

## A New Approach to Violent Crime in Brooklyn

*By Jill Pope*

What if someone hurt by violent crime could help determine the consequences for the person who harmed them? What if, instead of being locked up, the assailant had an opportunity to apologize and try to make things right? Common Justice, Vera's newest demonstration project, seeks to make such scenarios possible.

Common Justice will give young people who face a range of serious charges in Brooklyn's adult criminal court—including burglary, robbery, and assault, but not murder, sexual assault, or intimate partner violence—the chance to take part in supervised conferences with the person they harmed instead of going to prison.

In a safe environment, with a support team present, the harmed and responsible parties will meet with a facilitator to discuss what happened and arrive at an alternative sanction, which might include community service or restitution. Participants will be motivated to take sanctions seriously: failure to fulfill them will lead to prison. Program staff will also work to connect harmed parties with appropriate services (see box on page 6).

By giving harmed parties a chance to ask questions of the person who hurt them, describe how the crime affected them, and think through consequences that might help them feel better, the program seeks to improve

victims' experiences of justice. It also seeks to keep those who are responsible for these incidents out of prison and reduce their chances of reoffending.

"Part of me feels that this is one of the most cutting edge projects in the field. On the other hand, it's a very ordinary human response to harm," says Danielle Sered, the project's director.

Common Justice's practices—often referred to as restorative justice—originated in native cultures and have gained traction in western systems over the past 30 years. Research on these programs suggests that those dealing with serious offenses, such as robbery and assault, have bet-

*continued on page 6*

## Accessing Safety Initiative Expands Work into Criminal Justice System

*By Abbi Leman*

Since 2005, Vera's Accessing Safety Initiative (ASI) has been helping domestic violence and sexual assault agencies and organizations that serve people with disabilities or Deaf people to work together to better support people in need of both types of services. This fall, thanks to a change in federal guidelines affecting its government partner, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), ASI will offer technical assistance to people working in the criminal justice system as well.

The change hinges on the 2005 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. The original act prohibited criminal justice agencies from being involved in this portion of OVW's work that includes ASI. The reauthori-

zation of the act voided that prohibition.

"It has always been a shortcoming of our project that criminal justice practitioners could not be involved with these partnerships," says Nancy Smith, ASI's director. "The criminal justice system is a strong avenue of response for many victims of domestic and sexual violence as well as for people with disabilities. But people with disabilities encounter barriers in the justice system that are similar to those they face in accessing domestic violence services. Change efforts are needed to remove those barriers as well."

To prepare for working with this new group, ASI recently hosted three national roundtable discussions with experts in violence against women, disabilities

*continued on page 6*

## From Vera's Director



### Bringing Clarity to a Clouded Issue

As I write this letter, a handful of Vera researchers are intently focused on completing the final report for our Clinical Trials project. When it is released later this year, the report is likely to garner a great deal of attention. If the project's origins are any guide, it may also generate some controversy.

New York City's Administration for Children's Services (Children's Services) asked Vera to take on the project—an

exploration of issues related to the enrollment of foster children in clinical trials of HIV and AIDS treatments during the late 1980s and 1990s—in spring 2005. The previous year, an independent journalist had published an online article alleging that the trials were "neither safe nor necessary" and that black, Hispanic, and poor children in the agency's care had been enrolled in the trials without their knowledge and against the wishes of their parents or guardians. Variations of these allegations soon reappeared in the *New York Post*, on the Fox Television program the *O'Reilly Factor*, and in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary, *Guinea Pig Kids*. Although denied by Children's Services (the BBC would later retract portions of its documentary), the claims were taken up by citizens groups focused on protecting the rights of human research subjects and on issues of concern to the African American community.

Vera's mandate was to identify the policies and procedures for enrolling and monitoring HIV-positive foster children in clinical trials, determine whether those procedures were followed, and report on the condition of the children today. By the time they were done, Vera staff had examined the files of 796 children who may have participated in HIV/AIDS clinical trials—hundreds of thousands of pages altogether.

In undertaking this analysis, Vera is performing a vital public service: we are bringing facts and hard data to an issue that is easily—and understandably—clouded by emotions. There is a right way and a wrong way to deal with contentious issues such as this one. The right way is to take time to study the matter and gather data impartially and competently so that informed decisions are possible.

Although some time has passed since we began this research, the controversy remains. Those who feel aggrieved by the trials are moved by a history of discrimination and unethical practices from other quarters. Those who are offended by the charges—including many in the medical community—recall the trials as a valiant effort to extend care under unimaginably difficult circumstances. And because everyone involved was touched, one way or another, by the tragedy of AIDS, the feelings run deep.

Vera's job is to bring the facts to light. When we do, they will be, to the best of our ability, the truth. And the truth—a cornerstone of good policy and trust in government—is worth waiting for.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "MJ", written over a white background.

Michael P. Jacobson  
Director, Vera Institute of Justice

**Letters to the Editor may be sent to:** [contactvera@vera.org](mailto:contactvera@vera.org)

Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10279

Tel: (212) 334-1300, Fax: (212) 941-9407, [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org)

## ABOUT JUST 'CAUSE

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines expertise in research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety.

*Just 'Cause* is produced by the Communications Department: Robin Campbell, Abbi Leman, Nicole Lemon, Michael Mehler, and Jill Pope.

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Laurie O. Robinson  
Chair

Michael P. Jacobson  
President

James K. Bredar  
Edward P. Brynn  
Karen S. Burstein  
Zachary W. Carter  
William P. Dickey  
Richard G. Dudley, Jr.  
Dean M. Esserman  
Daniel J. Freed  
Saul A. Green  
Robert H. Henry  
Sally T. Hillsman  
Sandra A. Lamb  
Eric Lane  
Susan Powers Lodge  
Richard J. Mack  
Catie Marshall  
Joseph F. McDonald  
Theodore A. McKee  
Orlando Rodriguez  
John F. Savarese  
Frederick A. O. Schwarz, Jr.  
Karen P. Seymour

### HONORARY TRUSTEES

Norborne Berkeley, Jr.  
Nicholas de B. Katzenbach  
Morris E. Lasker  
Barbara Margolis  
Richard L. Menschel  
Michael E. Smith  
Christopher E. Stone  
Herbert Sturz  
Patricia M. Wald

# City Budget Cuts Force Closure of Adolescent Reentry Initiative

By Nicole Lemon

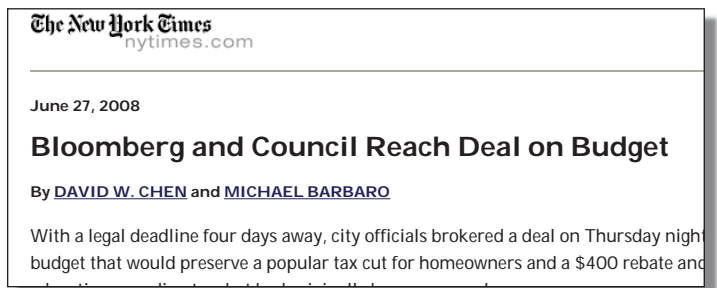
On June 29, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the New York City Council voted on a 2009 fiscal year budget that cut almost 40 percent of council-sponsored programs. Vera's Adolescent Reentry Initiative (ARI), one of many programs affected by the cut, was abruptly closed as a result. "There are really very few adolescent-focused reentry programs, so the loss of ARI is a big loss for New York City," says Evan Elkin, director of ARI and Adolescent Portable Therapy.

ARI was established in 2005 as a comprehensive, community-based reentry program for youth ages 16 to 18 returning home from the jail at Rikers Island. In collaboration with its government partner, the New York City Department of Correction (DOC), ARI matched participants with case managers who mentored them before and after release, helping them access employment and educational opportunities. The program was guided by a theory of change that helped youth identify their innate capacities and work toward becoming self-sufficient.

The closing of ARI demonstrates a fundamental challenge facing many Vera projects. "Our work is vulnerable," says Michael Jacobson, Vera director. "We partner with government, and government funding streams are sometimes unstable." This is true, Jacobson noted, even though Vera projects often can help government generate long-term net savings, even as they produce better outcomes for participants. With ARI, Vera had hoped to show that connecting young people to vocational and educational programs, internships, and jobs would prevent recidivism and costly jail and prison stays. The program's closure displaced eight staff members and 82 youth.

Despite the unexpected shut down, Vera staff are seeking funding to continue a central part of the work: ARI's literacy initiative. When ARI first assessed the needs of youth at Rikers Island, it learned that up to 60 percent read below the fifth-grade level. Such low reading skills substantially limit opportunities upon release, because most training programs for young people in New York City require a minimum of a sixth-grade reading level. To help youth acquire the minimum skills, ARI collaborated with the Queens Borough Public Library to develop a curriculum that integrates culturally relevant texts with job applications and other reading materials related to the goals of youth returning to the community.

If successful, the literacy initiative could result in ARI being restored sometime in the future. Kathy Coughlin,



deputy commissioner for programs and discharge planning for DOC, says she and allies in the New York City Discharge Planning Collaboration will work to rebuild the program. "We will continue to impress upon everyone we interact with the importance of reaching these young people before they become long-term residents of the jail and prison system. We have all learned a lot from ARI, and we cannot afford to let that investment go to waste."

The loss of ARI leaves a substantial void in the field of youth reentry. For Vera, it is a reminder of both the vulnerability and value of its work. "The whole undertaking of designing, testing, and implementing innovations in the justice system is fraught with risks," says Megan Golden, Vera's director of government innovation and planning. "If it were easy, everyone would be doing it."

For more information, contact Evan Elkin at [eelkin@vera.org](mailto:eelkin@vera.org).

# Q&A

## With Ruth Parlin Director, Information Management

Ruth Parlin joined Vera in April 2006 as librarian and, after a brief time on staff at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, returned as director of information management this July. Before coming to Vera, Ruth was an academic librarian at Vermont Law School, a position that drew upon her degrees in law and library science. *Just 'Cause* recently spoke with Ruth about her new position, her goals for improving information management at Vera, and her passion for music.



*Interview by Nicole Lemon*

### What type of work did you do as Vera's librarian?

My job as Vera's librarian was not like any other library job I'd ever had. Some of the tasks were typical, like managing the collection and maintaining subscriptions, but I also found myself doing work that I'd never done before. For example, for an anti-gang initiative in Los Angeles I was asked to identify alternative funding streams that were not law enforcement-oriented but more social service-oriented. Fortunately, I knew the resources to use. I also started doing a bunch of training, including a fairly elaborate library orientation for new employees.

### What did you do before you returned to Vera?

In November 2007, I left Vera to work as the head of research at the court of appeals library. After four months, I moved to the clerk's office there. I'm still working for them part time on a project that integrates social computing tools like wikis, blogs, and social tagging into their work. If it's successful, the project may help Vera add a new element to its consulting portfolio: helping government partners use social computing tools to better communicate with their constituents and increase transparency and openness.

### What do you do in your new position at Vera?

As director of information management, I define policies and procedures that will help Vera organize and manage information. I'm looking at the entire lifecycle of information flow at Vera with an eye toward making us more efficient and better at sharing information and building a substantial knowledge base. Creating and maintaining institutional memory has been challenging for Vera over the years. For example, whenever a demonstration project

spins off, the accompanying staff take a large piece of institutional memory with them. And we lose a lot of our younger staff to graduate or professional school. Another big part of my job is trying to help people identify what their information needs are and serving as a liaison between them and the information technology department. And I'll still be responsible for managing the library.

### What organizational initiatives will you be working on?

One initiative is related to what we call the PMA (Performance Measurement Analysis), a data capturing instrument that is used by our demonstration projects and others for tracking their participants' progress. Data-gathering is an important aspect of our ability to analyze and evaluate the programs and to produce the research we are known for. The previous director of information management ran a software development shop within Vera, and the PMA was the main product. There's a lot of interest in updating it and moving it to a web-based interface. I'll also be bringing the web-based library catalog online so that people can access our library collection more readily, and I'll be assessing whether or not we need to develop an e-mail archiving program that will allow staff to store and search their e-mail archives more efficiently. The intranet, which will allow staff to get and share internal information more easily, is going to be another major initiative.

### What "best practices" in information management do you embrace?

First off, I think you don't talk to people using tech talk; you use language that people understand. Directly tied to this is that you get as much stakeholder participation as

*continued on page 5*

you possibly can. I don't believe in doing a top-down kind of thing; I believe in consensus. This is the nature of social computing tools. They contribute to openness and participation, and I think those are ideals for us at Vera. And if they're not they should be! I also think technology should be delightful.

**I understand you have a law degree. Does that help you at Vera?**

My law degree comes in handy with everything. I never practiced, though. I finished law school and went directly to library school. It took me about a week of law school to realize that I didn't want to practice law. In my second year, we got a new library director who got me really interested in law librarianship. Academic law librarians are expected to have both law and library degrees. So I was an academic law librarian and a college library director for my entire career until coming here.

**What let you know that law wasn't the profession for you?**

Law was far more interesting to me intellectually than practically. Part of it was a self confidence issue. The people at law school were so smart and accomplished, and I had this fear that I would lose cases because I just wasn't a good enough lawyer. I know that a lot of lawyers feel that way, but they get over it. Ironically, in the long run, law school turned out to be a big confidence building experience for me. Having a law degree has afforded me many benefits over the years, even though I hated getting it!

**I hear you belong to vocal ensembles in New York. How long have you been singing?**

I've been a musician pretty much all my life. I started playing the piano when I was five. I took up the cornet at nine, and then the French horn at 10. And I went to music school at the Berklee College of Music in Boston after college. About six or seven years ago, I started singing in choral groups in Vermont and New Hampshire. When I came to New York, I was determined to continue singing. I sing second alto with a 40-member mixed chorus that almost exclusively performs work by living composers. I also sing with a 16-member women's chorus. Singing is enormously satisfying. The people you sing with are not just the people you sing with; they're like family. Making music with other people is a great joy.

---

For more information, contact Ruth Parlin at [rparlin@vera.org](mailto:rparlin@vera.org).

## Researchers Present at ABA's World Justice Forum

Vera researchers presented their work on international justice indicators at the World Justice Forum, in Vienna in July. The indicators were designed to gauge nations' adherence to the rule of law and were developed with fellow members of the Altus Global Alliance. Their report, *Developing Indicators to Measure the Rule of Law: A Global Approach*, is available on Vera's web site, [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org).



Jim Parsons, director of the Substance Use and Mental Health Program at Vera; Innocent Chukwuma, director of the CLEEN Foundation; and Monica Thornton, director of international business at Vera



Hugo Frühling, director of Centro de Estudios en Seguridad Ciudadana, and Pramod Kumar, director of the Institute for Development and Communication

ter outcomes than those addressing lesser crimes. Common Justice will be one of the first efforts to test this approach with serious crime in an urban setting. “The vast majority of restorative justice programs in this country have taken place in white, middle class communities,” Sered says. “By many measures, that’s not where the need is greatest.”

Vera’s primary partner in the work

is Kings County District Attorney Charles Hynes, whose office will refer eligible cases.

Set to launch in October, Common Justice is already bringing unlikely parties together. The Brooklyn Legal Aid Society and Brooklyn Defender Services have both committed to participating in the project. It has also been endorsed by two prominent victim advocacy groups—the New

York City Crime Victims Board and the Downstate Coalition for Crime Victims. “Part of the reason you see these people coming together,” Sered says, “is because Common Justice is not just about a different sentence, it’s about a different way of arriving at that sentence.”

Common Justice is being funded—and currently housed—by the Blue Ridge Foundation. Additional support comes from the Guggenheim Foundation and New York State’s Division of Criminal Justice Services. Vera’s research on the program will focus on participant satisfaction, re-arrest, and improved mental health for crime victims. As one of the few programs of its kind to work with serious and violent offenders, Common Justice promises to offer important lessons for the justice field and the trauma field alike.

For more information, contact Danielle Sered at [dsered@vera.org](mailto:dsered@vera.org).

### ADDRESSING VICTIMS’ NEEDS

In New York City and nationally, young black men (ages 16 to 24) are at greatest risk of being harmed by violent crime; they are also the people most likely to commit those crimes. Yet young men of color who are victimized rarely receive any services in the aftermath, and that has implications for the communities in which they live. Research shows that people harmed by violence who don’t get help are more likely to commit acts of violence themselves. Addressing the needs of these victims not only stands to improve their mental health, but it also is sound crime prevention. In working with this underserved population, Common Justice will help to increase the range of services available to meet their specific needs, from compensation to culturally competent counseling.

and Deaf culture, and members of law enforcement, prosecution, and the courts. The roundtables explored how the criminal justice system currently serves this population, how services could be improved, and the specific steps needed to ensure that change can happen.

“There is a lot of room for learning,” says Amy Loder, program specialist at OVW. “Service providers and criminal justice system professionals come from very different places. They have different perspectives and different job responsibilities.”

When it begins working with these new partners this fall, ASI will focus on helping them to build partnerships with community organizations,

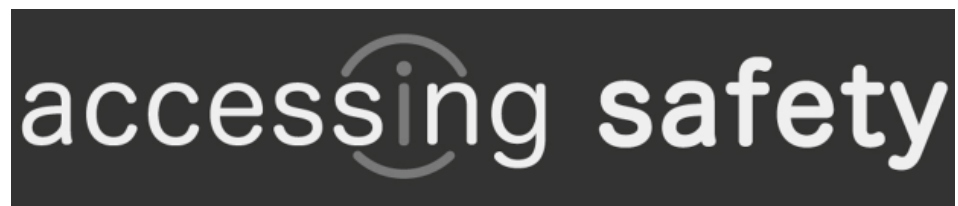
identify barriers in their response, and develop strategies for responding appropriately. It will also provide support to jurisdictions seeking to change policies and implement new protocols.

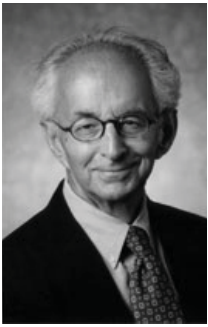
The introduction of people from the criminal justice system into ASI moves the program closer to Vera’s larger body of work.

Even without this new group, however, Smith has always viewed ASI as a quintessential Vera project because

it expresses the Institute’s commitment to improving the services people rely on for justice and safety. After all, she notes, safety is not only a product of the criminal justice system. “Few of the people who experience domestic violence go through the criminal justice system,” she says. “Vera has a great history of serving underserved populations, and this is certainly an underserved population.”

For more information, contact Nancy Smith at [nsmith@vera.org](mailto:nsmith@vera.org).





> **DAN FREED**, Vera trustee, was honored at the 2008 conference of the National Association of Sentencing Commissioners in San Francisco for his many contributions to the field of sentencing law and policy. Freed, clinical professor emeritus at Yale Law School, has been a member of the Institute's board for 38 years. During that time he helped create the *Federal Sentencing Reporter* and provided his expertise to many Vera projects involving sentencing, bail, and alternatives to incarceration.

> With a new grant from the Tiger Foundation, Vera research staff are beginning a yearlong project to help people leaving New York City jails transition back to the community. A variety of community-based organizations exist to help returning individuals overcome challenges to successful reentry—such as problems connected to drug and alcohol use, poor physical and mental health, unemployment, and homelessness—yet many do not attend these services. The Comprehensive Transition Planning Project (CTPP), part of Vera's **SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM**, will build and test a new jail-to-community transition model that seeks to strengthen the links between the jail and community services providers. Although some best practices for reentry work are emerging, few comprehensive approaches have been rigorously evaluated. CTPP will not only test its model, but it will also collect data to evaluate it.

> **RICHARD ABORN**, president of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City and gun control expert, recently gave a presentation at the Vera Institute on the issue of gun control. He briefly discussed the events that led to the creation and passing of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act in 1993 and the federal assault weapons ban in 1994 before commenting on the recent Supreme Court decision that ruled that owning a handgun was an individual right. He viewed the decision as positive for gun control advocates because while it affirmed the right to own handguns, it also affirmed the right to regulate handguns.

### Are you LinkedIn?

You are invited to join the Vera Institute of Justice group on LinkedIn, a professional networking web site. Through this group, you will be able to reach other members of the Vera network, including current and former employees, and receive and request information from group members about possible jobs and business opportunities.

Join the group at <http://www.linkedin.com/e/gis/70194/65FE7D182782>.

### NEW PUBLICATIONS

> *Improving Efficiency and Promoting Justice in the Immigration System* is the Institute's preliminary evaluation of the Legal Orientation Program (LOP)—an innovative effort to inform immigrant detainees about their rights, immigration court, and the detention process. The report shows that participants move through the courts faster, appear at court dates more often, and are better prepared to represent themselves in court than those in a comparison group. Immigration judges state that the LOP increases immigration court efficiency, and detention facility staff say that it improves detention conditions.

> With members of the Altus Global Alliance, Vera researchers have created a flexible set of indicators designed to measure how people in different nations experience crucial aspects of the rule of law, such as transparency, participation, and access to justice. This project is described in a new report, *Developing Indicators to Measure the Rule of Law: A Global Approach*. Members of the Vera Institute and Altus presented findings from the report at World Justice Forum in Vienna in July (see page 5).

*These publications are available at [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org).*

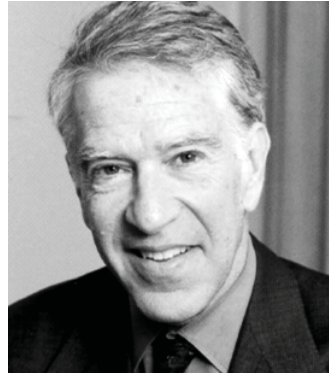
## Upcoming Event

### ANNUAL BENEFIT: NEW IDEAS, LASTING SOLUTIONS

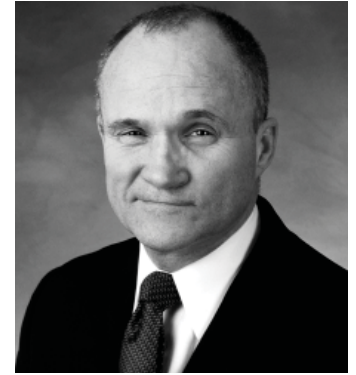
On September 23, the Vera Institute of Justice will hold its third annual benefit, "New Ideas, Lasting Solutions," honoring Roger C. Altman, chairman and CEO of Evercore Partners, and Raymond W. Kelly, police commissioner of the City of New York.

Mr. Altman has served as assistant secretary and deputy secretary of the U.S. Treasury and is currently a trustee of New York-Presbyterian Hospital and New Visions for Public Schools, which develops programs to improve public education in New York City. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Kelly has previously served as commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service and undersecretary for enforcement at the U.S. Treasury.

The co-chairs of this year's benefit are Vera trustee Karen Patton Seymour of Sullivan & Cromwell, Vera trustee John Savarese of Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen, and Katz, and Paul Curmin of Simpson Thacher & Bartlett. Richard Beattie, also of Simpson Thacher & Bartlett, will serve as honorary chairman of the event.



Roger C. Altman



Raymond W. Kelly

**DATE:** Tuesday, September 23, 2008  
6:00 – 8:30 p.m.  
**LOCATION:** Allen Room at Frederick P. Rose Hall  
Home of Jazz at Lincoln Center  
Broadway at 60th Street  
New York City  
**CONTACT:** For more information, contact Anna Kornilakis at [akornilakis@vera.org](mailto:akornilakis@vera.org) or (212) 376-3084.



233 Broadway, 12th Floor  
New York, NY 10279

Presorted  
First-Class Mail  
US Postage  
**PAID**  
Hackensack, NJ  
Permit No. 1121

## Inside

- 1 New Approach to Violent Crime in Brooklyn
- 2 From the Director: Clarity for a Clouded Issue
- 3 Budget Cuts Force ARI to Close
- 4 Q&A with Ruth Parlin
- 5 Researchers Present at World Justice Forum
- 7 News & Announcements