

Title: Vermont Prison Research and Innovation Network (DOC SOW)

Jan 1, 2025 – Dec 31, 2027

Objective: The Vermont Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN) is a statewide initiative to establish a model of transparency, accountability, and innovation in Vermont’s prisons. In collaboration with the Justice Research Initiative at the University of Vermont, PRIN aims to enhance research and data capacity to better understand prison environments; promote transparency and accountability; and design, implement, and evaluate evidence-based programs and policies to improve conditions for individuals incarcerated in and working in Vermont’s prisons.

Background: The PRIN initiative first began in 2020 as part of an Urban Institute project, with funding from Arnold Ventures, to support a consortium of 5 states each interested in researching and improving prison culture, operations, and design to create more humane, safe, and rehabilitative correctional environments. In Vermont, this pilot phase included a focus on a single prison facility, Southern State Correctional Facility in Springfield VT. The pilot phase of the PRIN initiative was for 5 years with the formal Urban Institute project concluding in Dec 2024. Due to the success of the PRIN pilot effort in Vermont, the state is now transitioning their PRIN initiative beyond a single pilot facility and toward developing a sustainable, statewide network that uses community-engaged research and data to build evidence and spur innovation to improve all of Vermont’s prisons. This expansion phase is launching in January 2025.

Approach: Below describes the roles and responsibilities for the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) to collaborate with the Justice Research Initiative at the University of Vermont (research partner) to expand the PRIN initiative in Vermont.

Task 1. In collaboration with its UVM partners, DOC will seek to onboard each of the state’s prison facilities to participate in the PRIN initiative using a phased approach. The DOC will leverage the learned experiences from the PRIN pilot prison, Southern State Correctional Facility, to serve in a mentorship capacity when onboarding new facilities. The aim is to have successfully onboarded at least 3 facilities by December 2027.

Task 2. The DOC will seek to support and empower each participating facility to engage in local, data-driven change efforts. Each facility will have a designated, on-site contact who will be responsible for collaborating with community partners; collaborating with the research partner in facilitating onsite data collection and research activities; convening and facilitating innovation councils to support staff and incarcerated persons’ engagement in data-driven change efforts; and maintaining ongoing participation and communication with the DOC.

Task 3. The DOC will provide access to all participating state prisons and facilitate the research partner’s entry to facilities for all planning and research activities. Research activities include conducting climate surveys, confidential interviews, focus groups, observations of correctional staff and incarcerated people, and analyzing administrative data. As part of this responsibility, the DOC will support the use of community-engaged research approaches, such as community-led and researcher-guided data collection, analysis, decision making, evaluation, and reporting.

Task 4. The DOC will provide required materials to the research partner for their institutional review board application and review process. The DOC will continue to support the deferral of its own Agency of Human Services research review process to the research partners' institutional review board.

Task 5. The DOC will support the research partner in conducting regular climate surveys in participating facilities, including providing support for corrections staff time (one-hour overtime pay) to engage with the research process. The research partner will work with the site contact to schedule interviews at times that are complimentary to facility schedules and not necessitate employee travel or interfere with security scheduling needs.

Task 6. The DOC will, to the best of its ability, provide access to all relevant and appropriate administrative data to its research partner in compliance with State policies. This may include data related to the DOC's incarcerated population, corrections staff and officials, program offerings and participation, disciplinary procedures, grievance procedures, hiring and termination policies.

Task 7. The DOC will resource the PRIN initiative as part of their Strategic Planning process by designating the *Modernization Committee* to champion these efforts on behalf of the DOC. The *Modernization Committee* will be responsible for the day-to-day project work and will regularly engage with individual facilities, department leadership, the research partner, and other state and community organizations as needed. The *Modernization Committee* will meet with core initiative partners, including the research partner and designated facility contacts from each facility, at a cadence agreed upon by all parties and form the core team of the initiative.

Task 8. The DOC will engage and participate in a *Community Review Board* convened by the research partner. Data from the climate surveys and related research efforts will be central to guiding *Community Review Board* activities. The review board will meet regularly (annually or semiannually) to ensure the initiative is being advanced within the broader state-policy context and will include representation from a broad range of state and community organizations, such as: leadership from state agencies and prison facilities; legislators and policy makers; community organizations; corrections staff, including the facility contacts; formerly and/or currently incarcerated people.

Approach: Below describes the roles and responsibilities for the Justice Research Initiative at the University of Vermont (research partner) to collaborate with the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) to expand the PRIN initiative in Vermont.

Task 1. The research partner will collaborate with DOC as they seek to onboard each of the state's prison facilities to participate in the PRIN initiative using a phased approach. To this end, the research partner will aim to expand data collection and research activities, including staff and incarcerated persons climate surveys, to at least 3 facilities by December 2027.

Task 2. The research partner will complete any research review process required by its own review board and provide required materials to the DOC. The research partner will ensure that research activities comply with research standards outlined by its research review authorities as well as the DOC's IRB.

Task 3. The research partner will collaborate with the DOC to plan and carry out research

activities. Research activities may include conducting administrative data analysis, climate surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups with correctional staff and incarcerated people as well as baseline data analyses and evaluability assessments of prospective changes to policies and practices. As part of this responsibility, the research partner will use community-engaged research approaches to the extent possible (understanding potential human subjects protections limitations), such as community-led and researcher-guided data collection, analysis, decision making, and evaluation.

Task 4. The research partner will designate at least one representative to collaborate and engage with the DOC's *Modernization Committee*. The *Modernization Committee* will be responsible for the day-to-day work of the initiative and support project meetings at a cadence agreed to by all parties.

Task 5. The research partner will convene and facilitate a *Community Review Board*, including providing data analysis and communication resources. The research partner will connect these activities to their larger national efforts (e.g. National Center on Restorative Justice) and advancing evaluation of local change efforts (e.g. expanding prison-based peer-recovery services). The review board will meet regularly (annually or semiannually) to ensure the initiative is being advanced within the broader state-policy context and will include representation from a broad range of state and community organizations, such as: leadership from state agencies and prison facilities; legislators and policy makers; community organizations; corrections staff, including the Innovation Managers; formerly and/or currently incarcerated people.

Task 6. The research partner will seek opportunities to publish in both academic and practitioner journals and publications to share the knowledge generated and research findings stemming from this project. In doing so, the research partner will collaborate with DOC on the development and dissemination of these products.