

Recent Projects

- > **Reentry Is Relational: Improving prison reentry outcomes in New Mexico and Oklahoma.** The Family Justice Program provides training to staff at prisons and probation/parole offices, as well as technical assistance and evaluation to help sustain changes in practices and institutional policies that reinforce a family-focused approach.
- > **Juvenile Justice Reform: Supporting family participation in California.** The California Division of Juvenile Justice piloted a new model for engaging young people's families based on training and technical assistance by Family Justice. The model is now part of the reform efforts under way statewide.
- > **Close to Home: Enhancing jail reentry by building on community connections.** The Family Justice Program is helping agencies in Montgomery County, MD, and Green Lake County, WI, to collaborate in applying a family-focused approach to jail reentry. Part of the goal is to determine how this work looks different given people's shorter sentences (compared to time typically served in prison) and their proximity to the communities where they will return.
- > **APPA Partnership: Influencing community corrections throughout the country.** Through a multiyear partnership with the American Probation and Parole Association, the Family Justice Program helps community corrections agencies integrate a family support approach.

"In the past, we had the attitude that offenders should come on their own. [We thought] they shouldn't be bringing their children or their girlfriends—and if they did, those people stayed in the waiting room. Now when a person brings someone, we take advantage of that. Whoever had enough interest in that person to come in with them is someone we want back there with us in our corner, helping us out."

—Susan Quigley, probation and parole supervisor for the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, on the agency's partnership with Family Justice

Families and social networks play a critical role when their loved ones are involved in the juvenile or criminal justice system. Studies have found that increased contact with family during incarceration can reduce the likelihood of recidivism. In addition to playing an important role in addressing addiction and encouraging loved ones to find and keep jobs, families also provide motivation. People who work in the justice field understand this but rarely know how to tap families as a resource. The Family Justice Program provides training, tools, and consultation to help government and community-based organizations implement family-focused policies and practices. The program's primary goal is to leverage the assets of families to end cycles of crime and victimization.

The Family Justice Program's principles and strategies were developed and tested at the direct-service center La Bodega de la Familia, which was a Vera demonstration project. The program values the input of people involved in the justice system, members of their families and social networks, and agency staff at every level of responsibility. This participation ensures that the program's tools and methods are informed by families' experiences and relevant to their lives.

Vera's 2002 evaluation showed that Family Justice's strength-based approach to family case management helps reduce drug use and rates of new arrests among participants—and also improves the well-being of families living in poverty. (Participating family members were more likely to resolve their medical and social-service needs than people in a comparison group did.) These findings are consistent with other research demonstrating that strong family support helps people succeed after they leave jail or prison.

Our Mission

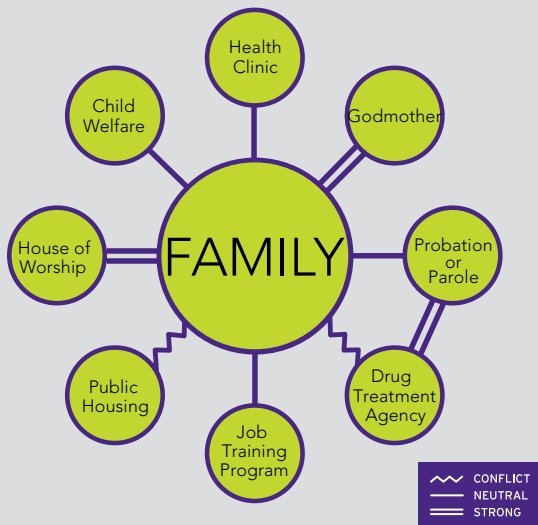
Vera's Family Justice Program provides extensive training and strategic support to government and community partners to help them effectively draw on the resources of families and communities. The program's systemic interventions are designed to benefit people at greatest risk of cycling in and out of the justice system.

Core Services

The Family Justice Program provides tools, training, and strategic support to help government and community-based organizations implement family-oriented policies and practices and address challenges to doing this strength-based work.

Three core services reflect our work in juvenile and criminal justice:

User-friendly tools for the field: The Family Justice Program has developed tools that help staff apply a family-focused approach in a range of contexts. The Relational Inquiry Tools help staff in juvenile and adult corrections learn about the strengths and social supports of people in their custody. These tools help improve rapport while gathering valuable information for reentry planning. Partner organizations benefit from using family mapping tools (such as the ecomap, below), which provide staff with a visual means to engage participants in discussion about their social supports. Staff also learn to use a gang assessment form, which guides a conversation about youth gang involvement and family gang affiliation.



The ecomap is one example of a family mapping tool. It displays public and community resources available to a family, as well as relationships with the justice system, informal links in the community, and institutions such as drug treatment, public housing, school, or a place of worship.

Innovative planning with adult and juvenile justice agencies: The Family Justice Program tailors its assessment, capacity building, and evaluation to help meet the needs of government and nongovernmental agencies that want to change their organizational culture.

- > During the assessment phase, Family Justice Program staff study how agency employees function in their respective roles and then identify the resources, technical assistance, and training that will best suit their needs. The program helps assemble a “diagonal work group” so that people at various organizational levels and representing key constituencies contribute to the process. This participation reinforces the stakeholders’ ownership of the work.
- > The capacity-building phase consists of form review—to ensure that agency forms reflect a commitment to drawing on the resources of families—and training on using strength-based tools and methods with individuals and families.
- > The final stages focus on the sustainability of changes in practice, including a review of evaluation findings to understand how family-focused approaches are working and whether staff (including managers) need further training and development. Evaluation efforts also examine whether training and technical assistance have resulted in changes to practice and policy.

Research and evaluation that value participation from staff, people involved in the justice system, and families: Participatory action research provides a collaborative platform for learning. The insight of individuals who are affected daily is extremely valuable, especially when a new tool or activity is being developed. By using interviews, surveys, and focus groups, the Family Justice Program learns from families and staff and uses this information to promote lasting change in justice agencies.

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The Family Justice Program is a part of the Vera Institute of Justice, 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.