

Request for Proposals

Reshaping Prosecution: Pursuing a better path to safety

Summary:

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) is accepting applications from prosecutor offices, with support from local community groups, interested in receiving technical assistance at no financial cost. Vera will select three offices committed to improving public safety by reducing the number of people entering the criminal legal system (declining or diverting cases), addressing racial disparities in who is impacted by the system, and increasing the office's transparency with and accountability to the community it serves.

Vera will assist offices with implementing reforms and building evidence that alternative approaches are a better path to safety through its policy expertise, implementation and training support, analysis of data from the office's case management system, and gathering data from community members to drive reform efforts.

This document describes the background and context for this program and how prosecutors' offices can apply to join. Please read the information provided here and do not hesitate to contact us with any questions at reshapingprosecution@vera.org.

[Watch this webinar](#) to learn more about the request for proposal.

Reshaping Prosecution:

The reform prosecution movement faces a critical moment. With the recent uptick in violent crime, reform prosecutors face unprecedented attacks and calls for a return to tough-on-crime tactics. Those attacks rest in a [misguided belief](#) that criminal legal system reforms endanger public safety. To sustain the movement, reform prosecutors must build the case that their approach will make communities safer and Vera's Reshaping Prosecution team is well positioned to help them do so.

Who we are

We are a team of people with varied experiences including former prosecutors, defense attorneys, quantitative and qualitative researchers, criminal legal system reform experts, public health experts, community organizers, a communications strategist, and trained facilitators.

We are anchored in the belief that communities will be safer if fewer people enter the criminal legal system. We work with prosecutors to limit who enters the system, primarily through declining and diverting cases, and to build evidence that alternative approaches are a better path to safety. We believe, based on our country's history of using power to marginalize people

of color, that any system dedicated to safety should be racially equitable and accountable to the people it serves. As such, our work is guided by three principles with a focus on supporting safer communities: shrinking the front end of the criminal legal system; addressing systemic racial disparities; and increasing accountability to directly impacted communities.

History and prior partnerships

Vera has a long history in prosecution reform and has always focused on prosecutors' roles in addressing racial disparities in the criminal legal system. In 2005, we launched the [Prosecution and Racial Justice Program](#) and partnered with prosecutors' offices in Mecklenburg County (Charlotte), North Carolina; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; San Diego, California; and New York County, New York. Through these partnerships, we studied how prosecutorial discretion at key decision points contributed to racial disparities in those local criminal legal systems. Our resulting report, [The Anatomy of Discretion](#), examined how prosecutors in two offices made decisions at key points in a case to determine what influenced the exercise of prosecutorial discretion. And, in 2014, we released a [guide for prosecutors on advancing racial equity](#). We also analyzed decisions made by prosecutors in the [New York County District Attorney's Office](#) in more than 200,000 cases, to understand how those decisions might contribute to racially disparate outcomes.

In 2018, Vera re-entered the prosecution space with its Reshaping Prosecution program. Reshaping Prosecution published [Unlocking the Black Box](#) to help prosecutors and community members learn about reform, created [Motion for Justice](#) to provide guidance on tackling system racial disparities, and piloted a technical assistance model with City of St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner to advance reforms and implement communications strategies in line with office priorities. As detailed in [this report](#), among other things, the Circuit Attorney's office adopted a declination policy and new charging policy to promote effective decision-making, cleared a backlog of more than 25,000 cases, and expanded their [diversion program](#) which allowed 311 people to be connected to services and support rather than face a conviction.

In addition to St. Louis, the Reshaping Prosecution program has partnered with 17 offices, including [Motion for Justice campaign](#) sites, to provide various levels of support: Arlington and Falls Church County, VA; Athens-Oconee, GA; Boulder County, CO; Chatham County, GA; Chittenden County, VT; Contra Costa County, CA; DeKalb County, GA; Kauai County, HI; Fairfax County, VA; Franklin County, PA; Ingham County, MI; Marion County, IN; Ramsey County, MN; Suffolk County, MA; Washtenaw County, MI; Westchester County, NY; and Wyandotte County, KS.

What would this partnership with Vera look like for your office?

Overview of the engagement

The engagement will last 12 months and focus on implementing change that limits who enters the criminal system (either declining or diverting cases), addressing racial disparities (e.g. Black people may make up 15 percent of a county, but 50 percent of cases referred to an office), increasing accountability to local communities, and building a case that these reforms contribute to safer communities. Vera will begin the engagement by helping the office implement a reform identified during the RFP process and use its research expertise to help the office identify additional reforms. By the end of the engagement, the office will have implemented at least one reform and regularly share data externally so that community members can track office progress.

The engagement will consist of four components: (1) implementation support, (2) internal data analysis, (3) community data analysis, and (4) communication assistance.

Implementation support

Vera will help the office develop and execute a plan to transform policy ideas into actionable change. That plan will include interviews, focus groups, and shadowing of office staff to learn about culture, practices, and lessons learned from prior policy roll outs. Vera, together with community researchers (defined below), will observe court, conduct conversations with external stakeholders such as public defenders, judges, and community members to glean their perspectives on the office's practices. Vera will also work with the office to identify 5-8 staff members to participate in a working group to ensure that new policies are informed by an office's local expertise and supported by a culture of change for sustainability. The working group will begin with deeper learning on pursuing safety and ultimately serve as a resource on how to navigate internal obstacles to implement reforms. Vera will further collaborate with the working group to develop (and potentially co-lead) training for the wider office on enacting reforms.

Internal data analysis

To illuminate potential areas for reform, Vera will analyze data from the office's case management system (CMS). We will take a deep dive into the CMS data to examine each major decision point: cases referred from the police, charging decisions, diversion, and dispositions. We will conduct our analysis with a race equity lens to identify who is most impacted by the system and inform where policy solutions can focus. Vera will present its analysis to the office's leadership, office staff, and community members to inform policy discussions. Data findings are presented in the aggregate (instead of individual cases) to show what decisions are typically made and how they impact individuals, case outcomes, and communities. Finally, Vera will assist the office with building evidence on the progress of its reform efforts and developing an avenue to regularly share data with community members.

Community data analysis

Vera will bring an [innovative research approach](#) to gather information on how local community members view safety and justice and identify reforms they would like the office to pursue. Because we believe that prosecution reforms should be community centered, we will help the office understand how their decisions impact individuals, families, and neighborhoods. Vera will contact community-based organizations to identify people that we can train and hire as community researchers – those who live in the community, are impacted by the system, and are interested in learning qualitative research skills. Vera will guide the community researchers as they conduct research (e.g., focus groups, surveys, or interviews) with people most impacted by the system. The community researchers will work with Vera to present their findings to the office, external stakeholders, and community members. These findings will further highlight potential areas for reform and help build narratives around why reforms are necessary to support safer communities.

Communications assistance

Vera will assist the office in cultivating narratives to support and sustain their reform efforts — this could include helping advance messaging that uplifts and defends prosecutorial reform through talking points, content, and training. For example, we will provide strategic talking points to the office around new policy announcements and can prepare an elected for media interviews.

Requirements for Participating Offices:

Selected offices will be expected to commit the following:

- Values alignment: The office must be committed to a public safety vision that includes reducing the number of people entering the system, centering racial equity, and being more accountable to communities. **To solidify this commitment, the office must commit to (1) implementing at least one declination or diversion policy that centers racial equity and (2) regularly sharing data with the community through an accessible avenue (e.g., a dashboard).**
- Community engagement: **The office must be willing to develop relationships with directly impacted individuals and community groups if they are not currently engaged with these communities.** The office must also be willing to work with community members so that they can learn more about how the office functions and its impact on public safety – including by allowing community researchers (members of the community that Vera will train as qualitative researchers) to meet with staff in the office.

- Staff capacity for reform efforts: Offices must designate a project lead within the office who will coordinate reform efforts internally. This individual should have relationships and credibility with staff throughout the office and effective leadership skills and authority to support staff and manage resistance. Offices will be asked to form a working group of staff members who are interested in collaborating with the project lead to champion the office’s reform goals. The elected will be expected to express and demonstrate internal support for the project lead and working group as they champion reforms in the office. All staff will ultimately participate in discussions, workshops, and training throughout the engagement. The office must also designate, if they do not already have one, a community liaison to help coordinate work with the local community.
- Access to the office: The elected must be available to meet with the Vera team on a monthly basis. The office’s project lead will be asked to be in regular contact with Vera throughout the engagement. Site visits to the office, including meetings, focus groups, and/or interviews with staff and discussions with members of the community are an essential part of this project. The engagement also requires access to historical case-level data from the office’s case management system and periodic updates.

How to Apply:

Step 1: Written Application

Offices can submit an online application using the apply link below. The application aims to collect contact information, gather information about data capacity, and learn more about the office’s vision for pursuing safety that includes limiting who enters the criminal legal system, centering racial equity, and being accountable to the community it serves.

Applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis and must be submitted no later than 5 pm PST on Friday August 5, 2022.

Applicants can complete their online application by using the “Apply” button below:

[APPLY](#)

You may preview the application by clicking the “Preview” button below:

[PREVIEW](#)

Step 2: Video Conference Interview

Based on the written applications, Vera will select a group of offices to participate in the interview process. The interview will be with the elected prosecutor and project lead. We will

also have a conversation with staff who manage and/or analyze data from the office's case management system. Vera will notify offices no later than August 12 of their selection to participate in interviews to be scheduled between August 15 and August 19.

Step 3: Site Visit

Vera will notify offices no later than August 26 of their selection for a site visit. Site visits will be scheduled for one to two days in the first two weeks of September. The site visit will include a presentation from Vera staff about the engagement; discussion with office leadership; individual and/or group meetings with line prosecutors and managers from different divisions of the office; an assessment of the office's data system and access; court observations; and a meeting with community members. Vera will work with the office to plan this visit and identify key participants.

Vera will notify selected offices by September 21, 2022.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us at reshapingprosecution@vera.org with any questions.