

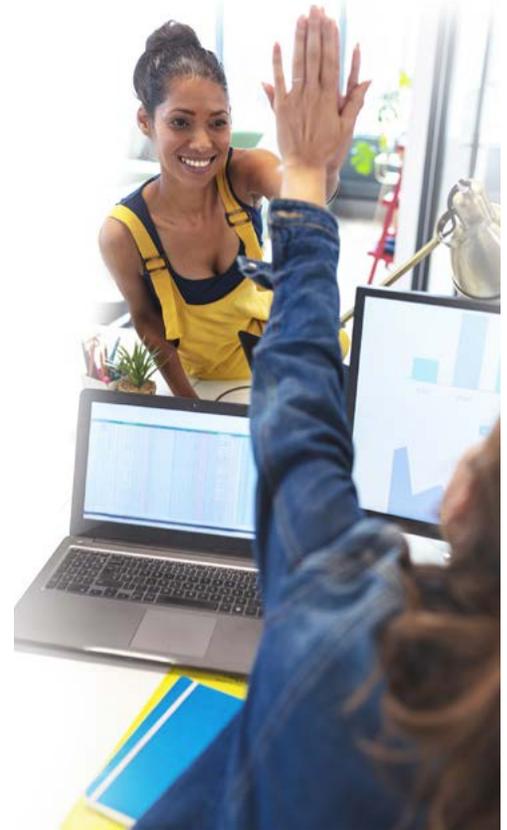
### POLICY BRIEF:

## REDUCING EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

People returning from incarceration (i.e. returning citizens) face multiple barriers to finding and retaining employment. This can include a persistent stigma associated with having a criminal record when applying for jobs. Ensuring fundamental needs are met first, such as stable housing, reliable transportation, and obtaining proper identification documents required for employment, can further delay a person's ability to find a job post-release. In addition, the need for training to obtain the skills and credentials necessary for employment is an obstacle for many. A study of individuals incarcerated at federal and state prisons found that only 15% of incarcerated individuals had some form of postsecondary degree or certificate compared to 45% of the general public.<sup>i</sup> Despite these challenges, the successful reintegration of returning citizens into the workforce is critical to reducing recidivism rates, fostering economic opportunity, and reducing worker shortages.

Workforce development programs that provide returning citizens (pre- and post-release) with career services, training, and robust wraparound and supportive services can help ease barriers to employment. One study from RAND found that incarcerated individuals participating in correctional education programs were 43% less likely to recidivate than those who did not. Individuals who participated in correctional education programs were also 13% more likely to obtain employment post-release; this was even higher (28%) for individuals participating in vocational training specifically.<sup>ii</sup>

Partner4Work has implemented several workforce development programs in Allegheny County serving returning citizens both pre- and post-release, including Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programming through PA CareerLink®, and US Department of Labor (DOL) and US Department of Justice grant-funded programs at the Allegheny County Jail. As an example, more than 1,000 individuals served by the WIOA Adult program between program years 2018 through 2022 identified as returning citizens, accounting for 21% of the total population served. Among the returning citizens who exited the program, 67% obtained employment within the first six months after leaving the program<sup>1</sup>.



<sup>1</sup>Based on Allegheny County/Pittsburgh WIOA Adult Program performance reports. Total served data is based on participants served between 07/01/2018 - 06/30/2023. Employment data is based on participants who exited the program between 07/01/2017 - 06/30/2022.

Additionally, more than half (53%) of participants in the DOL-funded Pathway Home program, which serves participants prior to and following release from the Allegheny County Jail have obtained jobs to date. To provide context, data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics for a cohort of formerly incarcerated individuals showed a jobless rate (i.e. not employed) between 62% and 65% during the first four years following release.<sup>iii</sup>

While factors influencing successful employment outcomes for returning citizens are wide-ranging and complex, the following are examples of policies and initiatives that should be considered to help reduce barriers to employment for these individuals:

- **INCREASING FUNDING FOR WIOA TITLE I ADULT, DISLOCATED WORKER, AND YOUTH PROGRAMS:**

WIOA establishes the American Job Center Network, the nation's federally funded workforce development system, referred to as PA CareerLink® in Pennsylvania. This system can be leveraged to deliver a combination of career, training, supportive, and follow-up services to returning citizens, helping to address potential barriers to employment. WIOA Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth programs have been underfunded, below federally authorized levels since the law's passage in 2014. Congress should fully fund WIOA at authorized levels.

- **CODIFYING THE REENTRY EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES (REO) PROGRAM INTO LAW:**

The REO program, initially authorized as Research and Evaluation under WIOA, was established to test successful strategies and program models for improving workforce outcomes for justice-involved youth and young adults and adults who were formerly incarcerated. As Congress considers the reauthorization of WIOA, it should fully codify Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) as a permanent program in the reauthorized law. This is a policy change that was included in *A Stronger Workforce for America Act* (H.R. 6655), which passed the U.S. House of Representatives on April 9, 2024.<sup>iv</sup>

- **PROMOTING AND EDUCATING EMPLOYERS ON FAIR CHANCE HIRING PRACTICES:**

Fair chance hiring practices can help employers avoid unfairly or unnecessarily excluding candidates from hiring consideration due to having a criminal record. Fair chance hiring practices may include removing stigmatizing language from job postings (e.g., "felon"), educating human resources staff on how to properly interpret criminal records, considering applicant qualifications first and delaying criminal background checks until a conditional offer of employment has occurred, and limiting the types of criminal records that disqualify a candidate to only those directly related to the position. These practices benefit returning citizens and other justice-impacted individuals by opening up opportunities for employment. Employers also benefit from expanded access to qualified, dependable talent. For example, research has shown lower turnover rates among employees who are returning citizens compared to the general employee population.<sup>v</sup>

- **HELPING RETURNING CITIZENS OBTAIN IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS REQUIRED FOR EMPLOYMENT:**

Lacking identification documents, such as a driver's license, Social Security card, or birth certificate, can create a major obstacle for returning citizens looking for employment. Such documents can become lost or expired while an individual is incarcerated. Further, the financial costs associated with regaining these documents can present a challenge. Programs that help individuals obtain these identification documents in advance of their release should be promoted and supported. At the state and local levels, partnerships between correctional facilities and PennDOT should be expanded throughout the Commonwealth to help individuals obtain IDs prior to release.<sup>vi</sup> Legislation that would require state agencies to assist returning citizens with obtaining necessary identification documents prior to release should also be considered.<sup>vii</sup>

- **INCREASING EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION IN INCENTIVE PROGRAMS FOR HIRING RETURNING CITIZENS:**

Federal programs such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) and Federal Bonding Program can provide financial incentives and protections against potential losses when hiring from target populations, including returning citizens. WOTC rewards employers through federal tax credits for hiring individuals from target groups. The Federal Bonding Program provides protections against potential financial or property losses when hiring a person from a targeted group.

- **PROMOTING RECORD SEALING, EXPUNGEMENT, AND PARDONING FOR RETURNING CITIZENS:**

The stigma associated with having a criminal record can perpetually punish an individual long after they have returned from incarceration, creating a substantial obstacle to employment and economic opportunity. Clean slate legislation in Pennsylvania enables individuals convicted of certain non-violent offenses and individuals charged but not convicted to have their records sealed or expunged after a period of time.<sup>viii</sup> In addition, Pennsylvania also has established a process in which individuals convicted of certain offenses, which aren't eligible

for record sealing, can be pardoned. Research has shown the positive effect that record sealing and expungement can have on employment outcomes. One such study from Michigan found after sealing their criminal records, individuals saw a 23% increase in their average quarterly wages and a 13% increase in the likelihood of being employed.<sup>ix</sup> Record sealing, expungement, and pardoning opportunities should continue to be promoted across Pennsylvania through outreach and education initiatives to ensure returning citizens who qualify for and would benefit are able to take advantage of these programs.

- **INCREASING RETURNING CITIZENS' ACCESS TO STABLE HOUSING FOLLOWING RELEASE:**

For people to be successful in employment, basic needs such as stable housing must be met first. Returning citizens often experience housing instability and homelessness following release from incarceration. A study from the Prison Policy Initiative estimated that formerly incarcerated people were nearly 10 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population.<sup>x</sup> Immediate financial costs of rent and security deposits can be obstacles to obtaining housing. Moreover, having a criminal record increases the risk of a person's rental application being denied by landlords during the tenant screening process. An individual's criminal record can also exclude them from participating in publicly-funded housing programs due to certain program restrictions. Policies that can improve returning citizens' access to housing include: increased public investment in transitional housing programs that provide a combination of both housing and wraparound services to individuals post-release; fair chance housing policy that limits the degree to which landlords can use criminal records as reasoning for denying housing to individuals; and updates to public housing policy that eases the degree (e.g. criminal record lookback periods) to which criminal records impact an individual's eligibility for housing vouchers and other support.



Policies that reduce barriers and increase employment opportunities for returning citizens should continue to be promoted at the federal, state, and local levels. Such policies not only help to improve economic outcomes for people returning from incarceration, but they also support employers and industries which are able to tap into an often neglected pool of talent to grow their workforces, benefiting communities and regional economies overall.

### ENDNOTES

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- ii. Davis, Lois M., Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013. Retrieved from [[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html)]([https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html))
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- vii. See Pennsylvania House Bill (HB 1601) - *An Act amending Title 61 (Prisons and Parole) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes, establishing the Identification Upon Reentry Program*.
- viii. See Pennsylvania Act 56 of 2018.
- ix. Prescott, J.J. and Starr, Sonja B. Expungement of Criminal Convictions: An Empirical Study (March 16, 2019). Harvard Law Review, Vol. 133, No. 8, pp. 2460-555 (June 2020). Available at SSRN: [<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3353620>](<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3353620>) or [<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3353620>](<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3353620>)
- x. Couloute, Lucius. 2018. "Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among Formerly Incarcerated People." Prison Policy Initiative. August 2018. Retrieved from [<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>](<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>)