



BUILDING REENTRY ECOSYSTEMS

A BLUEPRINT FOR
INNOVATION



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April 2023
NCJ 306489

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Cover Image: halbergman/iStock, Drazen Zigic/iStock, ipuwadoliStock, Rommel Canlas/Shutterstock, SvetaZiiStock, Perawit Boonchu/iStock.

This project is supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-21-GK-04603-SCAX awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



People returning to the community after incarceration face barriers to successful reentry. These barriers prevent people from thriving in their communities and contribute to decreased public safety. Reentry programs and policy change efforts help mitigate some of these challenges, but with hundreds of thousands of people released from prison each year and millions cycling in and out of jails, there is more that can be done to improve reentry outcomes and increase public safety.

Services and policy changes are critical to improve people's lives post-incarceration, helping people to gain the skills to navigate challenges in the community and removing the barriers resulting from one's conviction history. However, complementary approaches are needed to realize systemic changes. This report offers a framework and guidelines to develop ecosystems to complement current reentry initiatives and build safe, thriving communities.

Ecosystem building considers the reentry process holistically and seeks to reshape the communities people return to after incarceration. Organizations embedded in these communities act as anchors to build ecosystems, serving people while reshaping their neighborhoods. These organizations and the communities they serve need resources to thrive. This report highlights how the funding could flow to these communities and targets stakeholders with decision-making authority over reentry investments.

Three tenets underpin the reentry ecosystem framework. Each tenet reflects slight changes to existing resource flows for reentry that can

complement and support existing efforts to improve reentry outcomes. They are:

- Redirecting public investments to local people, networks, and community-based organizations.
- Supporting the capacity and organizational infrastructure of community groups.
- Targeting investments in local geographies.

The findings in this report reflect a review of literature and data to explore the elements needed to develop thriving ecosystems. Advocates, formerly incarcerated people, funders, practitioners, researchers, and systems stakeholders offered perspectives on developing reentry ecosystems, programmatic activities that positively impact communities, and ways to sustain impact. Several principles were consistently noted as foundational to building reentry ecosystems:

- Funding to support successful reentry must take into account the capacity and operations of community organizations.
- An intermediary can help bridge the relationship between community entities and systems stakeholders for lasting collaboration.
- Sustainable funding streams are critical for lasting change.
- Developing formerly incarcerated leaders who can lead change efforts and spur innovation.

- Ensuring efforts are community-centered and reflect the diversity of people in communities.

Mass incarceration is one of the many outcomes of disinvestment in communities. There is often an overlap between communities with high incarceration rates and those that have suffered disinvestments in essential infrastructure and services such as education and housing. The ecosystem-building framework considers this

and seeks to reverse-engineer safer, more vibrant communities through the criminal justice system in partnership with communities. The challenges are immense, and change may take time and sustained investments. However, a spark is often all that is required to catalyze systemic changes. This framework could be a starting point to realize the much-needed changes to improve reentry and community-level outcomes.

INTRODUCTION



In 1999, the National Institute of Justice started an inquiry into the large number of people being released from prisons each year and what is needed to keep more people from returning to prison.¹ The inquiry launched an era of political and scholarly attention on “reentry” which still endures. Since then, programmatic and research innovations have occurred at the local, state, and federal levels, and policies were advanced to improve the lives of people impacted by the criminal justice system and returning home from incarceration. At the federal level, the Second Chance Act passed in 2008, and the Department of Justice (DOJ) has awarded more than \$600 million in grants since its passage to support adults and youth with involvement in the criminal justice system. In 2018, the First Step Act passed with bipartisan support, reauthorizing the Second Chance Act by enacting correctional and sentencing reforms for people incarcerated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.² After two decades, incarcerated students regained access to federal Pell grants with the passage of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid Simplification Act in 2020.³

These reforms—and countless others in the past two decades—contributed to improvements for people, families, and communities. However, the United States still leads the world in incarceration rates, and the number of people admitted to and released from prisons each year remains stagnant and stubbornly high. In 2000, 625,219 people entered state and federal prisons, and 604,858 people were released into the community;⁴ in 2019, 576,956 people entered state and federal prisons, and 608,026 people were released from state and federal prisons.⁵ Between 2000 and 2019, the average percent change of prison admissions in the country was -0.4% and the average percent change of prison releases was -0.1%.

METHODOLOGY



Information collected from the following methods informed the creation of this report and the principles that inform this blueprint:


- Literature review of data and research on national reentry initiatives and blueprints as well as a review of reentry initiatives underway in Colorado and Michigan.
- Nineteen semi-structured interviews with national organizations and stakeholders in Colorado and Michigan, including community-based organizations, corrections departments, formerly incarcerated people, foundations, and grassroots organizations. The interviews included questions about how organizations and programs are and should be funded, the impact of programmatic activities on the broader community, and how the impact could be sustained and replicated within jurisdictions.
- Review of internal documents provided by state-based organizations.
- Site visits to Colorado and Michigan.

With the number of people cycling in and out of incarceration remaining stagnant and some parts of the country facing high recidivism rates, what else is needed to decrease recidivism further and improve public safety and community well-being? This report presents new ways to think about supporting improved reentry outcomes and a framework to strengthen and improve the lives of formerly incarcerated people, their families, and their communities. Elements highlighted reflect what is needed to invest in a different vision of reentry: one of thriving ecosystems that holistically support the

individual and the community. These ecosystems are essential to undoing the harms of mass incarceration and require different investment approaches to increase public safety, decrease recidivism, and improve community well-being. The current efforts

of stakeholders nationwide, infused with the lessons learned from the past and concepts incorporated in this blueprint, could help usher in new approaches to public safety and reentry.

CURRENT STATE OF REENTRY



Implementing systemic efforts to improve reentry is challenging, and the complexity of the country's criminal justice systems partly contributes to this challenge. The United States corrections system includes many parts: 50 state prison systems, a federal prison system, and local counties that, collectively, oversee more than 1,500 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, and nearly 3,000 local jails.⁶ Most people who are incarcerated are in state prisons—in 2021, 87.5% of those incarcerated in correctional facilities were in state prisons—and 95% of all incarcerated people will eventually return to their communities.⁷ The communities to which individuals are returning are distinct and pose specific challenges: in rural communities, people may lack public transportation and rental housing units; in urban areas with high density neighborhoods, people are returning home to an increased cost of living and housing unaffordability. Society has also changed through technological advances and demographic shifts, and people incarcerated for lengthy periods may be returning to an unrecognizable community. In addition to the communities' economic, political, and social factors, formerly incarcerated people face barriers to employment, government assistance, housing, and voting. More than 45,000 laws and regulations, referred to as collateral consequences, prevent formerly incarcerated people from accessing these basic needs.⁸



"Individual and policy change efforts will be limited in their impact without investments and resources into communities that support formerly incarcerated people. "

The field has focused on various interventions, programs, and supports to improve the outcomes of people exiting incarceration, from higher education programs in prisons to job training, housing programs, and substance use disorder treatment. Some programs focus on changing individual behaviors and improving the "soft skills" of formerly incarcerated people.⁹ Examples of soft skills may include showing up to work on time and looking your boss in the eye. While important, these programs may do little to change the realities and address the barriers to successful living post-incarceration.¹⁰ In recognizing the factors that impede successful reentry and diminish public safety, communities and policymakers continue efforts to reduce barriers to employment, housing, and other basic needs. For example, a handful of states have passed Clean Slate legislation to automatically expunge the records of people with

conviction histories, while other state and local jurisdictions passed policies to remove barriers to housing.

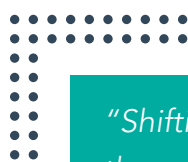
In 2022, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced that it would take a comprehensive look at its programs and policies to improve access to HUD programs for formerly incarcerated people.¹¹ President Biden's Executive Order on Effective, Accountable Policing, and Criminal Justice Practices established the interagency Alternatives and Reentry Committee to create a plan to limit criminal justice system interactions and improve reentry outcomes.¹² In 2022, the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), awarded more than \$100 million in grants to support the successful reentry of people leaving incarceration.¹³

While the collective progress made at the individual and policy levels addresses issues that people and communities face in "real-time,"¹⁴ addressing the enduring impact of incarceration and its collateral consequences require additional levers that can complement these changes. Individual and policy change efforts will be limited in their impact without investments and resources into communities that support formerly incarcerated people. To catalyze systemic change for more significant impact, we must move toward investing in *ecosystems* using public resources, centering organizations and people with lived experience in the issue. Resourcing local communities empowers people with a vested interest in the success and sustainability of change, yielding greater impact and returns on investments.¹⁵

INVESTING IN REENTRY ECOSYSTEMS

The term “ecosystem” invokes a picture illustrating an environment with wildlife, explaining the interdependence of all living things within that environment. *Reentry ecosystems*, similarly, depict environments with the people most impacted by incarceration being the focal point of this environment. The holistic view of reentry considers the economic, individual, physical, and social factors of a formerly incarcerated person’s environment, the interactions of these factors, and the interdependencies and assets conducive to improved public safety outcomes and community well-being.

The creation and development of these ecosystems require targeted investments, specifically public investments, to catalyze and sustain long-term change. Here, the purpose of the funding and how things are funded are equally important to what is funded. Changing the orientation of an investment’s purpose allows stakeholders to consider elements of a problem’s solutions beyond a set of interventions (e.g., the environment that would be conducive to supporting effective interventions). This flexibility in thinking creates opportunities to address problems in a holistic manner that influence the conditions that contribute to the public safety issue and its solutions. This framework is supported by three tenets that are critical in creating reentry ecosystems:



“Shifting resources to other parts of the system because the infrastructure does not exist for alternatives may be an immediate solution, but realizing the true vision of JRI requires investments into communities to create the structures needed for change.”

- Redirecting public safety funding to local people, networks, and community-based organizations.
- Investing in the infrastructure and capacity of local organizations.
- Targeting investments in local geographies.

Building these ecosystems begins with reorienting the framing of public investments in reentry, shifting the thinking about the recipients and mechanisms of funding, the distribution of power and influence, and institutional norms.¹⁶ This model evolves from one that resources systems stakeholders and already well-resourced organizations to one that improves the systemic and institutional factors that impact public safety through public investments in local people, networks, and community-based

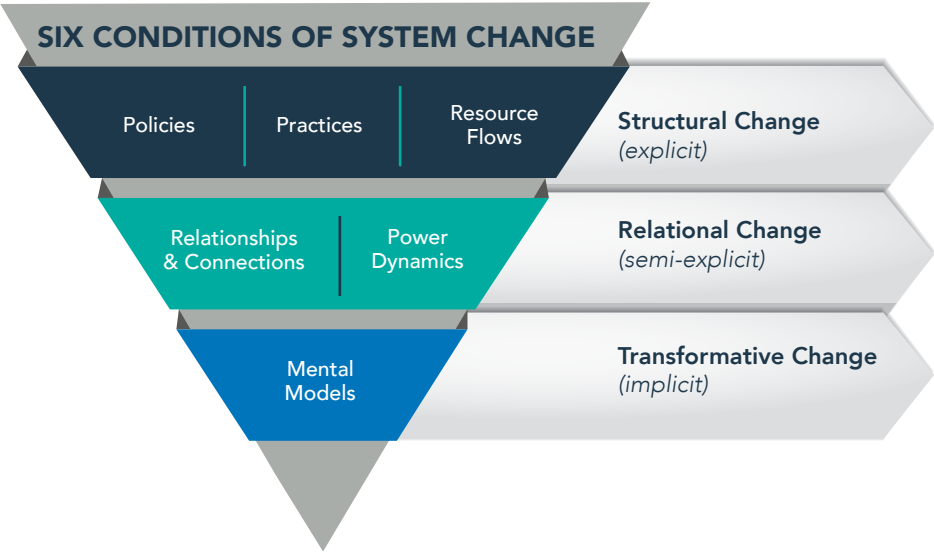
organizations. This concept is not a novel idea: 20 years ago, Susan Tucker and Eric Cadora called for a different approach to public safety, moving from punitive responses and investments in prison to targeted investments in local communities for programs and services in education, employment, health care, and other basic needs.¹⁷ Their concept—directing savings captured by prison closures toward investments in communities impacted by mass incarceration—became the basis of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI). JRI has evolved since its inception, and some argue that the initiative strayed from its original intent of reinvestment into communities toward investments back into systems.¹⁸ While some states have made reinvestment into communities for a range of services including reentry, violence interruption, and substance use disorder treatment, others have directed resources to other parts of the criminal justice system.¹⁹ Shifting resources to other parts of the system because the infrastructure does not exist for alternatives may be an immediate solution, but realizing the true vision of JRI requires investments into communities to create the structures needed for change.

Current public reentry investments focus on the individual outcomes of program participants. While those outcomes are critical, there needs to be more thinking about the long-term capacity, infrastructure, and sustainability of the conduits for lasting change. By building the organizational infrastructure of reentry service providers, local organizations and stakeholders develop the ability to gather additional resources for innovation and become an anchor in communities to improve public safety outcomes and individual lives. Anchor organizations help to improve the physical infrastructure and the human capital within communities impacted by incarceration, realizing an objective of the original intent of the justice reinvestment framework.²⁰ In some cases, anchor organizations create housing and operate community centers for young people. These organizations create training opportunities and pathways to careers for people.

Incarceration is spatially concentrated in specific communities, and the removal of people from communities through incarceration deteriorates social networks and impacts communities' economic and political infrastructure.²¹ Disinvestments into essential services within those communities, layered with a reduced workforce due to incarceration, decreased investments into local businesses, and poor outcomes in health and education, produce disenfranchised communities that lack the power and resources for upward mobility. Targeting investments into local communities is more than just redirected public resources; it shifts accountability and responsibility to local stakeholders and communities.²² The organizations are vested in the outcomes of the people they serve and the neighborhoods they operate within; the people served also have a stake in the transformation of their communities and the success of the organizations. By shifting accountability and responsibility, marginalized communities regain their autonomy and power.

This model of building reentry ecosystems adopts elements of different frameworks for public safety and systems change. The original JRI is at this model's core, focusing reinvestment into local communities to develop and strengthen their infrastructure and human capital.²³ Tenets of the reentry framework underpin this model, examining the connections between and interactions of different sectors of society that promote and inhibit the success of people leaving incarceration.²⁴ Ecosystem building overlays the systems-change framework, looking at the structural, relational, and transformative changes needed to transform a system.²⁵ This framework (see figure 1) begins to consider ways to shift the "conditions that are holding the problem in place" by examining the six conditions for systems change: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models.²⁶ There is a particular emphasis on resource flows, which impact relational and transformative changes. Finally, community-driven and community-led initiatives are prioritized, recognizing the impact of community collaboration on public safety and neighborhood revitalization.²⁷

FIGURE 1. SIX CONDITIONS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE



Source: Kania et al., 2018, 4.

BLUEPRINT FOR THRIVING ECOSYSTEMS



Reentry ecosystems often develop organically, but several principles inform the creation of these environments. The conditions and factors needed to develop reentry ecosystems are often specific to a particular state or local jurisdiction, meaning there is no off-the-shelf model for creating ecosystems nationally. Each jurisdiction will present a specific set of criminal justice system challenges, and the criminal justice system field within the jurisdiction may have a particular group of stakeholders and organizations that drive change in a particular manner. The following are principles to support the development of these community-centered reentry ecosystems:

- **Account for the capacity and operations of community organizations.** Local entities supporting people from marginalized communities often operate within the same geographic areas of the population they serve. Historically, these organizations were underfunded and lacked the resources to develop their organizational capacity, precluding organizations from accessing funding opportunities, especially the public safety funding awarded by governments. Investments into developing these ecosystems should include dedicated resources to develop the capacity and operations of community organizations. Examples of the type of activities that may be supported include capacity-building resources for data

management, financial reporting, and accessing federal grant resources. Technical assistance from national entities can shift from programmatic assistance—as local stakeholders may be best suited to know the challenges facing their communities and the solutions—to supporting the operational capacity of local organizations.

- **Build a bridge and use an interpreter between community entities and systems stakeholders for lasting collaboration.** Ecosystems do not develop overnight, and, at the onset, there may be distrust between community-facing entities and systems (e.g., corrections departments). An interpreter, or an intermediary, plays a vital role in bridging the initial interactions between the two stakeholders until trust develops. The intermediary could be an entity operating in an official capacity to support the community organizations through capacity-building efforts or another stakeholder such as a local foundation that can play the interpreter role until trust develops. In the forthcoming example of Colorado, the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership plays this role in the reentry grant program, acting as a bridge between the Colorado Department of Corrections and the community partners. Latino Coalition helps communication flow in both directions, with messages about needed improvements and challenges being translated between stakeholders for programmatic improvements.

- **Create sustainable funding streams.** Multi-year, reliable funding streams are rare, and organizations have to pivot their program design as funding trends shift which can be detrimental to a strong program. Some jurisdictions have limited resource pools, hindering opportunities for dedicated resources. Sustainable funding streams are vital to support community efforts, and different mechanisms to identify and create such funding streams are needed. Sustainable funding streams may look different across jurisdictions and different levels of government. The fiscal health of an agency, state, or locality may also influence sustainability. Given these factors, sustainable funding in practice may vary: it may include legislative appropriations (see Colorado) or changing existing funding uses to broaden the scope of activities.
- **Develop leaders impacted by the criminal justice system.** People impacted by the criminal justice system understand the elements of personal transformation through their lived

experiences and offer their social capital to inform change efforts.²⁸ Their determination to change lives fuels their desire to support and revitalize their communities.²⁹ Formerly incarcerated people can serve as ambassadors within the ecosystem, interacting with community members and peers to legitimize change efforts. Investments are needed to develop formerly incarcerated people to highlight their accomplishments and ideas and support their ongoing work addressing mass incarceration.

- **Ensure efforts are community centered.** The community's needs are central to any ecosystem-building effort. When planning projects, the community should sit at the table, and people should be paid for their participation and time. Community-centered efforts should involve more than one community member as people experience reentry challenges from different vantage points (e.g., as a caregiver, person with disabilities, veteran).

ECOSYSTEM BUILDING IN COLORADO AND MICHIGAN



Initiatives underway in Colorado and Michigan reflect the principles underscored in this blueprint and show the impact and potential of an ecosystem-building approach. Colorado realized changes through reinvestment in communities, with system-impacted people leading the way. In Michigan, efforts in progress show the promise of human capital development, catalyzed by formerly incarcerated people designing their own solutions.

Colorado: Community Reinvestment

Background

The story behind Colorado's existing reentry ecosystem starts with both tragedy and opportunity. In 2013, Tom Clements, the executive director of the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC), was murdered by a person on parole.³⁰ When the state decided to invest resources to improve reentry following this incident, community organizations led by the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition (CCJRC) stepped into the discussions, advocating for community-driven public safety strategies.³¹ Around the same time, a U.S. Department of Labor-funded program led by the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership (LCCL) was ending. The program, called "Work and Gain Education and

Employment Skills" (WAGEES), awarded grants to organizations to improve the employment prospects of young adults released from prison and people who left high school in three cities: Buffalo, NY; Denver, CO; and Los Angeles, CA.³² The intent to improve reentry outcomes through community collaboration and an existing framework for reentry programming combined to usher in the first community reinvestment program in Colorado.

Colorado's Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills Program

The reinvestment initiatives in Colorado redirect a portion of funding allocated to government agencies to community-based programming. In the case of Colorado's reentry efforts, funding from CDOC's budget was used to create a reentry grant program. In 2014, the Colorado legislature passed House Bill 1355, creating a reentry grant program in CDOC for programs to reduce recidivism, increase public safety, and support the successful transition of people released from incarceration.³³ The statute created an administrative model: CDOC selects a community-facing intermediary to administer the grant program, collect data, provide capacity-building technical assistance and training, and monitor performance.³⁴ Grantees (called "community partners") must be organizations

TABLE 1. WAGEES EXPENDITURES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS: FY 2017–2022

Fiscal year	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022
Expenditures by community partners	\$1,545,952	\$4,416,975	\$6,804,100	\$7,610,422	\$7,372,456
Intermediary expenditures	\$267,048	\$752,996	\$1,060,294	\$1,330,612	\$1,199,571
Total	\$1,813,000	\$5,169,971	\$7,864,394	\$8,941,034	\$8,572,027
Number of community partners	9	18	18	18	20
Communities served	Aurora, Boulder, Cañon City, Colorado Springs, Cortez, Denver, Durango, Englewood, Ft. Collins, Grand Junction, Greeley, La Junta, Longmont, Montrose, Sterling				

Source: Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, 2022.

with nonprofit status registered with the Colorado Secretary of State and provide a range of services to participants, including case management; permanent and transitional job placement; and training, educational training, and mentoring.

Community partners must provide core services: case management and services that align with the programmatic outcomes of WAGEES, including vocational or education credentialing, placement into employment, and decreased recidivism. The community can decide on the different types of services and how they will be implemented (through partners, subcontracts) and decide how grant funds are distributed to achieve programmatic outcomes. Grant funds can underwrite programs and services not outlined in the initial request for proposals, such as family reunification, anger management counseling, and gang disengagement.³⁵ WAGEES participants are people under parole supervision who score as medium to high risk under CDOC's validated risk assessment tool. The program is voluntary, and participation is not required.

Once enrolled, community partners assess the participants' needs using the Individual Needs and Strengths Inventory Tool (INSIT), a tool that

assesses criminogenic needs for participants using the risk-needs-responsivity model. Participants and case managers establish a case plan based on the assessment, identifying goals for both the case manager and participant, and identify pathways to achieve the goals. Since the program's inception, the WAGEES program enrolled 7,664 people.³⁶ Currently, nearly 25 percent of people who are on parole and score medium to high risk on the risk assessment participate in a WAGEES program. As the number of program participants increased, funding for the program also increased. The WAGEES program's initial appropriation for fiscal year (FY) 2014–2015 was \$500,000; the following year, the appropriations increased to \$1,710,000.³⁷ In FY 2021–2022, total expenditures for the program were \$8,572,027 for 20 community partners serving 15 different communities in the state (see table 1 for information on expenditures and community partners).³⁸

Elements that Support Success

On paper, WAGEES may read like a traditional grant program: there is a funder, a grant administrator, grantees, and services offered. However, deeper analysis points to elements of the program that

sets WAGEES apart as a unique model for reentry programming. All the stakeholders involved—corrections, community partners, and the intermediary—play specific roles in producing the outcomes and transformation happening in the community.

LCCL follows a specific approach in working with community partners: they “find, fund, form, and feature” community partners.

- LCCL understands that organizations currently exist in communities working on various social issues and works to **find** these groups. While these organizations may lack operational infrastructure, they are connected with the people in the communities, sharing lived experiences and understanding the support needed for community transformation.
- LCCL receives money as an intermediary to **fund** the community organizations it finds, driving money deep into the community.
- LCCL **forms** the organizations it finds and funds by providing technical assistance and capacity building. LCCL acknowledges the expertise that community partners bring to support people: the community partners work deep in the community, and the best practices of transformation surface from their work. LCCL assists community partners in developing infrastructure and building organizations from the ground up to succeed in supporting communities. It focuses on various supports, including developing accounting and finance systems, data reporting mechanisms, and performance monitoring systems. LCCL also helps community partners develop relationships with different stakeholders, including funders and government, and goes even further to help cultivate those relationships by redistributing power to community partners on the frontlines of reentry.
- LCCL **features** organizations through various efforts, creating opportunities for community

partners to have a seat at the table in creating change agendas for communities. The partners are not tokenized and are asked only to share their stories; they are lifted up for their expertise and insights, gaining the visibility that may create additional opportunities for long-term sustainability.

Formerly incarcerated and system-impacted people hold leadership roles in several WAGEES organizations, with some leading the organizations. CDOC and LCCL recognized the power in their lived experiences and ability to build trust with the communities they served. By building trust, the communities’ and organizations’ success become intrinsically linked. This dynamic becomes the foundation for organizations, and community partners become more entrenched and champions for the community’s needs.

Formerly incarcerated leaders needed to gain background or expertise on starting or running an organization. They recognized that others would scrutinize their efforts more intensely, even with a fraction of the budget of larger organizations and government agencies. The technical assistance that LCCL provided in budgeting, data collection, documenting expenditures, and financial guidance helped the community partners develop confidence and comfort to dispel scrutiny. By working with the intermediary to develop the organizational infrastructure, community partners created a framework for accountability and responsibility, demonstrating their ability to account for every dollar spent and to become responsible stewards of public resources.

Community partners view LCCL not as an intermediary, grant monitor, or technical assistance provider but as an interpreter. It can bridge and connect community partners with CDOC and translate the needs of CDOC and the rationale behind its asks to community partners. In turn, LCCL advocates for community partners, voicing their concerns and helping them operationalize improvements to their programming. For CDOC,

TABLE 2. WAGEES PERFORMANCE MEASURES: FY 2014–2021

Fiscal year	Enrollment	Placement	Retention	Credentialing	Recidivism
Target	100%	60%	50%	50%	<20%
Actuals	135%	68%	67%	86%	5%
Participants	7,663	5,194	4,151	1,436	366

Source: Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, 2022.

the intermediary streamlines the grantmaking process, circumventing the onerous contracting and procurement processes to receive government funding. In the eyes of corrections, community partners play a vital role in improving reentry outcomes as they are embedded in the communities and have participants' trust.

In 2017, the WAGEES program underwent a sunset review conducted by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, Colorado Office of Policy, Research and Regulatory Reform (COPRRR). In its analysis, COPRRR recognized the power of lived experience guiding this work and the flexibility of a grant program administered by a community-facing intermediary free from the bureaucratic challenges of a traditional grant program.³⁹ COPRRR also recognized the funding disparity between systems stakeholders and the community, writing:

The Division [of Adult Parole], which is charged with implementing HB 1355's other re-entry initiatives, has 419 employees and an annual budget of over \$52 million. Compared with this, the WAGEES program, with its \$1.7 million annual allocation, seems quite small indeed.

What can WAGEES do that the Department's other re-entry initiatives cannot?⁴⁰

WAGEES was extended until 2023 and is currently undergoing a sunset review. COPRRR's recommendation is to extend WAGEES for nine years, until 2032.

Outcomes and Impact

Since its inception in FY 2014, WAGEES served thousands of people returning to communities from incarceration. The recidivism rate for active WAGEES participants is less than 5 percent and has been low as 2.5 percent, and the recidivism rate reductions were statistically significant.⁴¹ The program continues to exceed performance targets (see table 2). In addition, WAGEES participants recidivate at a lower rate than formerly incarcerated people who do not enter the program and people who do recidivate are in the community longer than people who do not participate in WAGEES.⁴²

In addition to effecting programmatic outcomes and personal changes in WAGEES participants, community partners also contribute to reshaping the local community ecosystem. For example, starting with a \$3,000 budget and operating out of his car, Hassan Latif, the formerly incarcerated former executive director of Second Chance Center, built the organization from the ground up. Second Chance Center serves the reentry population in Aurora, next to Denver, providing an array of services, including job placement and mentoring. The \$200,000 WAGEES grant, the first substantial grant for the organization, propelled the organization to grow into a \$6.5 million organization, with LCCL helping it develop its operational capacity. The WAGEES grant continues to be a sustainable funding source and investment that yields greater returns than low recidivism rates. In 2020, Second Chance Center opened Providence

at the Heights (PATH), a 50-unit permanent supportive housing complex in Aurora developed by the organization and funded by low-income housing tax credits and private capital. Nearly 20 percent of its initial residents are current or former clients of Second Chance Center.

Life-Line Colorado is another organization reshaping the ecosystem and infrastructure of the community. Leo Alirez, a system-impacted person, leads Life-Line. The organization offers reentry and violence prevention programming in Denver. Life-Line became an independent nonprofit in 2018, receiving its first grant from LCCL for \$250,000 and employing three staff. Now, the organizational budget is \$3.8 million, and it employs 31 staff. Over the years, Life-Line's reputation grew, opening opportunities for more significant impact.

In 2022, the city of Denver purchased a vacant Police Athletic League building with federal community development block grant funds, and the Denver City Council approved a 5-year, non-financial contract for the Life-Line to operate a Youth Empowerment Center in its vacancy.⁴³ This is the first center of its kind in Denver, a vision of Denver's Youth Violence Prevention Action Table to provide a safe space for young people in Denver to access services, training, and to prevent youth violence.⁴⁴

Future of Reinvestment Ecosystems in Colorado

Since 2015, nearly \$80 million flowed to community partners from Colorado for four grant programs focused on a range of community issues, including crime prevention, harm reduction, and reentry.⁴⁵ The past several years of implementation have provided lessons for communities, governments, nonprofits, and people impacted by the criminal justice system. A significant learning and takeaway from these efforts make a case for continued investments into communities: empowering communities and people who are the most proximate to the problems that need to be addressed will yield transformative results.⁴⁰

Michigan: Peer-led Reentry Developing Human Capital

Michigan's Reentry Landscape

Michigan has a rich history of criminal justice system and reentry reforms and, in recent years, decreased its prison population to levels seen in the early 1990s and reduced its recidivism rate to 23 percent, fourth best in the nation.⁴⁶ In response to a growing prison population and high recidivism rates, Michigan launched the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative (MPRI) in 2004. The program uplifted the necessity of maintaining political support by bringing value to the public in its goals and enabling organizational capacity for success.⁴⁷ Before launching, MPRI brought together hundreds of communities and systems stakeholders to develop a shared mission and vision for the initiative.⁴⁸ Local reentry advisory councils and steering teams supported MPRI's implementation, helping build public support for the project and providing oversight and coordination with local communities.⁴⁹ The program was operating in 18 regional sites, serving nearly 12,000 people in reentry.⁵⁰ In its early stages of implementation, MPRI decreased recidivism rates by 25 percent.⁵¹ Despite its success in reducing recidivism and saving millions of dollars, MPRI underwent administrative changes and budget cuts in 2013.⁵² Reentry programming in Michigan transformed into what is now "Offender Success," an evolved version of MPRI without the internal culture change and community collaboration components that were central to its success.

Recently, communities in Michigan considered ways to further improve outcomes for people exiting Michigan's prisons and meet their needs. A diverse group of stakeholders, including formerly incarcerated people, explored previous models of serving the reentry population that emphasized community-led and community-inspired designs. Nation Outside, a grassroots organization founded by formerly incarcerated people, led efforts to

design a program that changes not only how reentry programming is funded but how the challenges of reentry are viewed. This paradigm-shifting effort, the Trauma-Informed Peer Led Reentry Initiative, shows promise in transforming individual lives and their communities.

Trauma-Informed Peer Led Reentry⁵³

Beginning in 2021, formerly incarcerated people and community stakeholders convened to develop a model for peer mentoring services in Michigan for Nation Outside. One of the many impetuses behind its creation was to address the “collective carceral impact” of incarceration, the enduring effect of systemic barriers that hinder a formerly incarcerated person’s ability to live a healthy life and achieve stability for their family. This term was coined by Ashley Goldon, the executive director of Nation Outside. These systemic barriers are detrimental to the health of formerly incarcerated individuals and alternatives to traditional criminal justice responses (and funding mechanisms) were embedded in the program’s framework.

Trauma-Informed Peer Led Reentry (TIPLR) is a program that trains formerly incarcerated people as peer reentry specialists to help other formerly incarcerated people navigate the challenges of reentry and improve their health and wellness outcomes. The 14-day evidence-informed Reentry Peer Model Training and Certification Program includes paid training on trauma-informed care, restorative justice, ethics and values, career development, motivational interviewing, and case management. The service delivery model tracks individual outcomes within 30 days, between 60 and 180 days, and between 6 months and 12 months. Objectives include creating a career pathway for formerly incarcerated people in the health and wellness fields, reducing recidivism and improving wellness outcomes, reducing costs to the public, and shifting funding (and funding norms) in reentry. The TIPLR pilot targets 114 people with 11 staff,

with an annual cost of \$1,800 per client. Preventing 20 percent of pilot participants from recidivating would result in savings of \$2 million. The long-term sustainability plan is to establish peer reentry support as an allowable expense under Medicaid coverage.

The advantages of establishing this model are underscored by formerly incarcerated people and community stakeholders. Formerly incarcerated people can act as mentors for others with the same lived experience, and TIPLR infuses those lived experiences to establish trusting relationships. The peer support specialists are able to emulate a model of successful reentry that provides a model for hope and achievable success. TIPLR also fills a gap in reentry resources, leveraging health care resources to support formerly incarcerated people. This concept highlights several important aspects of TIPLR: if Nation Outside succeeds in adding post-incarceration reentry as qualifiers for Medicaid coverage, the field of peer-led reentry support will have access to billions of dollars in health care funds, eclipsing the resources currently available for reentry programming. Shifting the way reentry is funded has broader implications: it can change the way entities and stakeholders outside of the criminal justice system (e.g., housing sector, health care) view formerly incarcerated people. A shift in funding signals an acknowledgment that the challenges of reentry are, in fact, community and societal challenges that face a particular population, and these challenges are best addressed by the experts in that matter. As other entities take on the responsibility of supporting formerly incarcerated people (for their housing needs, their health care needs), resources and power will shift to communities, holding criminal justice systems accountable to community outcomes. Ultimately, the reach of mass incarceration into neighborhoods and communities begins to dissipate.

Michigan's Outlook

Nation Outside is beginning its first training in cohort in 2023 while actively engaged in discussions with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to change current Medicaid regulations. Conversations are promising and Nation Outside and its partners are positioned to make this vision a reality. Through these efforts, Nation Outside is changing the traditional model of reentry support

and is establishing formerly incarcerated leaders as ambassadors of community change. Its efforts are recognized by a diverse group of stakeholders, including law enforcement. For example, some Nation Outside members are current deputies of the Genesee County Sheriff's Office. With these efforts, the untapped value and potential of formerly incarcerated people are realized, and the promise of community transformation begins.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS



The following recommendations—some currently underway—can help reorient the thinking of how public investments can help build thriving ecosystems that support people leaving incarceration and the essential role of national stakeholders in creating those conditions. There is an opportunity for coordination as some elements needed to create reentry ecosystems are present across different initiatives.

- **Elevate the profile of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted people.** Funding, featuring, and supporting people with lived experience in the criminal justice system develop the leadership capacity of formerly incarcerated people and their communities, and their lived experience can catalyze innovation and shape policy efforts. Recent efforts by the Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, highlight ways federal agencies can support formerly incarcerated people's leadership. For example, organizations led by system-impacted people, such as the Georgia Coalition for Higher Education in Prison and Operation Restoration in Louisiana, received Second Chance Act funding through BJA. BJA's Visiting Fellow Program is another funding program that offers opportunities for people with lived experience to advance national policy priorities.
- **Explore dedicated and sustainable federal funding streams for community-led public safety initiatives and reentry.** Second Chance Act funding supports reentry efforts by investing in innovation, piloting, and incubating efforts nationwide. However, additional resources are needed to support reentry efforts nationally. Competitive funding opportunities are sizable but are limited to 36 months. In 2022, President Biden's Safer America Plan included an opportunity to create a sustainable funding stream to support public safety efforts.⁵⁴ Accelerating Justice System Reform is a grant program that called for \$15 billion over 10 years to support various efforts in states and localities, including resources to expand services for basic needs and supportive services. Funding programs such as the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program (Byrne JAG) also offer lessons and are models to consider. Byrne JAG, a formula grant program (funding calculations for state and local governments use population data and violent crime statistics), has awarded over \$7.6 billion through over 24,000 awards since FY 2005.⁵⁵ There are multiple allowable uses—including reentry programming—and areas of emphasis for Byrne JAG for various stakeholders in the criminal justice system.⁵⁶ In 2018, law enforcement received 48 percent of the \$109 million

reported; only 10 percent supported corrections, community corrections, and reentry.⁵⁷

- **Leverage public–private partnerships for activities and tactics needed to create reentry ecosystems.** Certain state and local reforms, such as budget advocacy and policy change, may require partnerships with philanthropy for implementation. The Justice Reinvestment Initiative is one example of a public–private partnership to improve public safety. Private entities such as the Pew Charitable Trusts and, more recently, Arnold Ventures, collaborated with BJA to help over 30 states decrease correctional populations and shutter prisons.
- **Support technical assistance for capacity building.** Community-based organizations need support to strengthen their operations (e.g., data collection, grant writing, reporting).

The strength of these operations influences the efficacy of programming and creates pathways for sustainability, yet smaller organizations rooted in communities need more capacity for critical activities such as navigating onerous grant application processes and the requirements of government agencies. DOJ is cognizant of these challenges and is working to address this issue. Through the Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative, intermediaries help community-based, grassroots organizations build their capacity to access federal resources. In addition, the DOJ Fiscal Year 2023 Program Plan includes a solicitation for the Second Chance Act Community-based Reentry Incubator Initiative.⁵⁸ The program will fund an intermediary to award microgrants to organizations. The intermediary will play an active role in strengthening the operational capacity of micro-grant recipients.

CONCLUSION



Most people in prison eventually “all come back,” and people return, not to distant locations sequestered from society, but to our communities. These marginalized communities feel the brunt of mass incarceration and are under-resourced to address the challenges of reentry. No panaceas or absolute models exist to solve all the reentry issues facing our communities; these challenges require coordinated efforts with multi-pronged

solutions. Communities that formerly incarcerated people return to after incarceration are central to these solutions, and their efforts to improve their neighborhoods and public safety require investment. These investments yield greater returns than individual change: they create lasting transformation and a pathway toward thriving ecosystems with improved public safety and well-being for all.

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