



NEWS

FOR RELEASE: Immediately

Prosecutors' Center for Excellence

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Prosecutors' Center for Excellence Joins National Initiative Enhancing Police Interactions with Persons with Mental Illnesses and Developmental Disabilities

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Vera Institute of Justice's Serving Safely will promote public safety and improve police-community relations

People living with mental illnesses and intellectual and developmental disabilities are disproportionately represented in contacts with the police as well as in jails and prisons. These interactions can lead to stressful and dangerous conditions for both community members and officers. Conservative estimates show that at least 10% of calls to police involve people who have serious mental illnesses and that [50 to 80% of police encounters](#) involve persons with some type of disability. Additionally, an estimated [2 million adults with serious mental illnesses](#) are admitted into jails each year, making them a significant part of our nation's high rates of incarceration.

As a response to this critical need, today the Vera Institute of Justice, in cooperation with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and in partnership with a consortium of organizations including **Prosecutors' Center for Excellence** is launching **Serving Safely: The National Initiative to Enhance Policing for Persons with Mental Illnesses and Developmental Disabilities**, a new initiative designed to improve collaborative responses for people with mental illnesses and intellectual and developmental disabilities who come into contact with the police to improve outcomes and the safety for all involved parties.

Through Serving Safely, Vera, BJA, Prosecutors' Center for Excellence and their other partners will work together to minimize unnecessary detention and incarceration of persons with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities, strengthen connections to community-based treatment and services, and grow trusting relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve.

Kristine Hamann, Executive Director of Prosecutors' Center for Excellence said:

"We are pleased to be a part of this important initiative that will improve law enforcement's response to people in a mental health crisis. These are tough cases that our police confront every day. Thanks to Vera Institute and their partners, more of these interactions will now have successful outcomes."

Drawing on over 55 years of experience collaborating with policing partners, Vera has assembled a diverse and multidisciplinary project team composed of leaders in the fields of policing, mental health, intellectual and developmental disability, crisis intervention, peer advocacy, prosecution, emergency medicine, and technology development. Together, the team will work to:

- Provide training and technical assistance directly to law enforcement and partnering agencies.
- Develop and facilitate collaborative responses for people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities who come into contact with the police and their community partners in ways that improve safety for all.
- Build a national community of practice for police responses to people with mental illnesses and developmental disabilities.
- Contribute to and expand upon available information on best practices, policies, research, and resources in the field and ensure that all resources are easily accessible and widely disseminated.

“Local law enforcement is most effective when it has the necessary guidance and tools to ensure the safety of all residents, particularly those who come into contact with the system at higher rates,” said Ron Serpas, Retired Police Chief and Professor of Practice at Loyola University, New Orleans. “Smart initiatives like Serving Safely will be an invaluable source to any department committing to building and maintaining trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve.”

There has been sustained attention to the complex dynamics at work when police and law enforcement officers encounter people with mental illnesses and intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as to the range of strategies that can improve police-based responses. This includes recent attention to the fact that these distinct groups require unique police approaches.

“We know that those affected by mental illnesses and intellectual and developmental disabilities face additional barriers when they come into contact with the justice system. The Bureau of Justice Assistance and other organizations have made significant investments to address these barriers, yet many law enforcement agencies could benefit from additional resources,” added Kate Davidson, Assistant Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at the National Council for Behavioral Health. “Serving Safely offers police departments the support they need to help bridge gaps and promote safety for everyone.”

Serving Safely will begin accepting requests for training and technical assistance today at www.vera.org/projects/serving-safely/training-and-technical-assistance. Services will be provided through a growing consortium of partners, which to date includes:

American College of Emergency Physicians
The Arc
CIT International
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Disability Rights Network
Prosecutors’ Center for Excellence
Dr. Amy Watson, University of Illinois, Chicago
Dr. Michael Compton

About Prosecutors’ Center for Excellence

The mission of Prosecutors' Center for Excellence is to work with prosecutors to improve the criminal justice system and to address emerging issues. Prosecutors, who have an ethical duty to protect public safety as well as the rights of the accused, must keep abreast of the rapid changes in the criminal justice system and the ever-increasing flow of recommendations, studies and opinions. Prosecutors' Center for Excellence supports prosecutors across the country by facilitating the development, communication and implementation of best practices and modern approaches to achieving justice. For more information, visit www.pceinc.org.

About the Vera Institute of Justice:

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit national research and policy organization working with governments to build and improve justice systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities. For more information about Serving Safely and the Vera Institute of Justice, see www.vera.org/projects/serving-safely.

About the Bureau of Justice Assistance:

Please visit www.bja.gov.