

OPENING DOORS TO PUBLIC HOUSING

Request for Proposals for Technical Assistance

Applications will be accepted until 11:59 pm EST, Friday, May 12, 2017.

Applications should be submitted in PDF format via email to: kfinley@vera.org

Questions about this solicitation should be directed to Kate Finley, (212) 376-5206 or kfinley@vera.org.

I. Purpose of Request for Proposals

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly diverse communities.

Vera is soliciting applications from public housing authorities, including housing choice voucher programs, who would benefit from technical assistance as they seek to plan and implement reentry programs or change their policies in order to increase access to housing for people with conviction histories.

For more than 600,000 people leaving prison and the 12 million cycling through jails annually, research shows that safe, affordable housing is essential for them to succeed after they are released. At present, restrictive criteria across much of the country's public housing bar people from either moving back in with their family members or obtaining their own housing. Following federal guidelines, all public housing authorities (PHAs) must place lifetime exclusions on people who are lifetime-registered sex offenders or who have been convicted of producing methamphetamine on public housing property. For other types of criminal histories, housing authorities exercise their discretion in screening and eviction actions.

In recent years, a shift in thinking has occurred to address the collateral consequences around housing for formerly incarcerated individuals. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) publically encouraged PHAs to give formerly incarcerated people a second chance at housing by adopting policies that achieve a sensible and effective balance between allowing individuals with criminal records to access HUD-subsidized housing while maintaining the safety of all residents. In 2015, HUD released guidance to PHAs on the use of arrests for determinations on who can live in HUD-assisted housing, also emphasizing HUD does not require PHAs to adopt "One Strike" policies. A number of PHAs across the country have begun to adopt policies, in addition to discrete reentry programs, that provide formerly incarcerated people with the opportunity to live in federally subsidized housing more quickly than their policies permitted in the past. Some of the reentry programs, including King's County,

Washington; Burlington, Vermont; and New York City, were featured in a 2016 HUD [toolkit](#) for PHAs.

II. Background

Vera has worked closely with two public housing authorities. Over the past three years, in partnership with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, the New York City Department of Homeless Services, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, Vera assisted NYCHA in implementing a new pilot program to help formerly incarcerated people reunite with their families who live in public housing. By making better use of existing housing units and connecting participants to case management provided by experienced reentry service providers, this program is working for families in New York and is being replicated by other housing authorities. Vera also completed [an evaluation](#) of the NYCHA pilot program. Vera found that NYCHA's program helped participants succeed by providing them with stable housing and ensuring that their other reentry needs were met by the partnering service providers. Program participants reported that family support was also essential to their efforts to secure employment and get back on their feet. Significantly, only one out of the 85 participants in the program was convicted of a new offense.

Vera also worked with the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) to address barriers to affordable housing and employment faced by those with criminal records. In partnership with housing police, parole, residents, and other stakeholders, Vera helped HANO develop policies and screening guidelines to inform HANO's admissions policies and hiring practices.

The goals of this Opening Doors initiative are to:

1. Increase the number of housing authorities serving people with criminal histories and/or juvenile records;
2. Assist housing authorities in planning and implementing programs or changing their policies to better serve people with criminal histories while maintaining community safety;
3. Strengthen partnerships between housing authorities and reentry stakeholders; and
4. Educate and build public support for public housing access for formerly incarcerated individuals and families.

III. Technical Assistance to Public Housing Authorities

A. Eligibility

This RFP is seeking a handful of housing authorities who would benefit from nine months of technical assistance as they plan and implement their own reentry-focused housing programs or change their admissions policies to safely increase access for people with conviction histories. Housing authorities of all sizes are encouraged to apply, including those administering housing choice vouchers. In addition, multiple housing authorities in the same geographic area may decide to apply together in a single application, in the event that they have common goals and believe that coordinating their reform efforts will increase the local impact of their work.

B. Overview of Technical Assistance

Vera will work with each selected site or group of sites to develop a technical assistance plan. That plan may include some of the following activities. The actual work to be performed for each selected site will depend on funding availability and other factors, and be specified in a Memorandum of Understanding to be entered into between Vera and the site (MOU):

1. Initial Meeting with Housing Authority: Vera staff will meet with the housing authority to understand its goals for the project as well as its concerns and anticipated challenges.
2. Initial Meeting with Stakeholders: Vera staff will also meet with the key stakeholders (such as community service providers, tenant associations, property managers, reentry courts, housing authority police, parole officers and corrections leaders) to understand their desired outcomes, concerns, and their goals for the project.
3. Data Analysis: Depending on funding and data availability and other factors, Vera may be able to analyze data identifying the number of individuals potentially barred from public housing authorities in the participating jurisdiction. This analysis could assist the participating jurisdiction in making the case for their local reentry housing efforts and potentially provide further support for policy change.
4. Policy Assistance: Vera staff will review the housing authority's existing policies governing housing eligibility for people with criminal records, and, if desired by the PHA, provide analysis and assistance with the process of developing new screening guidelines and policies.
5. Facilitated Access to Peer Consultants: Each selected housing authority will have access to consultants identified by Vera from jurisdictions that have successfully launched reentry programs or changed their housing admissions policies to better serve the reentry population.

6. Implementation Assistance: Vera will provide ongoing assistance during the term of the project with planning and implementation of recommended policy changes.
7. Follow-up Data Analysis: Vera will assist the participating housing authorities with developing a plan to track the outcomes of their policy changes and/or programs. The outcomes might include recidivism and family self-sufficiency and cohesion.
8. Opportunities for Cross-Site Exchange: Vera will help foster cross-site learning through various activities, including webinars to share promising practices and strategize about implementing programs and effecting policy changes.

C. Expectations for Participating Housing Authorities

Selected housing authorities will liaise regularly with the Vera team and develop, maintain and support partners and stakeholders. In addition, the following two components are essential to the initiative:

1. Site lead: This person will be the primary liaison between the housing authority and the Vera team and will participate in regular project management calls with Vera staff, coordinate logistics for Vera site visits and workgroup meetings (e.g. securing meeting space, helping to plan agenda, etc.), and educate key stakeholders about the project.
2. Development of stakeholder group: Vera staff will work with the site lead to identify and develop a group of stakeholders who are interested in assisting with the creation of programs or reshaping policy in order to better serve the reentry community.

There is no financial commitment required from housing authorities.

IV. Application Requirements

Through the Opening Doors Initiative, sites will be selected to receive up to nine months of technical assistance of the type outlined in Section III.B, above to expand housing access for people with conviction histories. The actual length of each project will be agreed in the MOU. Applications will be accepted from individual housing authorities or groups of housing authorities.

Applicants must submit application packages via email, in PDF format, to kfinley@vera.org. Applications should include: (1) a letter of intent and commitment, (2) an application narrative, and (3) letters of support (optional, but recommended).

1. Letter of Intent and Commitment: The Opening Doors Initiative is a collaborative effort, and its success depends on the commitment and engagement of the housing authority. The letter of

intent should be signed by the PHA's executive director and indicate the housing authority's commitment to:

- a. Planning and implementing a reentry program to allow people with conviction histories to return home or otherwise obtain housing; and/or
- b. Changing existing policies to enable people with conviction histories to obtain housing;
- c. Engaging and collaborating with Vera as well as the stakeholder group throughout the project;
- d. Providing a suitable site lead throughout the project;
- e. Identifying, developing, and facilitating the involvement of supportive stakeholders throughout the project;
- f. Providing or assisting Vera in procuring data in support of this technical assistance;
- g. Granting Vera permission to publish reports, data analysis and other publications related to the Opening Doors initiative (opportunity for review and commentary will be provided prior to any publication);
- h. Entering into an MOU with Vera formalizing these commitments and other details regarding the project.

2. Application Narrative: The items listed below should be submitted as a narrative (copies of relevant documents or sections of documents may be included as attachments). The narrative, not counting attachments, should not exceed 10 pages in length.

- A. Statement of the Problem: The statement of the problem should provide a brief overview of the housing authority's reasons for applying and its goals for this reform effort. This section should also detail the housing authority's current policy as regards people with criminal histories and/or juvenile records. Application reviewers are looking for applications with a clear explanation of why the jurisdiction wants to revise its policies or design a re-entry program, and, importantly, why the timing is right to engage in this work now.
- B. Recent Changes to Policies: Please provide examples of other recent policy or programmatic changes the housing authority has implemented, and highlight key lessons learned from these past efforts.
- C. Staffing: Please identify the proposed site lead for this project, and describe why he or she has been selected. Describe how the site lead will be supported by the PHA's leadership and staff, and in addition please provide a description of the site lead's other responsibilities and availability to commit to this project over the nine-month period.

3. Letters of Support (recommended): Applicants may and are strongly encouraged to provide letters of support from relevant stakeholders and partners, including but not limited to community service providers, property management companies, tenant associations, housing authority police or other local law enforcement, parole officers, corrections officials, the county criminal justice coordinator, legal service providers, and local business leaders.

V. Selection Decisions: Timeline and Process for the Selection of TA Sites

Applications will be accepted until 11:59 pm EST on Friday, May 12, 2017. Vera staff will review and score all of the proposals, and will conduct telephone conversations with short-listed applicants to discuss the initiative. Applications will be scored on the basis of each site's commitment to reform and ability to carry out policy change, the level of existing support from local partners, and the site's need for technical assistance to accomplish its housing reentry goals.

Selected sites will be notified and a public announcement of the selection will occur in June 2017.

Terms of RFP

Vera has the right to amend or cancel this RFP at any time. Any changes to this RFP will be made in writing. Vera reserves the right, at the time of evaluation of any response, to request any additional information that it deems necessary. Vera will be the sole judge of responses received. Any response which does not comply with the terms of this RFP, including deadlines, may not be considered. Vera will not return any materials it receives, and will not reimburse applicants for any costs incurred in developing a response.