Affirm Promotes Positive Reinforcement in City Schools  

Robin Campbell

On a warm May afternoon, just after school begins letting out, the sidewalks near Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx are thick with homeward-bound teenagers. But as on most days, a persistent crowd lingers at the front gates of the school, bearing with it a potential for trouble—arguments, fights, etc. Inside the throng, four men dressed in blue wander about, reminding the students to “keep moving” and waving their arms as if they could literally sweep the kids down the block. From their uniforms, the four appear to be policemen. In fact, they are school safety agents, a special category of New York Police Department employees who patrol the city’s public schools. Along with deans who supervise the schools’ disciplinary functions, these agents are the primary clients of Affirm, Vera’s newest demonstration project, which seeks to improve student behavior by increasing the amount of positive reinforcement kids receive outside the classroom.

Just beyond Columbus’s front doors, Affirm’s first field trainer, Deidra Smith, is talking with a dean, reviewing the training session they had together earlier in the day. “What was your ratio, dean, three and seven?” she asks, referring to an exercise in which she asked him to count the positive reinforcements and the corrective instructions he gave to students in a specific five-minute period. Smith needs the numbers in order to measure the dean’s progress after the training is complete. “Four and ten,” he replies.

Although Affirm has contracted with its government partners—the Board of Education and the NYPD—to bring its intensive, multi-week program to 250 agents in the coming year, Columbus High is only the second school to receive the training so far. The first was Van Arsdale High School in Brooklyn.

As the project’s sole representative inside the schools, Smith is learning that even the basic logistics can be exhausting. At the relatively modest-sized Van Arsdale she trained 12 agents in four weeks; at Columbus, which has more than twice as many registered students, she is taking six weeks to train 23 people—15 agents, two supervisors, five deans, and one head dean. “It’s like mounting a new demonstration project” every time, notes Affirm’s director, Hema Sareen.

The basic structure of the training falls into two parts. Smith begins with a one-day classroom session introducing the goals of the project and the curriculum Sareen created with the Oregon Social Learning Center, a West Coast nonprofit that specializes in helping adults reduce aggression among children and adolescents. This is followed by several weeks of one-on-one guidance in which Smith accompanies trainees on their rounds and offers them individual instruction.

Because the project is new, much of it is still open to modification. After Van Arsdale, for example, two weeks of one-on-one training were added to give Smith more individual time with the trainees. Each session has a specific focus. In the first session, Smith and the trainee watch students together and note aloud actions that are worthy of positive reinforcement. These may include something as small as picking up a stray piece of paper to something as big as de-escalating a brewing fight. In the next session, the trainee is asked to verbally reinforce three students.

Focus On: General Counsel  
Karen Goldstein  

Positive actions may range from picking up a stray piece of paper to de-escalating a brewing fight.

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From the Director: A New Era in Policing

When Bill McCafferty was a teenager in small town Ohio, he and his friends would avoid going to nearby Steubenville. If the police pulled you over in Steubenville, there was a good chance they’d beat you up.

After college, Bill joined the 50-member Steubenville Police Department and found that some things hadn’t changed, and the police were getting sued for brutality on a regular basis. When the U.S. Department of Justice sent lawyers there to investigate a pattern of unconstitutional policing, Bill figured that he personally had little to worry about, but he knew that others in the department would be in trouble. He was right. Today, five years after the city and the Justice Department settled the lawsuit with a consent decree and installed a monitor, Bill has been promoted from patrolman to acting chief of the department, and there hasn’t been a complaint filed in court against the police since.

Only in 1994 did Congress give the U.S. Justice Department authority to sue local governments over a pattern of police misconduct. Steubenville, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were the first two jurisdictions to settle cases under the new law, and both are now poised to bring five years of federal court monitoring to a successful close. In Pittsburgh, for example, new Vera research shows that Chief Bob McNeilly has improved policing dramatically with the help of his monitor and that perceptions of the police among citizens are now in a relatively normal range for U.S. departments.

In June, Chief McCafferty and Chief McNeilly, along with their court-appointed monitors, participated in a small conference in Los Angeles sponsored by Vera’s Police Assessment Resource Center. It is a sign of PARC’s early success that it was able to attract top police officials and their monitors from jurisdictions currently under court-ordered monitoring: Washington; Philadelphia; Los Angeles; Montgomery County, Maryland; Wallkill, New York; and the State of New Jersey.

As I listened to the discussion at the conference, I was struck by the common commitment to success that unites the monitors and their chiefs. Despite the deep fears of oversight among the chiefs, and the uncertainty among monitors about their new role, they have found common cause in the realization of policing that is simultaneously effective against crime and respectful of people’s rights and dignity.

It is hardly news that in cities and towns across the United States, a chasm of distrust separates police from many communities in which they work. What is remarkable, however, is that a new civil rights law, a new generation of police chiefs, and a new role of police monitor are actually working in tandem to close that chasm. In places as different as Steubenville and Pittsburgh, the same basic approach has made a difference in just a few years. For its part, PARC is now harnessing the early lessons of police monitoring in training programs, publications, and hands-on assistance, so that more communities can enter this new era of effective and respectful policing.

Christopher Stone

JUST ‘CAUSE

The Vera Institute of Justice is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to making government policies and practices fairer, more humane, and more efficient. Working in collaboration with government officials, Vera designs and implements innovative programs that expand the provision of justice and improve the quality of urban life. Vera operates demonstration projects in partnership with government, conducts original research, and provides technical assistance to public officials and communities in New York and throughout the world.

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Innocent Chukwuma directs the Center for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN) in Lagos, Nigeria. Five years ago, when Nigeria was still under military rule, CLEEN—then a brand new organization—began building partnerships between law enforcement and local communities. It was the only non-governmental organization (NGO) working with Nigerian police at the time. Chukwuma fought openly against the government before founding CLEEN yet had the foresight to realize—even in advance of Nigeria’s first democratic elections since 1993—that the country’s future depended in part on healing relationships between citizens and police. Chukwuma now works closely with the head of Nigeria’s newly revived Police Service Commission, the office that oversees every officer on the force and reports directly to the president.

Just a few years ago, Julita Lemgruber became the first police ombudsman in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Today, as founding director of the Centro de Estudos de Segurança e Cidadania (Center for the Study of Public Security and Citizenship) in Rio, she is leading an evaluation of the office she once ran and of others around the country. In the state of Rio, where police routinely use excessive and often lethal force, having a credible process to collect and respond to citizens’ complaints is crucial. The study, which Lemgruber believes will improve the work of the ombudsmen and change police practices for the better, is just one of the center’s many projects.

Reformers like Innocent Chukwuma and Julita Lemgruber—and their relatively new organizations situated outside government but dedicated to working with public officials to advance justice—are evidence of the vitality of democratic governance around the world. Still, governments, especially young democracies, often feel compelled to follow established western models in policing and most other fields and to operate those models using technologies and services sold by influential corporations.

While their influence has its own benefits, wealthy nations and private corporations cannot be responsible for advancing the interests of the public. To develop a public perspective on justice reform able to compete with these other perspectives, seven NGOs—including Chukwuma’s, Lemgruber’s, and Vera—plan to form an international alliance. Unlike informal networks and serendipitous encounters among reformers, an alliance will provide a professional and enduring vehicle to

An alliance will build common understanding about what it takes to actually change government practices.

freely share lessons and techniques across national borders and, even more important, to build common understanding about the organizational dynamics of justice reform—what it takes to actually change government practices. Additionally, membership in an international alliance will give these select organizations considerable credibility and thus more influence over the reform process in their own countries and regions. Initially at least, the alliance expects to focus on issues related to policing and the judicial process.

The four other founding alliance members are the INDEM (which stands for Informatics for Democracy) Foundation, located in Moscow, Russia; the Institute for Development and Communication in Chandigarh, India; the Centro de Estudios de Seguridad Ciudadana (Center for Public Security) in Santiago, Chile; and an organization based in Western Europe that will join the alliance in November.

Headed by Georgii Satarov, a former aide to President Boris Yeltsin, INDEM is young by international standards—launched in 1997—but is one of the oldest NGOs in Russia and focuses on reducing corruption among public officials. In 2000, with support from the Open Society Institute and the Ford and Hewlett foundations, Vera and INDEM established the Center for Justice Assistance in Moscow to develop and test new criminal justice practices. These same three foundations are now collaborating in the planning of the alliance.

Under the direction of Pramod Kumar, the Institute for Development and Communication has studied a wide range of social problems in India since its formation in 1992 and more recently created an extension center to develop and test practical interventions based on its research. Established just last year, the Centro de Estudios de Seguridad Ciudadana aims to reduce crime in newly democratic Chile and elsewhere in the region, largely by conducting comparative research and disseminating the findings. Its director, Hugo Frühling, is an expert on human rights issues in South America and has previous experience in government, working for the Ministry of the Interior and as a National Security Advisor.

Over the remainder of this year and the first months of 2003, the members will refine the identity and goals of the alliance; establish its structure, staffing, and core activities; and raise funds to support the alliance for its first five years. Yet even during the planning period, the alliance will begin to come to life, using this time to experiment with promising activities, such as hosting transnational meetings on specific topics, capturing and disseminating the insights from these discussions, producing a newsletter on policing as well as an annotated bibliography of recent research in the field, and creating internships within the member organizations.

For more information about the international justice alliance, contact Todd Foglesong, tfoglesong@vera.org.

Jennifer Trone is a senior writer and editor in the Communications Department.
Focus On: General Counsel Karen Goldstein

Karen Goldstein has served Vera as General Counsel since August 2000. Before joining Vera, she was General Counsel to the New York City Department of Homeless Services; previously, she had the same role at Miracle Makers, Inc., a community-based nonprofit in Brooklyn. She received her law degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She spoke with Leah EDMUNS of the Communications Department.

Leah: Generally speaking, what function does a legal department serve at a nonprofit?

Karen: It varies a lot from nonprofit to nonprofit, depending on who the general counsel is and the size of the department. Some general counsels’ offices have very broad responsibilities and some focus a lot more narrowly. I have a sense of that because I’m part of a group, the general counsels’ roundtable, and we really see the range of what people do. Certainly there are areas we focus on that concern everyone. Anything having to do with personnel issues is relevant, and, across the board, general counsels help make decisions about hiring, taking disciplinary measures, or resolving problems in the employment area.

Leah: So a nonprofit faces some of the same challenges as a for-profit business?

Karen: Definitely. A lot of what we do can generally be described as risk management. In any kind of corporation or business, personnel issues will involve risk, and a place like Vera that does innovative work has potential risk everywhere you look. But traditional areas like contracts, leases, and issues related to the board and the corporation itself are common to the nonprofits that I’m familiar with. At some nonprofits the executive directors negotiate the contracts and then have the legal department look at them, whereas in others the attorneys do the negotiations. At Vera, we do a little bit of both; often the contracts will go back and forth between the legal department, Chris Stone, and the project’s director. The fact that we have offices abroad means there’s a whole additional body of law to be familiar with and risk to think about.

Leah: Does that mean you and your staff spend a lot of time researching the laws of the different countries where Vera is working?

Karen: Sometimes, but more often we work with outside counsel. Nonprofit counsels in need of help often get it from organizations that provide pro bono assistance. We have ongoing relationships with some firms that provide us with pro bono work in particular areas—intellectual property.

“A place like Vera that does innovative work has potential risk everywhere you look.”

for example. Pro bono work has not been as available for the international issues, but couple of years ago, when we were setting up the Center for Justice Assistance in Moscow, a visiting summer associate from Debevoise and Plimpton who happened to be a Russian lawyer wrote a comprehensive memo for us on types of legal entities that nonprofits use in Russia. We’ve been lucky to have some very talented and generous firms and individuals do wonderful work for us.

Leah: The legal department is involved with Vera’s Institutional Review Board, right?

Karen: Our legal department is Vera’s liaison with the IRB, which has four outside members. The point of the IRB is really to evaluate our research projects to make sure that human subjects, as they’re called, are being protected, so there is an element of risk management. The way that we manage that process at Vera is, I think, a little different from other nonprofits in that the IRB follows rules that apply to federally funded research—for example, there are rules on who must give consent when participating in a research study, and more stringent rules apply to the vulnerable populations we often work with, such as children and prison inmates. We apply all the same rules to all of our research, whether it’s federally funded or not, so that’s a broader protection than usual.

Leah: Can you tell me a little bit about the risk management process?

Karen: Whenever a demonstration project is sufficiently developed that we can analyze it, but before it goes to Vera’s board for review, the legal department goes through it with the broadest possible view of anything that could go wrong, considering risks to the clients we’ll be serving, risks to the project staff, and risks to Vera as an institution. Assuming we decide that the risks can be managed adequately and appropriately, the discussion is reduced to a risk analysis memo that we keep on file. Given the work we do, getting insurance can be particularly tricky. With the Police Assessment Resource Center, for example, it was almost impossible to get insurance. Because PARC’s work involves giving advice to police departments, it could be sued in cases where, say, it was argued that someone died as a result of policies based on its recommendations. That means that PARC needs very expensive professional liability insurance of the kind a management consulting firm would hold. Ultimately we were able to find an insurer for a reasonable price, but it was tough.
Leah: I wanted to come back to your roundtable. What’s valuable about the group, and what have you talked about recently?

Karen: What’s special is that it’s a mentoring group—we represent all different levels of experience at being general counsels. We confront general questions like, What do you bring to your boss and what do you not? Whom do you represent—your executive director, the staff, the institution—and how do you balance them all? A recent question was, What is your relationship with your board? Often we address more specific problems, and people bring up what’s urgent for them. Even though many of us know each other’s executive directors and agencies, what’s said in the group is kept in the group. We trade policies; someone will say, “Do you have a policy on the appropriate use of email?” and someone who does will share it with the group. The nice thing is that it’s created ongoing relationships. People have called me in between meetings and said, “Here’s my issue, I don’t know how to deal with it, what do you think?” We’re lucky at Vera because we have three lawyers, soon to be four, but general counsels at other nonprofits are by themselves, so it’s a big help for them to be able to call on someone for advice.

Leah: And what do you do for fun?

Karen: I dance for fun. Swing dancing’s been very popular recently, but I started doing it about 15 years ago. I teach sometimes, and for about five years I performed and ran a performing group. The swing dancing community in New York is very large, especially now, and I have a whole lot of friends that I wouldn’t have otherwise met. I’ve gone to swing dance events in England, Sweden, and other countries. It’s a wonderful cross-section of people all ages, races, backgrounds, and professions, and the music’s great. That’s how I met my husband, and he enjoys it as much as I do.

What’s in a Name? For Vera Projects, it’s Inspiration or Deliberation

Carol Shapiro was riding in a NYPD squad car through the Lower East Side of Manhattan when she got the first inkling of what she would name her new Vera demonstration project. It was 1995, and the center she was about to establish to support families of drug users in this largely Latino community had been operating under a working title, The Neighborhood Drug Crisis Center, that was clearly inadequate for such an innovative service. Shapiro was lamenting how hard it was to find a suitable home for the project when the driver pointed to an empty storefront. The site, a former grocery store, or “bodega,” had been a drug-dealing front until a police officer was shot there a few weeks earlier. Recalls Shapiro: “I loved the idea that there was a bodega where something horrible had happened and we could transform it into a place of hope and healing.” Not long after the lease was signed, she renamed her project La Bodega de la Familia.

Many factors conspire to create a good demonstration project name. “You’re trying to convey the essence of what you do,” says Molly Armstrong, Vera’s coordinator of demonstration projects, who notes that a name should be both memorable and mindful of its audience—which can include clients, government partners, and a wider public. Vera’s newest name, Affirm, for a project that trains New York City school safety agents to encourage positive student behavior, is a good example, she says: “It’s short, sweet, positive, and to the point.”

Most Vera demonstration project names fall into two categories. Either they explicitly describe what a program does—Adolescent Portable Therapy, the Appearance Assistance Project—or, like Affirm and Project Greenlight, they express the spirit of a project and rely on a tag line, a short phrase following the name, to drive home the details. (Affirm’s reads “Reinforcing Positive Student Behavior for Safer Schools.”)

While a name may arise in a moment’s inspiration, more often it is the result of deliberation. Project director Hema Sareen selected Affirm from alternatives like the Positive Behavior Support Program and the acronym PAVE (Preventing Adolescent Violence Through Encouragement).

Once a name has been chosen, it must be vetted. An Internet search can identify programs and entities that might cause confusion or conflict with or cast negative associations on the name. But according to Jessica Peña of Vera’s legal department, a more thorough search of the U.S. Trademark site is needed. “If we use a name taken by someone doing similar work, we could be forced to change it later and/or be sued for copyright infringement,” she says. Even names that merely sound similar could be problematic. The trademark search for Project Greenlight, which prepares inmates nearing release for life after incarceration, uncovered a utility service called Enron Green Light and a filmmaking contest called Project Greenlight. Fortunately, neither provided a service similar to Vera’s project.

The green light for Project Greenlight was welcome news for Marta Nelson, the project’s director. According to Nelson, Project Greenlight was conceived to be spun off to its government partners, New York State’s Departments of Correctional Services and Parole. Thus, its name was less an advertisement than something that had to work for a pair of state agencies. Project Greenlight emerged from a brainstorming session on the corrections and parole officers’ first day of training for the project. “They’re in greens, but they’re being given the green light to move out into the world,” said the officer who thought up the name, using a prison colloquialism that identifies inmates by the color of the clothes they wear. Says Nelson: “I really liked that the staff did it, because it gave them a sense of ownership.”
News & Announcements

- The Bureau of Justice Assistance in South Africa, a joint project of the South African Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Development and Vera, will continue operating for another three years. Chris Stone and representatives of the Ministry signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Cape Town on May 15 that extended the Bureau’s current five-year program. Minister of Justice Penuell Maduna, Vusi Pikoli, the Director General of the Department of Justice, and Vincent Saldanha, director of the Legal Resource Center and national director of the Association of Democratic Lawyers, also signed the document. Francis James, Vera’s director of international programs, attended the ceremony. Since it opened in 1997, the Bureau has launched four demonstration projects: Pre-Trial Services, the Prosecution Task Force on Car-Hijacking, the Thuthuzela Care Centres for rape victims, and a new project on plea-bargaining and access to justice. In the coming year, Vera expects to establish a local board of directors for the Bureau, which is funded by the Open Society Foundation for Southern Africa, Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Ford Foundation’s South Africa office.

- Vera and the Police Assessment Resource Center (PARC) co-hosted the Global Meeting on Civilian Oversight of Police, the third in a series of conferences on police accountability hosted by Vera and sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The Los Angeles-based conference, which took place May 6-9, attracted more than 30 participants from 10 countries. Chris Stone, Francis James, Chitra Bhanu, Emma Phillips, Joel Miller, and Jennifer Trone attended from Vera.

- National Associates Youth Justice Program Director Heidi Segal convened the program’s first associate engagement in Buffalo, New York, on May 13-14. The associates met with the Erie County PINS workgroup and discussed data collection and strategies for reducing detention and placement of PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision, or underage status offenders). County officials are preparing for an upcoming change in the law that will raise the age limit for PINS intake eligibility from 16 to 18.

- Newly available on Vera’s web site is an Issue Brief from the State Sentencing and Corrections program, Is the Budget Crisis Changing the Way We Look at Sentencing and Incarceration? Other new publications also available for download include Issues of Consistency in the Federal Death Penalty, an account of the roundtable discussion on the role of the U.S. Attorney that took place at Vera last fall; Balancing Punishment and Treatment: Alternatives to Incarceration in New York City, by Rachel Porter, Sophia Lee, and Mary Lutz; and Families as a Resource in Recovery from Drug Abuse: An Evaluation of La Bodega de la Familia, by Eileen Sullivan, Milton Mino, Katherine Nelson, and Jill Pope.

- The following people have joined Vera since April: At Vera Central: Jean Dauphinee is research associate; Winston Anderson is budget analyst, and Tomas Montalvo is office assistant. The following interns are working at Vera this summer: Raymond Audain and Lisa Yedid, planning; Genger Charles, Patricia De La Garza, Jessica End, Will Gilmore, Jacob Horowitz, Judith Miller, Lauren Miller, Alison Park, Addie Rasavong, and Rahilla Zafar, research; Michelle Beck, communications; and Sadie Francis, operations. At Project Greenlight: Mike Bobbitt returns as family counselor and Anthony Knight is project assistant. At APT: Michelle Pelnar, Larry Woodland, and Helen Yum are therapists, and Romain Fravien, Jane Yang, and Cristina Cocheo are interns.

Affirm Promotes Positive Reinforcement in City Schools (continued)

...task falls to Smith alone. At the close of every day, she checks in with Sareen by phone for upwards of an hour, reporting on topics that range from how well the curriculum is being received to internal school politics that must be factored into the project’s overall strategy. “Deirdra is in a really tough position. Her energy level must be at an all-time high all the time,” says Sareen. “What’s most important to me is to make sure she feels supported while she is out there.”

Smith’s work is informed by a substantial body of educational and professional experience. She taught fifth grade in the Bronx through Teach for America and was director for the Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council and community ombudsman for the Brooklyn Treatment Court. She also recently earned a Masters of Social Work from Hunter College. Yet her greatest inspiration for this project may come from her own son, Leon Geray, 6. “When I first decided to do this, I questioned it,” she admits. “So I went home and I tested the theory on my son. I wanted to see if positive reinforcement made a difference. And it did. It did.”

It is still too soon to judge the impact of Affirm, but an impromptu after-school conversation with three school safety agents in a Columbus hallway suggests that Smith is reaching her audience. “It was awkward in the beginning, but at our first meeting, she let us know what was in store for us,” said one agent, when asked how the training was going. A second agent agreed: “She made it easy for us and informative.”

ROBIN CAMPBELL is a writer/editor in the Communications Department.