

North Dakota State Senate Legislative Appropriation Hearing | 3.8.223  
Written Testimony of Matthew Lowen, Associate Director for the Restoring Promise Initiative  
Vera Institute of Justice

Good morning,

My name is Matthew Lowen, Associate Director for the Restoring Promise Initiative.

Thank you, Chairman Wanzek, and members of the Committee, for holding this senate legislative appropriation hearing inside of the walls of the prison, and so close to the Restoring Promise initiative's U.N.I.T.Y. Village. The inclusion of this community demonstrates your commitment to centering the human dignity of those most impacted by the prison system. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of Restoring Promise. I will spend my time-sharing information about the initiative in general, the impact of the transformational work happening with our partners here at the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCR), and opportunities for greater impact.

U.N.I.T.Y. Village, a young adult housing unit at the North Dakota State Penitentiary (NDSP), opened in March 2022. Since that time, the DOCR has made great strides, and under the thoughtful and strategic leadership of Director Krabbenhoft and his team, it is urgently investing in young adults.

This unit is the result of a partnership between the DOCR and Restoring Promise, an initiative creating housing units grounded in dignity for young adults (ages 18 to 25) in prison. Restoring Promise is an initiative of MILPA and the Vera Institute of Justice. MILPA is a nonprofit organization led by formerly incarcerated Chicano-Indigenous leaders who uplift race equity in prison systems nationwide. The Vera Institute of Justice, founded in 1961, is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and activists using data, evidence, and solutions to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they are fair for all. We envision safe, healthy, empowered communities and a fair, accountable justice system.

In Restoring Promise housing units, young adults are coached by mentors (incarcerated people over the age of 25) who work with corrections professionals to help young people realize their potential and purpose. Mentors and staff create an environment that allows young people to focus on life skills, financial literacy, conflict mediation, and healthy connection to family and loved ones. As a result, young people leave Restoring Promise units better prepared for a successful return to their home communities.

Our work is done in collaboration *with* the people most impacted by prison: corrections professionals and incarcerated people. The professionals who work in prison deserve to be safe at work. The people incarcerated in prisons should also be safe—and provided opportunities, with support, to heal.

It is for these reasons and more that Restoring Promise was created and opened its first young adult housing unit in 2017 with the Connecticut Department of Correction. Since that time, Restoring Promise has opened young adult housing units in a Connecticut women's prison, two

prisons in South Carolina, and a prison in Colorado, along with U.N.I.T.Y. Village here in North Dakota. A new young adult housing unit is scheduled to open this year in Idaho.

With each community created within prisons, there are even more lessons learned. Every Restoring Promise housing unit is designed and driven by incarcerated people and corrections staff, empowering those most impacted to form a supportive community. Though all Restoring Promise housing units vary to reflect the uniqueness of the community of people living and working within, our research proves changing carceral spaces to be grounded in human dignity is effective when the following areas are intentionally centered:

- Restorative practices
- Family engagement and partnership
- Mentorship
- Normalcy in the living environment
- Staff partnership and familiarity

Based on research done in collaboration with staff and incarcerated people, we can say with confidence that nine months after the opening of U.N.I.T.Y. Village, staff and those who reside in this community are feeling happy, heard, and safe. As you'll see in our handout, young adults in U.N.I.T.Y. Village have improved relationships with staff, family, and their fellow young adults, as well as a better outlook on their present situation and future. For example, 100 percent of young adults in U.N.I.T.Y. Village say they feel safe here. These results are consistent with the data from other Restoring Promise sites, which clearly shows that facilitating positive interactions between staff and incarcerated people prioritizes everyone's dignity, reduces stress, and leads to increased safety and better outcomes.

Last month, we conducted another round of data collection that captures *staff* feelings of safety, morale, and overall well-being, and will soon be able to report on those findings as well. The data from our other site partners provides a forecast of what North Dakota can anticipate. In Connecticut, the process evaluation showed that staff working on the unit reported more confidence in the administration, ongoing professional growth, and improved quality of life. Perhaps the most compelling finding was how safe staff feel working on the unit, which is composed mostly of young adults, typically the age group contributing to a large proportion of the violence and misconduct in prisons. Ninety-six percent of staff in Connecticut said they feel safe working on the unit, and 98 percent said the unit is a calm place. I think we can all agree, these areas are critical to staff retention.

Restoring Promise believes that data is an integral component in the change process. We want to make data informed decisions, but we also believe in the power of storytelling and allowing those closest to the work to inspire change by sharing their experiences. In a recent convening that we held in San Antonio, Texas, Lieutenant of U.N.I.T.Y. Village, Barbara Bailey, shared through tears: "What has changed in me—I have been working at the prison for 25 years, you have to be in a certain role. In my unit, I am able to be myself. I love my spot [role]."

It was evident to the entire room that Lieutenant Bailey has gained a renewed sense of purpose through working with her team, the mentors, and young adults. Thanks to the work of all these

people and the leadership of ND DOCR, NDSP has become a place of healing for those who are incarcerated and a place for staff to find professional value and purpose.

When ND DOCR applied for Restoring Promise along with 13 other state jurisdictions, it was a top choice. DOCR was selected because of its experience transforming the state prison system to better center the human dignity of incarcerated people. This came from North Dakota's long-standing relationship with Amend, under the leadership of Dr. Brie Williams. Amend is a public health and human rights program that works in prisons to reduce their debilitating health effects on residents and staff. Through Amend's partnership with North Dakota DOCR, it emerged that young adults still required something different, especially the overrepresentation of Native Americans within restrictive housing. Even in the best of circumstances, young adults have a unique set of needs and opportunities.

ND DOCR has continued to be a trailblazer through its partnership with Restoring Promise. The success of U.N.I.T.Y. Village is the result of a hardworking committee of people comprising DOCR leadership, corrections professionals, and incarcerated people. Collaboratively, we have created a community of healing by rethinking inequities, and focusing on accountability, trust, and respect for all on the unit. For staff on the unit, this experience will undoubtedly change the trajectory of their lives. Staff are keenly aware of the increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide for those in their profession. Working in a prison can resemble a battlefield in ways that heightens stress, increases anxiety and exhaustion, and leads to high turnover.

The need has never been greater to ensure that the women and men who choose to become corrections professionals in North Dakota feel safe and healthy; believe in the mission, vision, and goals of their employer; and feel supported and empowered by leadership. Through the Restoring Promise approach, North Dakota is on that path. We know how to substantially improve the quality of life for both the people working in and incarcerated in prisons. We can increase staff retention for those who choose to make the ND Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation their work home.

This impactful work is only as great as the resources provided to sustain and expand this transformation. The data and the experiences of those most impacted prove that this approach works. With further resources, we have an opportunity to expand the work of Restoring Promise and transform the lives of *everyone* incarcerated in North Dakota. The return on this investment goes beyond a culture change: happier and more fulfilled staff contribute greatly to a safer and healthier prison environment. Committing resources to expanding the Restoring Promise approach is a down payment on increased public safety for all North Dakotans.

In closing, I would like to thank Chairman Wanzek, members of the Committee, and Director Krabbenhoft for holding this important hearing inside NDSP and for the opportunity to provide written testimony. Please do not hesitate to contact us if Restoring Promise can provide further assistance.