

## Rural Jails Research and Policy Network Request for Proposals

**Proposals will be accepted until 11:59pm EDT on August 9, 2019**

**Materials must be submitted via Submittable at the following link:**  
<https://ruraljails.submittable.com/submit>

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), with support from Arnold Ventures, is soliciting applications from U.S.-based universities to participate in a new Rural Jails Research and Policy Network.

**The Project:** The Rural Jails Research and Policy Network will be comprised, in this phase, of two pilot “Hub” sites at universities that will each form partnerships with nearby rural counties<sup>1</sup> and their local justice system leaders. With Vera’s support, the university Hub sites will collect and analyze jail data from each locality, work to understand the causes of incarceration in these rural areas, engage in discussion with local stakeholders on the conclusions drawn from jail data analysis and any other qualitative research conducted, and build capacity in participating rural areas to make informed policy decisions and implement reform-oriented practices. At the end of the project, each university Hub site will attend a national convening to present its findings. The Hub sites will help inform the development of the full network.

***We encourage applications from universities and jurisdictions that have a rural presence and have not previously received external research funding.***

**Applicant Requirements:** Applicants must be university-based researchers or institutions with significant research capacity (e.g., a department, individual or team of faculty members, program, research center). The applicant must be engaged or interested in issues affecting rural areas in its home state, capable of learning about local criminal justice issues affecting these rural areas, and have the capacity to build partnerships with local government and non-government entities relevant to jail and criminal justice.

**Grant Amount:** Up to \$200,000 for project work over a period of approximately 15 months, from November 2019 until January 2021.

**Application Materials Due August 9, 2019:** (1) 3-6 page application narrative, (2) Completed budget spreadsheet, (3) Letters of Support from 3+ Rural Jurisdictions, and (4) Bios of proposed Hub site staff.

## I. Project Overview

Local jail populations in rural jurisdictions across America have grown dramatically over the past 45 years, both in absolute numbers and as a driver of mass incarceration nationally.<sup>2</sup> Data that would shed light on the source of this growth, however, are limited and research rarely focuses on rural justice systems. Further, their small size, large number and geographic dispersal make rural places hard to reach and hard to engage in national justice reform initiatives. To address this problem, Vera will establish a pilot Rural Jails Research and Policy Network through the creation, in two states, of Rural Jails Research and Policy Hubs. Vera will support the work of the university Hub sites from approximately November 2019 until January 2021, as described in further detail below.

### Goals of the Project

Based in universities with graduate programs, the Rural Jails Research and Policy Network Hubs are expected to:

- build a knowledge base about the causes of incarceration in local rural areas that can be used to inform state and national policymakers and drive reform;
- build capacity in local rural jurisdictions to make data-driven policy decisions about their jails and justice systems and to implement evidence-based practices; and
- demonstrate and catalyze an approach to data-driven policy reforms in rural justice systems that could be scaled up in other rural parts of the United States.

### Main Components of the Project

#### *Forming the Rural Jails Research and Policy Hubs*

The university Hub sites will be located at a university or affiliated research institution. There will be two Hub sites for the pilot project, likely in different regions; they will apply separately. Each Hub site will partner with approximately 5-10 rural jurisdictions in the state where the university is located. These jurisdictions will commit to providing data on their jails and justice systems, and to attending trainings at the Hub site. The university Hub site may also partner with other relevant organizations and actors, such as state or municipal institutions, NGOs, advocacy organizations, community groups (particularly those involving people with lived experience of the justice system), private sector entities, or others. Each university Hub site will work to define the key problems in the rural jurisdictions, identify and secure relevant data, build relationships with relevant actors, analyze data and generate recommendations, and disseminate findings to legislators and officials. Vera will provide support and coordination for all these activities.

#### *Part One: Trainings*

Vera will provide training and guidance to the university Hub sites on criminal justice policy issues, conducting research with jail data, and on other issues, methods, and strategies as needed. Vera will also provide separate training for the participating rural

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this project, we do not have a fixed definition of “rural.” We ask applicants to explain how their proposed counties have significant rural characteristics. Generally, small and mid-size cities are unlikely to count as rural.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Kang-Brown and Ram Subramanian. *Out of Sight: The Growth of Jails in Rural America*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 2017.

jurisdictions as the university Hub sites begin to collect and analyze local data. As part of this training, Vera will facilitate roundtable discussions to engage the university Hub sites and local stakeholders in conversations aimed at understanding local data and examining possible solutions. Vera staff may serve as faculty for the training for the participating jurisdictions, but they may also be led by local or other experts. The focus and content of all sets of trainings will depend on the needs and priorities of the local region and the existing capacity of the Hub university and participating rural jurisdictions.

#### *Part Two: Data Collection and Analysis*

The university Hub sites will obtain administrative data on the local jail population and other relevant local criminal justice system data from the participating rural jurisdictions. There may also be opportunities to do additional qualitative data collection and research with participating rural jurisdictions (e.g., court watching, interviews with other stakeholders or people who have lived experienced with the local justice system), and the university Hub site is encouraged to explore this further. The university Hub site, with support from Vera, will negotiate data-sharing agreements and research ethics approvals, collect, clean, and analyze data, and share findings. Vera expects that the most pressing questions will relate to pathways into jail (such as pretrial detention and sentencing decisions), trends and experiences in jail detention, and pathways out of jail (such as alternatives to detention and early release). Other local factors, such as economic concerns, crime patterns, agreements on facility use with other jurisdictions, particular populations (e.g. women, Native Americans, migrants), among others, may also be relevant.

#### *Part Three: Research in Action*

Based on the conclusions drawn in each rural jurisdiction, the university Hub sites will translate findings into ideas for local and state policymakers (e.g., legislative proposals, resource allocation, policy proposals, public communication). Vera will provide support and training on all aspects of developing and disseminating findings and engaging policy actors.

#### *National Convening*

At the end of the project period, in January 2021, Vera will organize a national convening to amplify the project findings to a national audience. If successful, jurisdictions in other states can replicate this pilot, using the curricula and templates developed. This project will ultimately build a national network of experts on rural jail issues, rural justice reform leaders, and researchers. To ensure the sustainability of the project goals, Vera will provide support to the university Hub sites and local jurisdictions in exploring outside sources for continued funding for research and/or policy initiatives at the end of the project period.

## **II. The Vera Institute of Justice**

Since 2015, Vera has been at the forefront of research examining the growth of jail populations across the country.<sup>3</sup> Vera's focus on the growth of rural criminal justice systems was born out of its Incarceration Trends Project, which pieced together 45 years' worth of county-level jails

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<sup>3</sup> See Ram Subramanian et al. *Incarceration's Front Door: The Misuse of Jail in America*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 2015.

incarceration data.<sup>4</sup> This has been further supplemented by Vera's qualitative research in small and rural communities across the country, which explores the human and social impact of jails and prisons and the structural and social forces driving high incarceration rates.<sup>5</sup> In Vera's analysis of jail population trends, there are more than 1,900 rural counties.<sup>6</sup>

### **III. Roles and Responsibilities**

#### **University Hub Site's Role**

- Provide Hub leadership, faculty advisors, graduate student researchers, and administrative staff support
- Conduct outreach to build a network of approximately 5-10 participating rural jurisdictions
- Host, contribute to, and participate in trainings presented by Vera at the university Hub site
- Provide conference and meeting space for meetings and trainings
- Leverage faculty and graduate student resources to conduct data collection and analysis in rural jurisdictions, and obtain required ethics and data-use approvals
- Participate in round table discussions with Vera and sites to discuss lessons from data and possible reform efforts
- Attend National Convening to present findings from project

#### **Participating Rural Jurisdictions' Role**

- Collaborate with the university Hub site to obtain existing justice system data and to collect additional data, where necessary
- Commit to working with university Hub site on using data to define and understand problems in local justice system
- Participate in trainings (e.g. on interpreting data, generating solutions to issues)
- Contribute to discussions about lessons from data and possible reform efforts

#### **Vera's Role**

- Train university Hub site staff/students and representatives from participating rural jurisdictions on issues affecting rural jails and conducting effective jails research
- Assist university Hub sites with outreach to build a network of approximately 5-10 participating rural jurisdictions
- Provide guidance and support to university Hub site staff throughout data collection in participating rural jurisdictions
- Facilitate roundtable discussions in participating rural jurisdictions to examine and analyze jail data gathered by university Hub sites
- Work with university Hub site to translate data analyses into briefing materials for state policymakers

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<sup>4</sup> See Ram Subramanian, Christian Henrichson, and Jacob Kang-Brown. *In Our Own Backyard: Confronting Growth and Disparities in American Jails*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 2015; Incarceration Trends, Vera Institute of Justice, <http://trends.vera.org>.

<sup>5</sup> See *In Our Backyards Stories*, Vera Institute of Justice, <https://www.vera.org/in-our-backyards-stories>

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the categories used in this analysis and a map of counties, please see: <https://public.tableau.com/profile/in.our.backyards#/vizhome/RuralJailsMap/Dashboard1>

- Assist the university Hub site in developing and executing a communications plan using these materials
- Help identify opportunities to meet with legislators and others to explain the findings and their implications for state policy
- Complete and disseminate a final report summarizing the lessons from the project

#### **IV. Who Can Apply**

The principal applicant must be a university-based research program or institution with significant research capacity. This can be any of the following:

- A university or college, preferably with graduate programs
- A research center housed within a university
- A department or faculty member within a university
- A team of faculty members or researchers affiliated with a university

*We encourage applications from institutions that have not previously received external research funding above \$50,000, and from departments or disciplines that are not explicitly tied to crime or justice issues.*

**The applicant institution/program/faculty must be engaged or interested in issues affecting nearby rural communities.** The applicant may have expertise in justice issues (e.g., law or criminal justice programs) but this is not mandatory; we also welcome applicants with expertise in other issues affecting local rural areas combined with the capacity to learn about justice issues and data (e.g., rural studies, public policy programs). Institutions must apply to work in only one state.

**The applicant institution/program/faculty must have the capacity to build partnerships** – for coordination, data, and policy work – **with local government entities relevant to jail and criminal justice.** These may include county commissioners or leaders, social services agencies, sheriffs, prosecutors, public defenders, judges, courts, community supervision services, health providers, educators, etc. While we expect there will also be partnerships with non-governmental entities (see below), the government partnerships are mandatory.

#### **V. The Grant**

Vera will award up to \$200,000 to support each university Hub site’s work as part of the Rural Jails Research and Policy Network. The award will be paid in a series of disbursements, with financial spending reports due on a later-specified timeline. The project work will occur over a period of approximately 15 months, from November 2019 until February 2021. **Please note that Arnold Ventures caps overhead (indirect costs) at 15%.**

The award money will cover:

- Compensation for core university Hub site staff, including faculty members and graduate students
- Travel costs for representatives from participating rural jurisdictions to attend trainings conducted by Vera at the Hub university (e.g. mileage reimbursement<sup>7</sup>)

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<sup>7</sup> Travel expense reimbursement will follow federally-approved rates. Reimbursement for air travel is allowable, but because all participants will be from rural places, we expect that air travel may be inconvenient or cost prohibitive.

- Other administrative and data collection expenses, including language interpretation and other measures to ensure access and inclusion, where needed.

Vera will pay separately for:

- Travel costs for Hub university staff and representatives from participating rural jurisdictions to attend the national convening in January 2021
- Travel costs for Vera staff to visit and conduct trainings at the university Hub site and participating rural jurisdictions

## VI. The Application

Please submit an Application Narrative, Budget Spreadsheet, and Supporting Documents through Submittable at: <https://ruraljails.submittable.com/submit>. The Submittable process allows you to upload and attach files in Word, PDF, and Excel.

**A. Application Narrative:** Please submit a 3-6 page letter that addresses as many of the following areas as possible:

**Nearby Rural Areas:** Tell us about the rural areas where you propose to conduct this project: What are the main characteristics of these areas? How are these areas (e.g. counties, Tribal jurisdictions) considered rural?<sup>8</sup> What are the variations in population size, demographics, economics, and remoteness in the areas in which you propose to work?

**Your Project Goals:** How does this project respond to criminal justice issues facing the rural areas you have described? What types of policy outcomes could you envision seeing at the end of this project? How might you leverage this project to expand your university's research in rural places? How will you leverage Vera's support to conduct this project?

**Your Qualifications:** What expertise or experience do you possess that positions you to conduct this project? What familiarity do you have with local criminal justice issues and institutions in rural communities? What program or center will support this project at your university? What capacity do you have to host trainings, manage data, receive funds, and produce spending reports? Who will participate in the core work of the Hub site (leadership, faculty advisors, graduate student researchers, administrative support)?

**Partnerships with Rural Jurisdictions:** What existing relationships, if any, does your institution have with nearby rural jurisdictions? How have you reached out to stakeholders in these locations so far? Who has pledged support? What is your plan for further outreach to stakeholders in additional jurisdictions? What existing data from local jurisdictions do you have access to?

**Project Sustainability:** Do you envision sustaining this or similar research after the end of the project period? What goals do you have for

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<sup>8</sup> Please list the population for each proposed county or jurisdiction. Please explain why this area exemplifies the characteristics and issues of a rural area.

expanding the project goals or utilizing the network once the project period ends?

**B. Budget Spreadsheet:** Please provide an overall project budget summarizing how grant funds will be allocated, using the template provided on Submittable.

**C. Supporting Documents**

**Letters of Support from Rural Jurisdiction Stakeholders:** Please submit three or more letters of support signed by stakeholders from nearby rural jurisdictions, indicating their support of the project goals, willingness to provide access to jails and relevant data, and willingness to participate in roundtable discussions on the conclusions drawn from the data. These letters could be from a Sheriff, jail administrator, prosecutor or public defender's office, member of a county Board of Supervisors, member of a Tribal Government, or another figure in a local leadership role. Vera will also consider letters of support from local advocacy groups that pledge support of this project and describe how they will assist in ensuring its success. If you will not be able to obtain letters of support by the application deadline, please reach out to us at [ruraljails@vera.org](mailto:ruraljails@vera.org). Please feel free to use the attached outreach talking points and sample letter of support.

**Bios of Proposed University Hub Site Staff:** Please provide short bios of the faculty and key staff who you anticipate will work on this project. (It is encouraged but not mandatory to include bios of graduate students at this stage, since your institution may not yet know who they will be.)

## **VII. Selection Process**

**Application Scoring:** Vera will review and score all of the proposals. Applications will be scored based on the following criteria:

- Commitment to addressing local criminal justice issues and challenges (such as jail overcrowding, use of money bail, practices driving over-incarceration) in ways that are data-driven and equitable
- Commitment to learn and/or ability to conduct clear, data-based analysis of factors that shape jail incarceration trends in rural jurisdictions
- Institutional capacity to conduct data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings (faculty with relevant expertise, availability of graduate students, existing relevant institutional work, capacity to offer space for trainings, mixed methods research capacity)
- Demonstrated support from rural jurisdictions to participate in the project and to share relevant data/access to institutions, and/or from local non-governmental organizations who work with people affected by the criminal justice system (strongly encouraged)

**Finalist Interviews:** Vera will conduct phone calls and site visits with finalists before making final decisions.

## Key dates

- July 1, 2019:** Request for Proposals formally released
- July 8, 2019:** Webinar to address questions about the application process
- August 9, 2019 at 11:59 p.m. EST:** Deadline for submission of proposals
- September 2019:** Phone interviews and site visits with finalists
- October 2019:** Anticipated signing of contracts with selected Hub sites

## VIII. 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.

**Vera will host a webinar on July 8, 2019, from 1:00-2:00pm EDT**, to answer any questions about the project and application process. Please RSVP to [ruraljails@vera.org](mailto:ruraljails@vera.org) to receive call-in details.

We encourage you to send us a brief email at [ruraljails@vera.org](mailto:ruraljails@vera.org) stating your intent to apply to this Request for Proposals, by July 17, 2019. This is not mandatory, but it will help us to support you in the application process.

**Please direct any other questions to [ruraljails@vera.org](mailto:ruraljails@vera.org).**