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## **New Orleans to Develop a Comprehensive Pretrial Services System Department of Justice to fund project through Vera Institute of Justice**

NEW ORLEANS – A new initiative in New Orleans will develop and implement a more just and effective way to determine whether arrested individuals must be detained or whether they can safely remain in the community before appearing in court. The project, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), will be overseen by the Vera Institute of Justice’s [New Orleans Office](#) in collaboration with local government, community, and civic organizations. It seeks to integrate best practices into the city’s troubled criminal justice system, with the goal of yielding greater public safety at less cost to taxpayers.

New Orleans’s criminal justice system currently detains a disproportionate number of people for minor, nonviolent charges and jails people at a rate roughly three times the national average. Incarceration is the most expensive response to arrest, and research shows that jailing people who are not dangerous can have the unintended consequence of making them a greater risk to public safety after release.

“I am pleased to see that Vera will work with us to develop a pretrial release system for minor, nonviolent crimes,” said New Orleans Police Department Superintendent Ronal Serpas. “Incarcerating people who pose little or no risk results in more crime, not less, and costs money that could be spent on addressing violent crime.”

New Orleans City Councilmember Susan Guidry, co-chair of the council’s Criminal Justice Committee, also welcomed the news about the initiative. “Every year we spend a tremendous amount of money to hold people at Orleans Parish Prison who are charged with nonviolent offenses,” said Guidry. “A pretrial services program will allow us to better focus our limited resources on the prosecution and incarceration of those who pose a substantial risk to the public’s safety.”

This initiative builds on a collaborative reform process that began following Hurricane Katrina. In 2006, local officials invited Vera to conduct an analysis of New Orleans’s criminal justice needs. The next year, criminal justice leaders created the Criminal Justice Leadership Alliance, which committed to a broad reform agenda. Since then, local reform efforts have sped up the city’s practices for addressing minor offenses (from 60 days to 5 days) and increased the use of summonses instead of custodial arrest for most minor misdemeanor offenses, reducing the number of people going to jail.

City Council Vice President Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson, also a co-chair of the Criminal Justice Committee, sees the new initiative as an extension of this process. “I look forward to continuing our work with the Vera Institute and the entire Criminal Justice Leadership Alliance in developing a broader range of pretrial release options and in continuing reforms like the sheriff’s fast-track program and the district attorney’s diversionary program,” she said.

The 18-month, \$467,960 initiative is funded through BJA’s field-initiated competitive grant program, which, according to Laurie O. Robinson, assistant attorney general for the Office of Justice Programs, is

premised on the principle that “the most effective way to confront crime is through dynamic and collaborative partnerships with federal, state, and local law enforcement, and community organizations.” James H. Burch, II, BJA’s acting director, described the pretrial services initiative as “a key component of the ongoing local effort to revitalize the justice system in New Orleans.” The grant to Vera was among more than \$5.6 million in awards to field-initiated crime-fighting projects that BJA announced this week.

“Superintendent Serpas, Councilmembers Clarkson and Guidry, and the Department of Justice understand how critical it is to establish a system of pretrial services in New Orleans,” said Michael Jacobson, Vera’s director. “Effective pretrial services can make the city’s justice system fairer and more efficient—and help make New Orleans safer.”

Jon Wool, director of Vera’s New Orleans Office, said the grant would further strengthen ongoing collaborative efforts among government, community, and civic organizations. “We work with a broad coalition of local groups that understand the need to base our work on evidence and demonstrated good practices,” said Wool. “This support from the Bureau of Justice Assistance will allow Vera and our government partners in the Criminal Justice Leadership Alliance to keep building a more just and effective system and a safer city.” The New Orleans Office is part of Vera’s Center on Sentencing and Corrections.

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*The [Vera Institute of Justice](#) is an independent nonprofit organization that combines expertise in research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to provide leaders in government and civil society with the knowledge they need to improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety.*