could not afford bail. Photo courtesy of Myles Martin.

“Imagine being kidnapped and taken away from your family. Imagine losing years with your children. Imagine losing your godfather and not being able to attend his funeral or console his sister (your mother). Imagine losing your apartment, your job, your vehicle, and a large number of friends. Imagine being told that you are an ‘inmate,’ and that you have no rights. Fortunately, most people only have to imagine those things. Unfortunately, it was my reality. I lost six months shy of three years of my life, all of which I will never get back. The biggest loss was my relationship with my now eight-year-old son and five-year-old daughter. You cannot rewind time and repair the damage that has been done. There is no making up for the time lost with my children. The limits that incarceration puts on you are so hard to bear.”

Myles Martin

Author, Poet, Artist, and Activist

Sentencing Reform

Vera's Sentencing Reform project takes on excessive sentences fueled by “tough-on-crime” rhetoric. Decades of research shows that [long sentences do not deter crime](#) and that the United States overestimates when incarceration is needed for public safety. Moreover, this approach actively causes harm by taking away the liberty of hundreds of thousands of people—particularly Black and Latino men. Harsh sentences also [fail to repair the damage](#) done to crime survivors, who are expected to be satisfied by a prison sentence and little else to address their harm.

The project advocates for new sentencing laws built around guiding principles: privileging liberty, building safety, and repairing harm to victims. Examples of such reforms include ending mandatory minimums, increasing access to community-based sentences, and striking down three-strikes laws.

In 2023, the project:

- **Issued a groundbreaking report, [A New Paradigm for Sentencing in the United States](#).**

The report summarizes the evidence surrounding sentencing's impact on safety, offers new guiding principles for sentencing legislation that privilege liberty, outlines seven key sentencing reforms in line with these guiding principles, and suggests a “North Star” for sentencing policy with a presumption toward community-based sentences except in limited circumstances. The report has been disseminated to policymakers, academics, and advocates across the country.

- **Worked to build a site selection process for advocacy efforts for two new states.**



Vera's groundbreaking report summarizes the evidence surrounding sentencing's impact on safety, offers new guiding principles, outlines seven key sentencing reforms, and suggests a “North Star” for sentencing policy.

Photo by Joseph Rodriguez/Redux.



Girls and gender expansive youth experiencing trafficking, homelessness, and other crises don't need a locked facility—they need meaningful supports, programming, and economic stability, along with places where they can feel safe and heard and can build relationships. Photo by FG Trade.

Ending Girls' Incarceration

Vera's Ending Girls' Incarceration (EGI) initiative aims to zero out the incarceration of girls and gender expansive youth in the country's juvenile legal system. This means promoting prevention and diversion services that prioritize freedom and enable young people to stay in their communities where they belong. EGI is working to decriminalize nonviolent offenses such as running away and to prohibit incarceration as a strategy to protect a young person's safety or address their needs.

In 2023, EGI made progress by:

— **Expanding work in California.**

EGI is building upon its work in California by expanding beyond [Santa Clara County](#). In April 2023, in partnership with the [California Office of Youth and Community Restoration \(OYCR\)](#), EGI launched the Ending Girls' Incarceration in California Action Network. Four counties have been selected for assistance as part of the first cohort: Imperial, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Diego. The state has invested \$5 million to encourage counties to implement reforms and fund diversion programming. Along with funding from OYCR, each county will receive technical assistance from Vera as it implements solutions to end girls' incarceration.

— **Zeroing out the population of Hawai'i's girls' facility.**

Girls experiencing trafficking, homelessness, and other crises don't need a locked facility—or the threat of a locked facility. What they need is connection to meaningful supports, programming, and economic stability, along with places where they can feel safe and heard and can build relationships. Since 2018 EGI has worked to end the incarceration of girls and gender expansive youth in the state. In July 2022, for the first time ever, Hawai'i held no girls in the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility (HYCF), its only long-term juvenile placement facility. EGI is working with HYCF, the Office of Youth Services, and the Pūā Foundation to build on this milestone. Instead of punishing girls and gender expansive youth for the harm and discrimination they experience, Hawai'i is investing in transformative solutions that promote their well-being.

— **Developing a model for community-based organizations to provide housing.**

Too often, girls and gender expansive youth end up in carceral settings because their home life is unsafe. In May 2023, Santa Clara

County released a request for proposals and will select community-based organizations to provide housing resources designed to prevent girls and gender expansive youth from entering detention because of a lack of housing. Vera codeveloped the model with the county and will serve on the evaluation committee that selects programs.

“Ending incarceration doesn't mean we completely eliminate consequences—but it is about fundamentally changing our mindset from a punitive approach to a healing approach. So many girls were sent to me for their own 'safety,' and I kept saying the correctional facility is not designed with their safety in mind. We need to be asking what girls need to be safe and investing in that.”

Mark Patterson

Administrator of the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility

Fines and Fees

Across the United States, laws require people to pay fines and fees for various nonviolent offenses and other points of contact with the criminal legal system. In a country where more than one-fifth of adults have no emergency savings, these payments are often impossible. People can be ticketed for minor infractions like traffic violations or even jaywalking. Additionally, many jurisdictions also charge fees to cover a range of administrative costs, which are not necessarily related to the underlying offense. If these debt obligations are not paid, people can be arrested and even incarcerated. The burden of these fines and fees is felt in particular by people living in poverty and can further trap them in cycles of incarceration.

Vera's Fines and Fees initiative is working to end exploitive criminal legal system fines and fees and saw major victories in two states:

— New Mexico.

In 2023, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed a bill into law that [eliminates](#) nearly all post-adjudication fees for adults in the state's criminal courts. Vera played a critical role in this bill's passage, meeting with legislators, providing feedback on the bill's fiscal impact report, and consulting on other economic impact evaluations that shaped discussion about the bill and likely influenced lawmakers' decisions to vote in favor of its passage.

— Washington.

In 2023, Governor Jay Inslee signed a bill into law that [requires courts to waive](#) all conviction fees for anyone who meets the indigency standard. This bill uses an expanded definition of indigency, created through previous legislation on which Vera consulted, that applies to people who are unhoused or who have mental health conditions or recurring basic living costs that render them without the ability to pay. Vera collaborated with partners at the Washington State Budget and Policy Center to develop methodology for a cost analysis of collecting these previously mandatory fees and consulted on an equitable funding formula for backfilling revenue losses after the bill's passage.



Photo by Paul Lewis Anderson.

Protecting the Rights of Immigrants Facing Deportation

Advancing Universal Representation

Far too many people who have a path to legal residency in the United States are instead deported, simply because they [can't afford an attorney](#). In criminal court, the Sixth Amendment guarantees the right to legal representation regardless of a person's ability to pay. But people facing deportation in immigration court are not afforded this same right if they cannot afford it. In the more than [2.9 million](#) cases pending in immigration court, more than 1.9 million people lack legal representation. Without an attorney, detained immigrants have little chance of avoiding deportation. In fact, detained people with legal representation are up to [10.5 times](#) more likely to obtain relief from deportation than those without representation.

In 2023, Advancing Universal Representation helped increase the numbers of people facing deportation who have publicly funded lawyers to protect their rights by:

- **Leading the effort to introduce the Fairness to Freedom Act in Congress.**

In April, Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Cory Booker and Representatives Norma Torres, Pramila Jayapal, and Grace Meng introduced the [Fairness to Freedom Act](#), which would establish the right to federally funded legal representation for every person facing deportation who cannot afford it. Vera rallied in Washington, DC, in May 2023 with more than 100 immigrant justice advocates from across the country to support the bill and met with members of Congress to advocate for its passage. Vera is also working to enshrine the right to legal counsel for immigrants in state law through legislation in key states, such as with the proposed Access to Representation Act in New York.

- Expanding the Safety and Fairness for Everyone Network of publicly funded deportation programs to 25 sites, including the state of Nevada and Bexar County, Texas.

Vera supported the coalition that advocated for the renewal of Nevada’s program, with a funding increase that brings the annual investment to \$850,000.

- Securing millions more in public investment for publicly funded deportation defense programs.

Vera was part of a coalition that successfully lobbied for an increase in annual funding for New York’s immigration [legal and social services](#) as part of a \$43 million increase from \$20 million to [\\$63 million](#).



In May 2023, Vera rallied in Washington, DC, with more than 100 immigrant justice advocates from across the country to support the Fairness to Freedom Act, which would establish the right to federally funded legal representation for every person facing deportation who cannot afford it. Photo by Sergio Mantilla.

“Having a lawyer helps you mentally because you have somebody that actually cares for your well-being and wants you to stay in the United States. It’s not just you by yourself. It makes you feel like you have a chance. When I was going to sign the deportation papers just to get out of detention, my lawyer said, ‘No, no. You have a good chance.’”

Julio

Julio is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who was able to remain in the United States with the help of an attorney from the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project, a publicly funded deportation defense program. His name has been changed to protect his identity.

Ensuring People Leave Prison and Jail with a Fair Chance to Thrive

Restoring Promise

Though [95 percent](#) of people incarcerated in state prisons will return home one day, too many prisons are dangerous, oppressive environments that often leave people worse off than they were before incarceration. This isn't only applicable to incarcerated people, as prison environments are also detrimental to the people who work there. The risk of suicide for corrections officers is [39 percent](#) higher than for people in other professions, and they suffer higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than combat veterans. Vera's [Restoring Promise](#) initiative partners with the [MILPA Collective](#) to create young adult housing units grounded in dignity. This groundbreaking work has transformed prisons in five states to create a culture where accountability, restorative practices, and healing replace the punitive and retributive nature of our carceral system.

Over the past year, Restoring Promise worked to transform prison culture by:

- **Increasing safety.**

Restoring Promise is backed by data-driven evidence showing that foregrounding dignity and restorative practices makes young adult housing units safer. Findings released by Vera and the National Institute of Justice in August 2023 from a [randomized control trial](#) conducted in prisons in South Carolina showed that living in a Restoring Promise unit decreased young adults' odds of being convicted of a violent infraction by 73 percent and of experiencing a stay in solitary confinement by 83 percent.

- **Convening 100 corrections professionals to promote dignity for incarcerated people.**

In October 2022, Restoring Promise held Together in Dignity, its sixth convening and first in-person convening since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three-day event brought together 100 corrections professionals in San Antonio, Texas, while many of their colleagues attended virtually. Notably, it was the first time that currently incarcerated members of Restoring Promise's community were (virtually) able to join a convening.

— Celebrating anniversaries of two new units.

Two Restoring Promise young adult housing units—Change Makers Village at the Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Colorado and UNITY Village at the North Dakota State Penitentiary in North Dakota—celebrated their one-year anniversaries. The units opened in December 2021 and February 2022, respectively. Both units were the first of their kind opened with primarily virtual technical assistance from Restoring Promise, and though they faced unique challenges, they are thriving and charting new territory as Restoring Promise units in their approach to programming, organization, and community involvement.



In partnership with the New York Giants, Vera staff and donors joined Giants Cornerback Darnay Holmes (left) and Ring of Honor Member Justin Tuck (right), who is also a Vera Board of Trustees member, to visit the Cheshire Correctional Institution in Connecticut and learn about the facility's Restoring Promise Truthfulness, Respectfulness, Understanding, and Elevating (T.R.U.E.) housing unit. Photo by Giants.com.

“Restoring Promise teaches you to be in tune with your soft skills, man, to let your fellow brothers know that you care. You can do that by a simple hug—most men in prison ain’t gonna hug you, but in Restoring Promise, you are more in tune with yourself and allowed to be human. You can hug a guy and tell him that you love him and that you are there for him.”

Olfonzo Staton

Formerly incarcerated in a Restoring Promise unit in South Carolina's Lee Correctional Institution

Unlocking Potential

In July 2023, as a result of a successful campaign led by Vera and a coalition of partners, 760,000 people in prison finally had their eligibility for Pell Grants restored after the 1994 Crime Bill barred their access for nearly three decades. Since the ban was overturned by Congress in December 2020, Vera's Unlocking Potential initiative has worked to build on this success and promote access to high-quality postsecondary education in prison. This benefits both [those participating in college in prison](#) and [communities at large](#). Ninety-five percent of people in state prisons will return home, and people who have participated in postsecondary education programs in prison may have up to [48 percent lower odds](#) of returning to prison than those who have not. This benefits communities, as well as businesses that have a larger pool of potential job candidates.

Unlocking Potential made strides this year by:

- **Ensuring full implementation of the new policy change reinstating Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison.**

[Vera provided](#) targeted technical assistance to corrections agencies in all 50 states, the Bureau of Prisons, and Puerto Rico aimed at implementation of the new regulations. Six months after reinstatement, 35 corrections agencies are Pell ready, meaning they have put in place the process to select and approve new college partners. These corrections agencies have custody over the majority of people in U.S. prisons, accounting for 1.08 million of the [1.2 million total prison population](#). Fourteen more



Dameon Stackhouse, community police alliance coordinator for the Bridgewater Police Department in New Jersey, completed college courses while incarcerated at East Jersey State Prison. Photo by Victoria Stevens.

agencies are on the cusp of readiness. Vera also conducted targeted outreach to the eight accrediting agencies with colleges participating in Second Chance Pell, assisting each with achieving Pell readiness to ensure that colleges approved by a corrections agency can advance to approval by their accreditor before receiving final sign-off from the U.S. Department of Education.

- **Providing technical assistance to colleges and corrections agencies that participate in the U.S. Department of Education’s Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative (SCP).**

SCP launched in 2015 to provide Pell Grants to help students in state and federal prisons pay for college. [More than 40,000 students](#) participated in postsecondary education funded through SCP between 2016 and 2022 and nearly 12,000 earned credentials, including bachelor’s degrees, associate’s degrees, and certificates or postsecondary diplomas.

- **Convening corrections agencies and education leaders to improve prison education opportunities.**

In July 2023, Unlocking Potential held its sixth annual convening in Washington, DC, which brought together 270 SCP site representatives and partners, including individuals from corrections departments, colleges, and accreditation agencies. The focus of the convening was the momentous reinstatement of Pell Grants in July 2023.

“The experience of actually being able to take college courses while I was inside changed my life. It gave me hope. I realized, you know what, there’s no limit to what you’re going to be able to do . . . if you focus at this particular moment.”

Dameon Stackhouse

Community Police Alliance Coordinator for the Bridgewater Police Department in New Jersey

Opening Doors

Vera’s Opening Doors initiative works to increase access to safe, affordable housing for people with conviction histories. Housing providers across the country exclude people who are trying to rejoin their communities after incarceration. Accessing shelter is a basic human right. Lacking a permanent address can make it difficult to obtain employment and social services, increasing the likelihood of a person’s future contact with the criminal legal system.

Opening Doors worked to end this counterproductive practice in 2023 by:

- **Supporting the introduction of the [Michigan Fair Chance to Housing Act](#).**

This bill, introduced in the Michigan House of Representatives in June, would prohibit landlords from requiring housing applicants to disclose criminal history records.

- **Working at the federal level to increase housing access nationally.**

Opening Doors participated in regional and federal panels that elevated the voices of people with lived experience in the criminal legal system who had experienced barriers to housing.

- **Launching a nationwide effort to increase the pool of affordable housing for people with conviction histories.**

In July 2023, Opening Doors released a request for proposals for technical assistance to housing finance agencies. Vera’s goal is to help these agencies analyze and adjust their policies to increase affordable housing access for people with conviction histories.

- **Launching statewide advocacy work in Oklahoma.**

Opening Doors hosted the Oklahoma Statewide Reentry Housing Roundtable in Tulsa in April 2023. The event focused on thinking through [opportunities and challenges](#) to expand housing access for people with conviction histories alongside public housing authorities, homeless service providers, criminal justice agencies, and local foundations.

Communications and External Affairs

Though media and politicians often use prejudicial rhetoric and scare tactics to fearmonger around crime and attack people involved with the criminal legal and immigration systems, there are positive signs that the public supports the kinds of reforms Vera champions. [Public sentiment polls](#) show that a majority of voters favor solutions that prevent crime rather than just responding with police and prison after harm is done. Through strategic communications, Vera aims to build on this progress and increase the number of people who demand systems that deliver true justice.

Using media outreach, publications, multimedia products, and digital advocacy, Vera is reaching a larger audience than ever before and attracting more supporters of our work.

Making News

The media shapes public perspectives. Securing coverage that combats false narratives around crime and advances reform goals helps Vera transform systems that harm. Through more than 60 years of producing quality research, analysis, and demonstration projects, Vera has earned a position as a trusted source for national and local media outlets covering the criminal legal and immigration systems. Each appearance in news articles, op-eds, radio and television programs, and online publications allows Vera to advance facts that support our efforts to make these systems more just and humane. Here are some of Vera's most impactful 2023 media appearances:

[How Crime Is Igniting New Conflicts between Red States and Blue Cities](#),
CNN, March 14, 2023

[A Young Mom Was Arrested for Theft—and Died Mysteriously in Jail](#),
Rolling Stone, March 29, 2023

[How to Transform America's Criminal Legal System](#),
The Atlantic, May 1, 2023

[How Do We Reduce Crime? Just Ask This Public Safety Expert](#),
BuzzFeed, May 3, 2023

[3 Things You May Not Know About Mass Incarceration and 3 Ways to Fight It](#), BuzzFeed, May 3, 2023

[What Is Universal Representation and Why Is It Important?](#), HuffPost, May 5, 2023

[Here's How Vera Institute of Justice Is Fighting to Transform the Legal and Immigration Systems](#), HuffPost, May 11, 2023

[Nick Turner on Criminal Justice Reform: 'It Is Possible to Have Safety and Justice at the Same Time'](#), MSNBC, June 10, 2023

[Thousands More Prisoners Across the U.S. Will Get Free College Paid for by the Government](#), Associated Press, June 28, 2023

[Mayor Adams and the Migrant Crisis in New York](#), *The New York Times*, September 11, 2023

Research Publications

Vera's efforts to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems are founded on research that shows humane, just solutions work. Elevating this research through research publications helps spread the word about evidence-based successes. A selection of publications from 2023:

[A New Paradigm for Sentencing in the United States](#), February 2023

[Getting to Zero: Ending Girls' Incarceration in California](#), April 2023

[People in Jail and Prison in 2022](#), June 2023

[Pushing Forward: Prosecution Reform and Racial Equity across Six Counties](#), July 2023

[The Criminalization of Poverty in Kentucky](#), August 2023

[Changing Prison Culture Reduces Violence](#), August 2023

Elevating the Voices of Impacted People

People harmed by the criminal legal and immigration systems have important messages about how to reform them, and others want to hear from them. Over the course of 2023, Vera more than doubled engagement with its editorial web content over the prior year, reaching more than half a million page views. In 2023, Vera elevated the following voices:

DC, Benjamin Frandsen, Elizabeth Hawes, Lyle C. May, Ryan M. Moser, Rahsaan Thomas, Derek R. Trumbo Sr., and George T. Wilkerson, [The Human Toll of Jail](#), January 2023

Craig Caudill and Minna Long, [New Partnerships Help Incarcerated People Find Jobs](#), March 2023

Syrita Steib, [College Applications Shouldn't Ask About Conviction History](#), April 2023

Walter Ball, Brandon Dennis, and David Sell, [We Founded a Youth Mentoring Program While in Prison, and It's Saving Lives](#), June 2023

Ramon*, Rosita*, and Julio*, [Arrested While Bringing His Son Gifts—Then Deported](#), June 2023

Jamie Gregrich, Dameon Stackhouse, and CJ Suranofsky, [How College in Prison is Changing Lives](#), June 2023

Molly, [Care over Confinement: Kids Need Second Chances and Services to Succeed](#), June 2023

Myles Martin, [I Lost My Job, Apartment, Vehicle, and Time with My Kids Due to Unjust Pretrial Detention](#), July 2023

Marcus Lane, [People Need Transportation Access After Release from Jail and Prison](#), October 2023

*Name changed to protect identity.

Inspiring Meaningful Engagement

As Vera's digital footprint expands, our approach to original content evolves. We use digital posting to mobilize communities around the issues that are central to Vera's mission, producing timely calls to action that keep emerging contacts, followers, and donors plugged in:

- Calls for U.S. Congress to pass critical federal legislation, like the Fairness to Freedom Act
- Celebrating the rollout of Pell Grants to incarcerated students
- Letter writing campaigns for trans people who are currently incarcerated
- Confronting legal slavery for incarcerated people

Video storytelling continues to play an important role in our work: we produce short, shareable pieces that break down complex issues for young, emerging audiences, whether it's the history of sentencing or the criminalization of poverty in the United States.

As a result, we've seen measurable impact:

- 321,328** followers on social media channels
- 130,117** engaged contacts on email
- 33,381** digital actions taken by our audience on email, web, and social media
- 58,585** social media video views

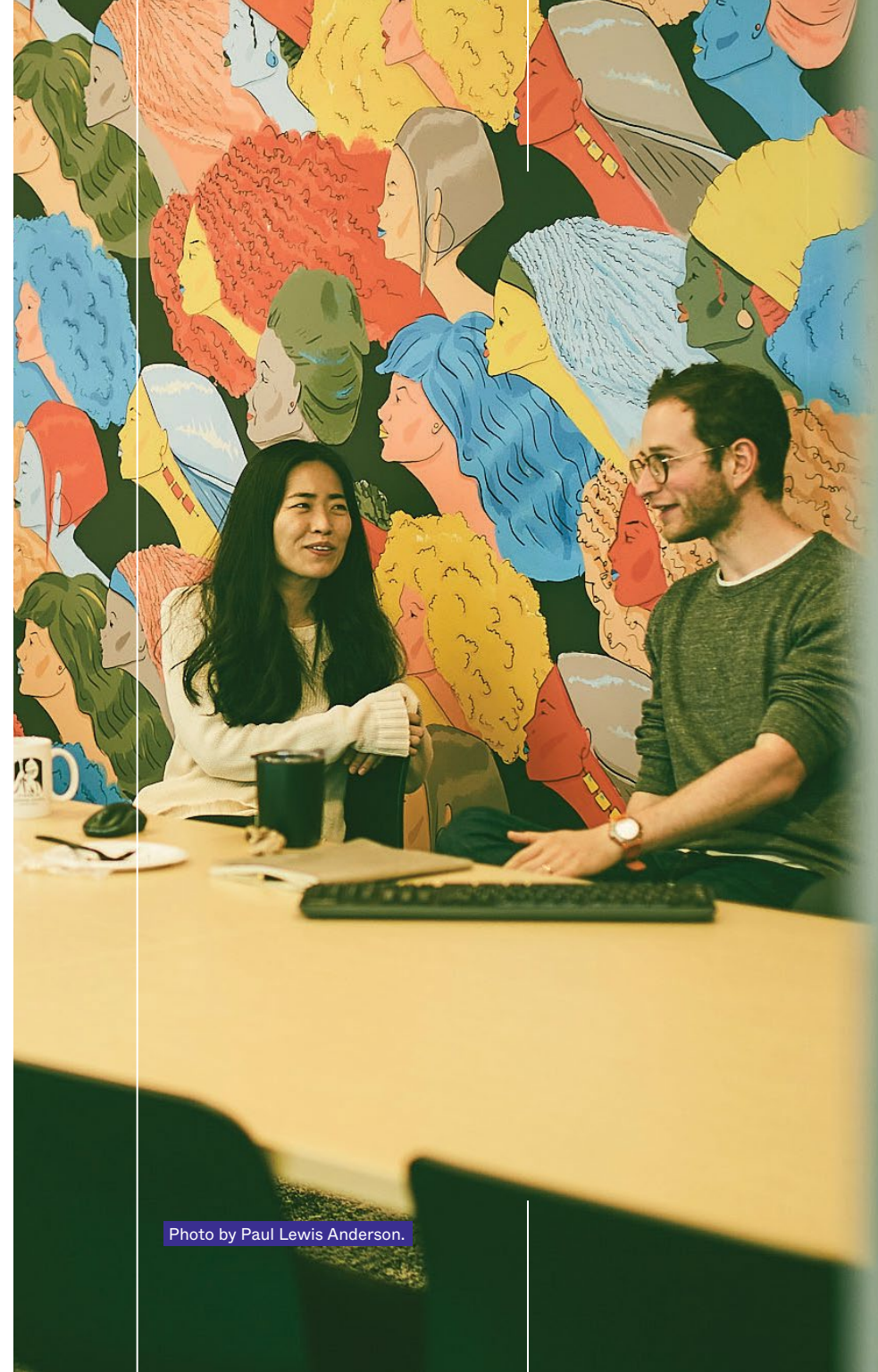


Photo by Paul Lewis Anderson.

Advancing Policies that Deliver Safety and Justice and Changing the Politics on Crime

Advocacy and Partnerships

The movement for justice reform and a new approach to public safety has experienced remarkable wins over the past decade. For the first time in 20 years, the [number of people in jail and prison](#) has dropped and remains below 2 million. There has been [unprecedented investment](#) by local government in a more comprehensive approach to safety, with billions of dollars allocated to civilian first responder programs and community violence intervention. And despite increased worries about crime in many parts of the country, in 2023 voters often [rejected scare tactics and fearmongering at the ballot box](#), electing mayors and state legislators who demonstrated they are “serious about safety” over “tough on crime” in places as diverse as Chicago; Jacksonville, Florida; and Lincoln, Nebraska.

However, as crime rates remain higher than pre-pandemic levels and the backlash to justice reform remains potent, we risk losing ground if we treat the headwinds like the weather and hope they pass. Vera’s initiatives, supported by our Advocacy & Partnerships Department and [Vera Action](#), an independent and aligned 501(c)(4), worked to enact transformative policy change for safety and justice at the local, state, and federal levels in partnership with organizers, advocates, government leaders, and elected officials on both sides of the political aisle.

A few highlights of Vera and Vera Action’s advocacy in 2023 include the following:

- Each year in the United States, police stop [more than 20 million](#) motorists for alleged traffic violations. [A large portion of these stops—estimates range from a third to nearly half](#)—are for minor violations that do not affect public safety, such as driving with a single broken taillight, expired or defective vehicle registrations, a missing inspection sticker, or excessive window tint. Yet those encounters between police and motorists can turn deadly, as evidenced by the deaths of Tyre Nichols, Philando Castile, and so many others. Vera’s STOPS project passed policies in four jurisdictions to reduce or end police stops for traffic infractions that have no bearing

on road safety ([Ann Arbor, Michigan](#); [Shaker Heights, Ohio](#); [Memphis, Tennessee](#); and [Seattle, Washington](#)).

- Community-driven district attorneys who reject “tough-on-crime” measures and champion policies that advance both safety *and* justice are increasingly under attack with recalls, removals, and legislation that threatens their independence. Vera and Vera Action launched a coordinating effort, in partnership with other national and local advocates, to protect these district attorneys and defeat bad legislation. We worked to neutralize [a bad bill in Texas](#) and curb some of the worst provisions of a [law that passed](#) (and was struck down by the state supreme court) in Georgia.
- A false narrative exists that communities must choose safety *or* justice—when in fact we can and must have both. Through [Vera Action](#), we worked to change the politics on crime with [public opinion research](#) and [message testing](#) that advances a strong, affirmative message on how to own safety, accountability, and justice and counter “tough-on-crime” rhetoric. We used the research to brief dozens of legislators, candidates, consultants, and campaigns, as well as the media and other justice reform and racial justice organizations. We continue to convene and lead a national messaging coordinating table featuring our own and others’ safety and crime messaging research, which includes over 25 partners.



Photo by Paul Lewis Anderson.

Financials

July 1, 2022—June 30, 2023 (FY23)

Revenues by type		
Government	\$199,797,374	76.30%
Foundation	\$9,663,071	3.69%
Contribution	\$42,927,697	16.39%
Individual and others	\$9,049,053	3.46%
State and city	\$423,170	0.16%
Total	\$261,860,365	100%

Pass-through funding	\$182,760,006
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Expenses		
Programs	\$248,496,141	94.79%
Program support and management	\$11,699,504	4.46%
Development and fundraising	\$1,967,072	0.75%
Total	\$262,162,717	100%

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Nicholas Turner

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