

VOTE's 12 Principles of Engagement

VOTE is blessed to serve at a community crossroads of criminal justice reform and reentry efforts. As people and organizations seek to partner with us, the main question we need to answer is:

“How does this build power, or alleviate oppression, amongst the people most oppressed by the criminal justice system?”

If that question has no answer, then VOTE should not be in partnership, nor be contracted, nor serve in an advisory role. Below are our 12 Principles of Engagement.

1. **Equality** - VOTE only affiliates with people who treat the formerly incarcerated, currently incarcerated, and their families as equal humans, residents, neighbors, and: “citizens”. VOTE will not work with those who define us, by word or deed, to other, less than, subjects, or clients.
2. **Equity** - VOTE calls on our partners to recognize the systematic marginalization created by the criminal justice system we collectively seek to change. For example, the inability to build wealth or earn formal education--while also paying fines and fees for needless carceral costs--makes every dollar different. The background of VOTE's staff and members is less privileged than most partners, therefore equitable contributions may not be 50/50.
3. **Experience** - VOTE's partners should acknowledge the experience they both have and lack. More importantly, partners should understand the level of pain and courage required for any VOTE member to stand and share their lives or analysis. VOTE's staff and core members have experienced centuries of collective poverty, desperation, governmental targeting, sadness, and outright torture. At times, those who share their experiences may be in danger, or at the very least, uncomfortable. It needs to be said that, without the experience of incarceration or reentry, a novice can provide about as much mentorship as a white woman can provide for a Black woman about mothering teenage Black boys in an American city, as a father can provide for a daughter going through puberty, as a straight person can provide for a gay person coming out to a homophobic parent.
4. **Elevation** - Building power requires elevation of the oppressed class of people. Partners should be able to answer not only if but how their project elevates the people we are fighting for, or merely the organization that is studying or helping them.
5. **Compensation**- Partners should appreciate and compensate consultations by VOTE's staff and members in the same manner as the partner would appreciate the expertise of others in the field. All hourly rates, stipends, honorariums, and other forms of compensation should reflect how the partner, to the extent they are able, values the experience, analysis, and innovation of people who suffered in exchange for their wisdom.

6. **Information-** Partners should be forthcoming and transparent with information regarding their organization, goals, relationships, and histories. They should also be sensitive in seeking and amplifying information, particularly personal data, that is traditionally used to denigrate that person and/or groups to which that person belongs.
7. **Administrative Support-** Partners should recognize that VOTE, as a front-line grassroots organization, is not heavily staffed in back-end administrators; therefore, they should understand that any overly burdensome paperwork, reporting, scheduling, etc. is taking away from the leadership, organizing, and expertise of VOTE's core capacity.
8. **Outreach and Networking-** Partners seeking to tap into VOTE's network should recognize the decades of labor invested into building a base of people directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Any time VOTE inserts a research request, job posting, media creation, issue campaign into our outreach, it has the capacity to water down other information. Therefore, such tapping into our network must always answer the fundamental question: "How does this build power amongst our people?"
9. **Accolades, Credit, and Attribution-** Partners should be aware of the historic tension of grassroots organizations taking credit for grassroots' trailblazing efforts. This is especially sensitive when credit-takers repeatedly and intentionally miss the chance to be partners at the ground floor, while under-resourced leaders move forward anyway. Partners in the struggle to end mass incarceration should recognize the contributions VOTE has made to their own work, particularly in situations where VOTE is critical to the entire project. Proper credit to the directly impacted, who are generally viewed with unjustified suspicion, is essential for building support for future innovations.
10. **Public Communications-** Partners' public communications should reflect "people-first" language, and recognize that the legacy of mainstream media has been built upon structural racism, 'tough on crime rhetoric,' and 'if it bleeds it leads' hierarchy. Partners should respect that the details of anyone's criminal history is extremely sensitive, and people are under no obligation to share, nor should it be presumed that their stories are open source. Partners should behave with the highest ethical standards, and be self-critical regarding the ability of public communications to re-shape culture.
11. **Autonomy-** Partners recognize that VOTE remains guided by its mission, and no partnership will be construed to limit VOTE's independent activities unless specifically agreed upon in the partnership. Furthermore, if the partnership steers adrift of VOTE's mission, the partnership will be terminated.
12. **Opportunities-** Partners should actively work to provide opportunities to people with criminal convictions, to the extent the partner has resources, access, platform, or a network. This includes jobs, training, internships, board memberships, scholarships, fellowships, panels, special rates, guest appearances, or in-kind services that could further advance the lives of our people.