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

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Introduction

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

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

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, are a set of international guidelines that outline standards for housing and treatment of incarcerated people. These Dignity Principles draw inspiration from the Nelson Mandela Rules, build on lessons from our work to open young adult housing units in prisons and jails, and were
formed in partnership with national organizations working in and with prison systems and jurisdictions to significantly reduce harm for all who are incarcerated. The guidelines for physical design changes were informed by engagement with Restoring Promise’s partner MASS Design Group. Together, we created this set of dynamic principles focused on human dignity to help corrections professionals, incarcerated people, and advocates, including nonprofit leaders and government officials, improve prison conditions and culture. Although the Dignity Principles provide a guide to create more humane environments in prisons, Restoring Promise also encourages decarceration to reduce the number of people held in prison and eliminate the racial disparities behind prisons walls.

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

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

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

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

Safety principle resources


2. Human Dignity in Carceral Settings

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


3. Morale and Well-Being

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

Morale and Well-Being principle resources


4. Fairness

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

Fairness principle resources

5. Purpose

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

Purpose principle resources

6. Family and Community Partnership

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

Family and Community Partnership principle resources


7. Transparency

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

Transparency principle resources

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Finally, we are grateful for the Nelson Mandela Rules and the United Nations for creating a set of standards that recognize the need to foster a more humane and just way of treating people who are imprisoned internationally.