

# BJA Designed for Dignity Request for Proposals

The Bureau of Justice Assistance has awarded the Vera Institute of Justice \$1.5 million in funding to provide strategic and intensive training and technical assistance to transform prison cultures, climates, and spaces.

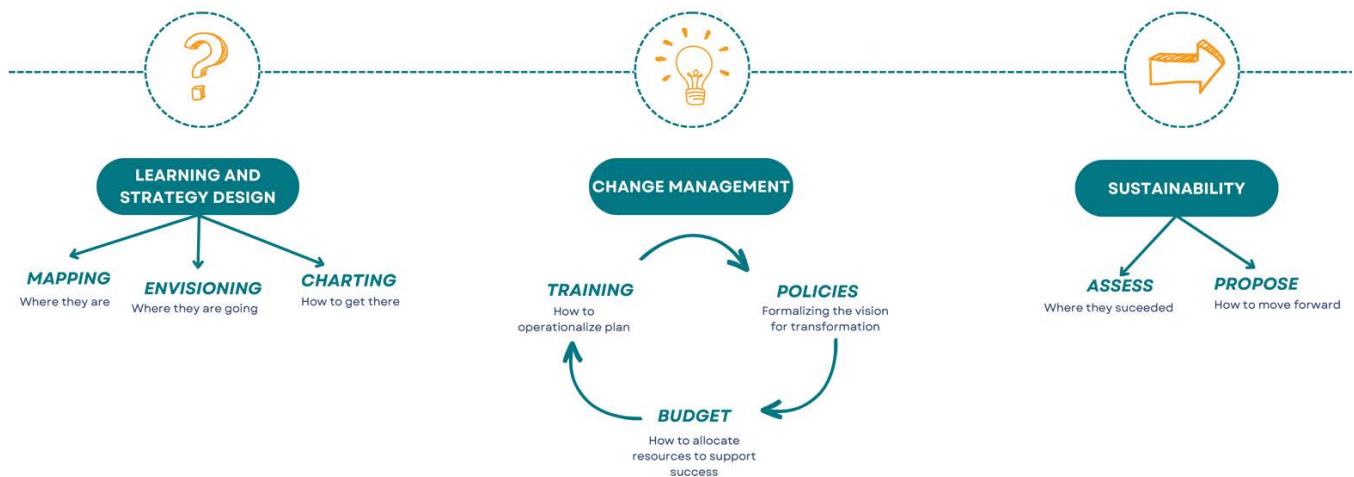
## Summary of Application Specifics

- **Project length:** 24 months (beginning on or around September 3, 2024, and concluding on September 30, 2026).
- **Application requirements:**
  - Acknowledgment of Restoring Promise’s Dignity Principles.
  - Responses to four (4) reflection questions.
  - Optional letter of support. (Please note that letters of support from governors will be required for applicants who progress to the second round of interviews.)
- **Deadline for submissions:** May 29, 2024.

## The Opportunity

Vera, in consultation with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), will select two corrections agencies to receive training and technical assistance (“TTA” and/or “the Project”) and targeted data collection aimed at devising, implementing, and/or enhancing strategies that create safer, more humane prison culture, climate, and spaces for correctional staff and those who are incarcerated. Over the 24 months of the Project, Vera will guide a work group (comprised of correctional leadership, staff, and people who are incarcerated) through a process of transforming DOC policy and training, along with a comprehensive review of resources to ensure long-term sustainability.

## Designed for Dignity Stages & Timeline



Vera's training, technical assistance, and targeted data collection shall include:

- mapping the site partners' current corrections culture, envisioning the desired corrections culture, and charting a process to sustainably achieve change;
- providing site partners with a plan for changes to policy, training, and resource allocation and a step-by-step guide to implementing the plan;
- facilitating training workshops to equip corrections professionals and people with the knowledge and tools needed to engage in the policy change process;
- collecting quantitative and qualitative data to understand site partners' interests, readiness, and capacities for culture change, as well as to assess and adjust the implementation of change efforts; and
- evaluating impact and establishing steps for sustainability and continued culture change.

Partner agencies must demonstrate a readiness and willingness to bring the Dignity Principles to all people who work and are incarcerated within their system.

Partner agencies will have the opportunity to:

- participate in site visits and cross-site Designed for Dignity Learning Exchanges;
- access subject matter experts on a range of strategies for creating safer and more humane prison environments (for example, staff retention, alternatives to disciplinary processes, restorative practices, and family partnership);
- develop a sustainability plan to ensure the continued transformation of policies and practices related to prison culture, climate, and spaces beyond the Project; and
- share lessons and impact from the change process with the wider field.

[Read more about the Project.](#)

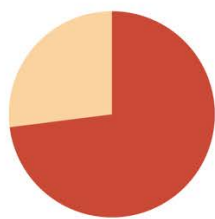
## **Background**

### **I. Origin of the Restoring Promise Initiative**

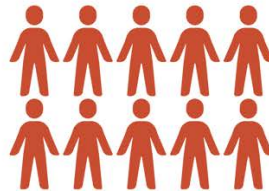
The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and activists working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all people. Restoring Promise is an initiative at Vera that, in partnership with correctional leaders, transforms prison cultures, climates, and spaces to reimagine housing units for young adults and realign corrections policies and practices with a commitment to human dignity.

Inspired by a trip to Germany in 2015, leadership from the Connecticut Department of Correction (CT DOC), including then-Commissioner Scott Semple and then-Governor Dannel Malloy, partnered with Restoring Promise to transform the living and working conditions in their prisons for young adults and staff. Within a year, the initiative successfully designed and implemented a first-of-its-kind housing unit for young adults sentenced to state prison, now known as the T.R.U.E. (Truthfulness, Respectfulness, Understanding, and Elevating) community. Since 2016, Restoring Promise has opened seven distinct units for young adults and partnered with six corrections agencies: Colorado Department of Corrections; Connecticut DOC; Idaho Department of Correction; Middlesex County Jail, Massachusetts; North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; and South Carolina Department of Corrections.

In 2023, landmark research revealed a significant reduction in violence among young adults (ages 18–25) living in two Restoring Promise young adult housing units located within the South Carolina Department of Corrections. As compared to a control group, young adults in a Restoring Promise housing unit were 73 percent less likely to receive a conviction for a violent infraction.



**SAFETY**  
73% of young adults in Restoring Promise units were less likely to receive a conviction for a violent infraction.



**STAFF MORALE+**  
100% Unit staff feel a renewed sense of purpose.

## II. Designed for Dignity

Designed for Dignity is an evolution of Restoring Promise, building on Vera’s groundbreaking work with corrections agencies since 2016 and evidence that the practices it has employed in young adult housing units can make facilities safer, for both staff and people who are incarcerated. Using Vera’s new set of Dignity Principles for conditions of confinement (outlined in *Dignity Principles: A Guide to Ensure the Humane Treatment of People in U.S. Carceral Settings*) as a guide, and the Designed for Dignity approach, Vera will work with agencies to implement strategies that will help meet their goals using the principles as a guide.

This approach was designed by Vera and BJA is funding the implementation of the TTA.

Vera has long-standing partnerships with state corrections agencies. We understand that each agency will have different focus areas and strategies to reach its individualized goals. We believe using the Dignity Principles as a guide for the implementation of more humane policies and practices will support DOC partners’ efforts to increase safety. The seven Dignity Principles that Restoring Promise will use as a roadmap are:

### 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.*

### 2. Human Dignity:

*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.*

### **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 the healing processes needed to address traumas from the workplace.*

### **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.*

### **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.*

### **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 also the experience of visitors arriving and walking to and from the space.*

### **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.*

The goal of Designed for Dignity is to support the field of corrections to transform its cultures, climates, and spaces into environments that prioritize safety and uphold human dignity for all people who work or are incarcerated within their systems.

## **Training and Technical Assistance**

### **I. Eligibility**

All state DOCs for adults are eligible to submit applications. Current Restoring Promise site partners are eligible to apply.

Partner agencies must demonstrate a readiness and willingness to bring the Dignity Principles to all people who work or are incarcerated within their system.

Applicants with a demonstrable overrepresentation of Black, brown, and Indigenous people incarcerated in their system will receive priority consideration.

## II. Vera Commitments

- **Access:** Restoring Promise leadership and a dedicated site coach from Restoring Promise will be readily available to Designed for Dignity site partners.
  - During the second year of the Project, Vera will connect the partner agencies with a pool of subject matter experts to support the site partners through the changes necessary to transform their culture, climate, and spaces.
- **Administrative:** Vera will engage in collaboration to draft and sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) incorporating a data-sharing agreement.
- **Staffing:** Vera will assign each partner agency a dedicated site coach to guide them through the Project successfully.
- **Meetings:** Vera will regularly convene the partner agency's Work Group and facilitate meetings with the partner agencies and key stakeholders.
  - Vera will identify and convene DOC staff to participate in Work Group meetings, phone calls, planning meetings, survey participation, and research planning.
- **Data collection:** Vera will collect quantitative and qualitative data throughout implementation to inform technical assistance and evaluate impact.
- **Policy assistance:** Vera staff will review the partner agencies' existing policies and standard operating procedures and, where necessary, assist with the process of developing new policies.
- **Informing the field:** Vera will present findings and lessons from implementation at conferences and through publications; when appropriate, partner agencies will be invited to join these presentations.

## III. Partner Site Commitments

- **Access:** Partner agencies will make agency leadership, staff, and people who are incarcerated readily available for activities related to the Project (including data collection), such as policy review meetings, site visits, surveys, and other data collection activities.
- **Administrative:** Engage in collaboration to draft and sign a MOU incorporating a data-sharing agreement.
- **Staffing:** Partner agencies will appoint a Project Coordinator situated within the policy department of each agency (20 percent full-time equivalent [FTE]) and a Data Coordinator (5 percent FTE) for the Project.

The Project Coordinator will

- be a member of the agency's leadership (at the agency headquarters-level);
- assume responsibility for organizational management of the Project;
- select and convene a multidisciplinary Work Group to meet with the Restoring Promise site coach;
- lead the work for the partner agency, serving as the point of contact for Vera and subject matter experts;
- represent the site in the Designed for Dignity Learning Exchanges; and
- meet regularly with the Vera site coach to provide status updates, share successes, and troubleshoot concerns and/or barriers to meeting the Project's goals.

The Data Coordinator will

- support Vera with data collection responsibilities.

- **Meetings:** Partner agencies will allow necessary people who work or are incarcerated within their correctional system to be available, as needed, for meetings that Vera convenes in support of the Project.
- **Inclusion:** Partner agencies will identify people who are incarcerated to participate in all project activities including, but not limited to:
  - Work Group and planning meetings;
  - policy and procedure review committees (to include collaboration in drafting revisions, where applicable);
  - work plan development; and
  - survey participation.
- **Data collection:** Partner agencies will provide Vera with administrative data and support with data request processes in support of the Project.
- **Policy assistance:** Partner agencies will provide Vera with access to policies, standard operating procedures, manuals, handbooks, training curricula, and other governing documents that detail the agency's procedures and practices.
- **Informing the field:** Partner agencies will grant Vera and BJA permission to publish reports, data analysis, and other publications related to the Project. An opportunity to review and provide commentary will be provided prior to publication.

## Selection Criteria and Proposal Submissions

Applicants must submit their proposals via the [application portal](#). Responses to the following questions are required.

1. Reflection questions (answers do not have to be in essay form):
  - a. What are the current challenges that the agency aims to address with the support of the Vera Institute of Justice (for example, staff morale, staff training, safety, conditions, or disciplinary processes)?
  - b. How has the agency leadership demonstrated prior collaboration with correctional staff and people who are incarcerated?
  - c. Describe a specific instance when the agency modified policies and/or training curricula in response to new evidence or knowledge. Please share challenges to implementation and whether modifications were sustained.
  - d. Describe in detail how a partnership with Designed for Dignity will advance the agency's goals to ensure humane conditions for all people who work and are incarcerated within their system.
2. Optional letter(s) of support from the applicant agency's state governor, legislative stakeholder(s), and/or union representative(s). (Please note that letters of support from governors will be required for applicants who progress to the second round of interviews.)

## Selection Decisions: Timeline and Process

Applications will be accepted until 11:59 p.m. PT on May 29, 2024. An informational webinar will be held to provide information about the initiative, the goals and expectations of the partnership, and resolve any questions. Applications will be scored based on each site's submission, including demonstrated readiness to create safer and more humane prisons through technical and training assistance, demonstrated ability to execute policy change, and letters of support from system and state stakeholders. Vera staff and the Project Advisory Board will review and score all applications.

Below is the anticipated timeline for the application process:

- **April 15, 2024:** RFP application opens
- **May 1, 2024:** Webinar
- **May 29, 2024:** Submission deadline
- **May 28–June 7, 2024:** First round of virtual interviews (with agency leadership and correctional staff)
- **June 10–14, 2024:** Second round of virtual interviews (with people who are incarcerated)
- **July 1, 2024:** Notification of selected proposals
- **September 1, 2024:** TTA and data collection start date

For any inquiries related to this application, please direct your questions to Clinique Chapman, Restoring Promise associate director, at [cchapman@vera.org](mailto:cchapman@vera.org).

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The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit [vera.org](http://vera.org).

Vera works to end mass incarceration, protect immigrants' rights, ensure dignity for people behind bars, and build safe, thriving communities.