Decarceration Fellowship:

Cohort 1 Final Evaluation Report

August 29, 2025

Source: Live Free Illinois

Executive Summary

The Decarceration Fellowship, a program piloted by Live Free Illinois (LFI) in late 2023 and the first half of 2024, is an innovative approach to re-entry that aims to complement and amplify traditional re-entry support with a leadership fellowship anchored in community organizing and movement building. Compared to other re-entry programs, the Decarceration Fellowship intends to improve outcomes for recently returned citizens by introducing them to principles of organizing and engaging them in leadership development, including through connection with mentors with lived experience of incarceration who work in the criminal justice reform space. Ultimately, through its curriculum and support networks, the Fellowship aims to: 1) help participants navigate the most vulnerable stages of re-entry and 2) develop them into community organizing leaders that drive criminal justice and policy reforms that improve conditions for communities of formerly incarcerated people in Illinois and beyond. To date, LFI has graduated its first cohort of Decarceration Fellows and is currently implementing its second cohort and expanding with an inaugural cohort in East St. Louis.

As part of the pilot implementation of the Decarceration Fellowship, the Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science (CORNERS) at Northwestern University has partnered with LFI to evaluate the impact of the first cohort of the Fellowship on individual Fellows, their communities, and the broader policy landscape within which they work. To evaluate the Fellowship's progress against its goals, the research team engaged with program participants and stakeholders through interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations of program activities. Data were gathered between early 2023 – during the planning phase for cohort one – and early 2025 – when cohort one Fellows participated in final, follow-up interviews roughly six months after program completion. This final evaluation report outlines successes and challenges related to program implementation and impact and recommendations for future programming.

Key Findings

Finding 1: Meeting Participants' Basic Needs

Fellowship Success

LFI's **informal networks and the efforts of a well-connected staff member** helped ensure participants with the highest level of need were **successfully referred to services through informal partnerships** with nonprofit organizations providing re-entry services.

Fellowship Challenge

Re-entry needs and structural barriers (e.g., parole restrictions) got in the way of full participation for Fellows with the highest level of need for re-entry services.

Finding 2: Relationships & Network Building

Fellowship Success

Fellows cite **networks and network building as a key benefit** of the Fellowship, and the exposure they gained to formerly incarcerated leaders allowed them to **build the skills and confidence to network** while also imagining themselves as future leaders.

Fellowship Challenge

Without a **formal mentorship componen**t in the Fellowship, relationships between Fellows and formerly incarcerated leaders were **ad hoc and lacked the necessary structure to ensure follow-through** from all parties.

Finding 3: Civic Engagement

Fellowship Success

After their participation in the Fellowship, alumni were **more engaged in their communities** and **knew more about public policy** and civic engagement opportunities.

Fellowship Challenge

Structural re-entry barriers limited the extent to which Fellows could civically engage in their communities and transition to professional organizing roles after graduating the Fellowship.

Program Recommendations

Drawn from analyses and findings above, research recommendations intend to inform continued programming and improve outcomes for future Fellows. Recommendations include:

Recommendation 1:

To address re-entry challenge in future cohorts, LFI should incorporate basic needs resource provision early into programming to ensure all participants can fully engage in the Fellowship. For example, the Fellowship could hire a full-time case manager to help connect Fellows to services through community-based organizations providing re-entry services and communicate directly with parole officers and other key stakeholders in Fellows' re-entry process. Ultimately setting up adequate staffing structures to provide personalized, intensive re-entry supports would ensure future Fellows can fully participate in programming without risking probation or parole violations.

Recommendation 2:

Full implementation of the Fellowship should include a well-structured mentorship component that ensures full follow-through, both on the part of leaders and on the part of Fellows themselves, so that Fellows feel the full benefit of the network building provided through LFI. Formalized mentorship relationships, such as setting up one-on-one matches between Fellows and a pool of self-identified mentors, would create structures of accountability between mentors and mentees during and beyond participation in the program.

Recommendation 3:

The limited impact on civic engagement among some Fellows from the first cohort highlights the need for future iterations of the Fellowship to implement a clearly defined curriculum aligned with the program's goals. By establishing a theory of change early in the program design and developing a curriculum clearly tied to the Fellowship's intended outcomes, LFI can improve its civic education, provide clearer applications of organizing skills, and develop established pathways for alumni to engage in community organizing and policy advocacy.

Introduction

The Decarceration Fellowship, a program piloted by Live Free Illinois (LFI) in late 2023 and the first half of 2024, is an innovative approach to re-entry that aims to complement and amplify traditional re-entry support with a leadership fellowship anchored in community organizing and movement building. Compared to other re-entry programs, the Decarceration Fellowship intends to improve outcomes for recently returned citizens by introducing them to principles of organizing and engaging them in leadership development, including through connection with mentors with lived experience of incarceration who work in the criminal justice reform space. The Fellowship recognizes its participants as subject matter experts who offer valuable insights drawn from their lived experience with the justice system, especially in shaping criminal justice reform through civic engagement and advocacy. LFI's program theory holds that providing recently returning citizens with an intensive, highly structured, and paid leadership and community organizing training curriculum within the critical first months of release will help program participants achieve greater health, well-being, and improve re-entry outcomes. In doing so, the program aims to grow participants into community leaders who mobilize their communities and influence justice reform policy by leveraging their voices and lived experiences. Finally, the Fellowship strives to improve participants' long-term outcomes by connecting them to mentors and networks of support involved in public policy and criminal justice reform. This includes making referrals to resources and facilitating connections to leaders in government, politics, and grassroots organizing.

Ultimately, through its curriculum and support networks, the Fellowship aims to: 1) help participants navigate the most vulnerable stages of re-entry and 2) develop them into community organizing leaders that drive criminal justice and policy reforms that improve conditions for communities of formerly incarcerated people in Illinois and beyond.

To achieve these two goals, the Decarceration Fellowship's program model includes two key components:

1. Pre-Entry Programming:

> During the first phase of programming, potential participants engage with program staff while still in Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) custody. According to the program model, LFI staff would recruit currently incarcerated participants within IDOC facilities in the last three months of their sentences. These individuals would participate in three monthly sessions within their respective IDOC facilities before applying to participate in the Fellowship. From this pool of individuals, LFI would then accept 15 men and 15 women, all returning to the South Side of Chicago (where LFI conducts much of its organizing work), to participate in the next phase of the Fellowship upon their return home.

2. Re-Entry Programming:

Upon re-entry, these 30 Fellows would engage in nine monthly leadership development sessions – each consisting of multiple days of programming – with Fellows receiving a $500 monthly stipend. These sessions would a) introduce Fellows to others with lived experience of incarceration, including formerly incarcerated public policy leaders; b) provide introductory content around community organizing; and c) connect Fellows with necessary supports to ease their re-entry experience. Additionally, re-entry programming would be paired with a mentorship component where LFI staff would connect Fellows with formerly incarcerated individuals in public policy – primarily through LFI's Decarceration Advisory Board – who would provide guidance and support as participants transitioned back into their communities. Re-entry Fellowship sessions were originally planned to start and end with a weekend-long retreat for Fellows.

If implemented to fidelity, the Decarceration Fellowship would provide participants with potential pathways to careers in organizing, as well as general professional development and leadership skills to succeed in their chosen industry. The Fellowship's focus on leadership development and civic engagement intended to set participants on a long-term pathway to success. At the same time, short-term re-entry supports (e.g., housing and employment) were not core components of the original program model. Instead of offering these supports directly, LFI intended to refer Fellows to other community-based organizations for these services.

To date, LFI has graduated its first cohort of Decarceration Fellows and is currently implementing its second cohort and expanding with an inaugural cohort in East St. Louis. After graduating its second cohort, LFI plans to continue with a third cohort in the fall of 2025. As noted below, this report focuses on the Decarceration Fellowship's pilot cohort, and additional insight on the implementation of this first cohort is included in the program implementation section below.

Source: Live Free Illinois

CORNERS' Evaluation

As part of this pilot program, the Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science (CORNERS) at Northwestern University has partnered with LFI to evaluate the impact of the first cohort of the Decarceration Fellowship on individual participants, their communities, and the broader policy landscape within which they work. To evaluate the Fellowship's progress against its goals (outlined above), the research team engaged with program participants and stakeholders through interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations of program activities. Specifically, the findings included in this report rely on:

1. Longitudinal Interviews:

The research team conducted interviews with cohort one participants at the beginning of programming (either while still in IDOC custody or at the start of re-entry programming, as discussed below), at the end of the Fellowship, and six months after graduating from the Fellowship. Overall, nine of 13 participants completed all three interviews, and the research team conducted in-depth qualitative analysis of these 27 total interviews to assess change over time of the program's impact on Fellows' civic engagement, social connectedness, network building, employment, basic needs, and experience with programming.

2. Participant Surveys:

In conjunction with interviews, the research team conducted self-report surveys at three intervals with nine participants (27 total surveys) to better understand their re-entry needs and wellbeing over the course of programming.

3. Network Surveys:

As a final component of longitudinal interviews, the research team conducted network surveys using Network Canvas[1] to assess the extent to which Fellows' networks of support changed and grew throughout their participation in the Decarceration Fellowship. Like interviews and surveys above, data in this report include 27 network surveys conducted at three separate intervals with nine Fellowship participants.

4. Ethnographic Observations:

In the 12-18 months that CORNERS followed the Decarceration Fellowship's inaugural cohort, the research team also conducted participant observations at twice monthly Fellowship sessions, semi-regular (e.g., roughly quarterly) LFI events, and biweekly meetings with LFI staff and/or Fellows. These observations were then translated into ethnographic fieldnotes, which were analyzed to better understand the process by which the Fellowship was implemented.

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1 Network Canvas is a "free and open-source software for surveying networks, designed around the needs of both researchers and their participants."

Program Implementation

In early program design sessions, LFI – in partnership with the research team – planned for a program timeline beginning with Fellowship recruitment in IDOC facilities in October 2022, with cohort one Fellows graduating in late summer 2023. However, between the end of 2022 and first half of 2023, staff turnover within LFI meant that the Fellowship's management shifted between three separate LFI staff leads (who all managed the program in addition to other responsibilities). As a result, initial program planning with IDOC did not begin until the first half of 2023. For more information on program timelines, refer to Figure 1 below, which outlines proposed and actual Fellowship implementation timelines.

	2022	2023			2024		
	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Planned	Fellowship Recruitment	Program Kickoff Retreat		Cohort 1 Graduation			
	Cohort 1 Pre-Entry Sessions	Cohort 1 Re-entry Sessions					
				Program Graduation Retreat			
Actual			Fellowship Recruitment		Welcome Home Dinner		
			Fellowship Info Session	Cohort 1 Pre-Entry Sessions	Cohort 1 Re-entry Sessions		
							Cohort 1 Graduation

Figure 1. Planned versus actual implementation timelines.

Under the guidance of two staff members who managed the program on a part-time basis, LFI hosted a virtual information session with IDOC facilities across the state in April 2023. In response to recruitment challenges, LFI expanded their geographic requirements, including those returning home to the West or South Sides of Chicago within a three-month period from program start. Ultimately, LFI hosted their first virtual session – using Webex – with IDOC facilities in July 2023. Across three IDOC locations, eleven individuals participated in this first virtual session, most of whom were leaving IDOC custody in three months or less. Given the challenge of engaging participants at multiple time points during the last months of their incarceration, LFI experienced significant drop-off in participation between virtual pre-entry sessions. In their second virtual session, only two potential program participants joined, each from different facilities. Although one facility did not participate in this second session because of a COVID lockdown, some of this drop off was a direct result of potential participants' earlier release dates, while the remainder may be explained by scheduling challenge or lack of interest.

As potential participants returned home, however, the program experienced further drop off, as LFI did not have access to pre-entry session participants' contact information and instead relied on IDOC re-entry counselors to share contact information for LFI staff in hopes that attendees would reach out after returning home. Even after engaging eleven potential participants in virtual pre-entry sessions, ultimately three people contacted LFI to continue with re-entry programming after returning home.

Early in the process of implementing the Fellowship, LFI experienced a number of organizational challenges – primarily in the form of staff turnover, with the Fellowship coordinator position changing hands multiple times in the first few months of program planning – many of which delayed program implementation and made maintaining fidelity to the program model difficult. This turnover also impacted curriculum development, as LFI shifted this work between multiple contractors hired for it. Ultimately, nearly a year and a half into program planning and a few months into program implementation – as participants were headed home and soon to engage in re-entry programming – the program experienced dramatic participant drop off, was managed by a new team of part time staff, and did not have a guiding curriculum.

However, the decision to hire a program co-lead from their network of LFI Leaders between participants' initial release from IDOC custody in August 2023 and the Fellowship's inaugural Welcome Home dinner hosted in October 2023 benefited the Fellowship as LFI pivoted to respond to these challenges. This program lead, referred to throughout this report under the pseudonym Samuel, entered the role with his own lived experience of incarceration and was well-connected in communities of formerly incarcerated people in Chicago. Relying on his own personal network and the networks provided through LFI – for example, institutional relationships with staff at transitional housing organizations – Samuel and his co-lead successfully recruited an additional 11 participants into the Decarceration Fellowship's inaugural cohort between August and October of 2023. By the time the Fellowship invited participants to their Welcome Home dinner in October 2023, the program had grown from a cohort of three to a cohort of 13, composed of formerly incarcerated individuals who had been home for less than a year. By the time re-entry sessions began in October 2023 (the day after the Welcome Home dinner), the Fellowship was made up of two women and eleven men, all of whom had been home from their most recent incarceration for less than a year. A few months into programming, one more Fellow joined the cohort, bringing the total participant count to 14. More information on participant demographics is included in Table 1.

Demographic Measure	Categories	Number of Participants
Race	Black/African American	13 (92.30%)
	Non-Black	1 (7.69%)
Gender	Men	12 (84.61%)
	Women	2 (15.35%)
Age	20-29	1 (7.69%)
	30-39	3 (23.07%)
	40-49	2 (15.38%)
	50+	7 (53.84%)
Community of Origin	Chicago (West Side)	4 (30.76%)
	Chicago (South Side)	9 (69.23%)
Community of Release	Chicago (West Side)	4 (30.76%)
	Chicago (South Side)	9 (69.23%)

Table 1. Cohort one participant demographics

Between October 2023 and May 2024, Fellowship sessions were held two days a month on a Friday and Saturday, except for one required three-day organizing training hosted by LFI in November 2023. During this extended organizing training, Fellows learned about the key components of political organizing, including one-on-ones,[2] power analyses,[3] and event planning. For Fellows who were unable to attend all three days of the November organizing training sessions, LFI distributed partial stipends for partial participation. Although cohort one of the Fellowship did not begin with a finalized curriculum, program staff – particularly Samuel – leveraged their network of formerly incarcerated organizers, leaders, and government workers to speak with Fellows, largely to tell their own stories and talk to Fellows about their path to success. Some of these speakers brought tangible resources – including referrals for programming and opportunities for jobs, therapy, or housing – to Fellowship sessions, but generally these introductions were intended to demonstrate the potential of formerly incarcerated people and build Fellows' networks of future support. Additionally, over the course of these eight months of programming, the Fellowship experienced one last major staff transition, as its longer-term co-lead shifted off the project to a different role within LFI, while Samuel took over as primary program lead.

Ultimately, the Fellowship's pilot cohort graduated in May 2024. At the end of the program, 13 Fellows – 12 men and one woman – remained engaged, and 12 participated in the graduation ceremony.[4]

Program Component	Planned Implementation	Actual Implementation
Cohort 1 Size	30 Fellows	15 Fellows
Cohort 1 Demographics	15 men, 15 women All from the South Side of Chicago	13 men, 2 women All from the South or West Sides of Chicago
Pre-Entry Timeline[5]	October 2022 – Dec 2022	July 2023 – September 2023
Re-Entry Timeline[6]	Dec 2022 – August 2023	October 2023 – June 2024
Mentorship	Mentors recruited from LFI's Decarceration Advisory Board, formally connected 1:1 with Fellows	Mentors largely drawn from Fellowship speakers, relationships informal and motivated by Fellows' personal and professional interests
Re-Entry Service Provision	Referrals to re-entry organizations	Referrals to re-entry organizations
Monthly Stipend	$500	$500

Table 2. Planned versus implemented program components.

After completing the Fellowship, alumni maintained relationships with one another and with program staff largely through a group thread where LFI program staff shared resources and conducted regular check-ins with alumni. These relationships have since continued and are discussed in further detail below.

The following sections outline key findings from CORNERS' evaluation of the implementation of the Decarceration Fellowship's inaugural cohort, including recommendations for future programming.

2 Per Indivisible, a one-on-one is an important organizing tool that involves an "intentional organizing meeting between two people to get to know one another, check in on progress on a project, escalate a volunteer to leadership, and more."

3 Per The Commons Social Change Library, a power analysis "is a tool that helps [community organizers] begin to understand where power currently sits within a community."

4 One was reincarcerated for an old charge, one moved out of state, and one got a job early into programming that interfered with their ability to participate.

5 "Pre-Entry" refers to the period of time in which potential Fellows engage with LFI programming before headed home from IDOC custody (generally, about three months).

6 "Re-Entry" refers to the period of time in which Fellows engaged in programming after returning home from IDOC custody (generally, about nine months).

Research Finding 1:
Meeting Participants' Basic Needs

Fellowship Success:

LFI's informal networks and the efforts of a well-connected staff member helped ensure participants with the highest level of need were successfully referred to services through informal partnerships with nonprofit organizations providing re-entry services.

During the first year after exiting carceral systems, individuals often need external social, financial, and basic needs support to succeed and avoid reincarceration.[7] In particular, returning citizens often struggle to find stable housing, employment, and transportation after returning home,[8] particularly in situations where social support (e.g., family and loved ones) is not available.[9] For Decarceration Fellows, some of whom had distanced themselves from loved ones or lost loved ones to disease or old age while incarcerated, re-entry support remained a critical need during their time in the Fellowship. Although original program planning did not include formalized referral systems or networks of support to meet Fellows' re-entry needs (discussed in further detail below), the program did often successfully meet the needs of returning citizens through three primary means:

1. Disbursement of a modest monthly program stipend, which provided direct financial support to Fellows;

2. Connection to basic needs through a clothing shopping trip and provision of computers soon after Fellows returned home; and

3. Informal referrals for services at re-entry nonprofits, through staff members' own personal and professional networks.

Program Stipends

As part of its program model, the Decarceration Fellowship provided a $500 monthly stipend to participants during their involvement in nine months of re-entry programming. In interviews, Fellows shared their initial surprise and excitement upon learning about the stipend before and early into their program participation. For some, the stipend provided an initial motivation and incentive to participate. One Fellow, when reflecting on what made him want to join the Fellowship, noted that "at first it was the money, because I just came home. No job, no type of resources, and I'm just thinking…I go talk to somebody for $500." Although, by the end of his participation, the Fellowship "stopped being about the money" and "started being more about the work" for this Fellow. The program's stipend was an important support as he first transitioned out of incarceration and engaged with the Fellowship.

7 La Vigne, N., Davies, E., Palmer, T., & Halberstadt, R. Release planning for successful reentry: A guide for corrections, service providers, and community groups. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2008. https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/release-planning-successful-reentry-guide-corrections-service

8 Binswanger, I. A., Nowels, C., Corsi, K. F., Long, J., Booth, R. E., Kutner, J., & Steiner, J. F. "'From the prison door right to the sidewalk, everything went downhill,' A qualitative study of the health experiences of recently released inmates." International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 34(2011): 249–255. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlp.2011.07.002

9 Western, B., Braga, A. A., Davis, J., & Sirois, C. "Stress and Hardship After Prison." American Journal of Sociology, 120 (2015): 1512–1547. https://doi.org/10.1086/681301

For another Fellow, who had been home for a few months and was struggling to find work, "the stipend [came] in handy." In yet another case, a Fellow reflected in his follow-up interview that LFI "gave us monthly stipends that was incredibly more than any other organization I've ever been involved in." As Fellows were returning home, and particularly as they worked to find jobs that would provide longer-term financial stability, these stipends served as an important material support in their re-entry process.

Importantly, while participants often spoke about stipends positively – noting that they were grateful for the financial support and surprised to learn that they would receive payment for just showing up – others noted that the stipends themselves were not large enough to fully financially support them. This limitation, and its relationship with Fellows' employment, is discussed in further detail in the "Program Challenges" portion of this section.

Basic Needs Shopping Trip

Early in the program, LFI took Fellows on a shopping trip for professional clothing and provided computers (along with some technology support), which Fellows reflected positively on, with one Fellow sharing that "they have been above and beyond when I first started. They took me shopping and bought me gorgeous clothes and computer and stuff that I wasn't even [thinking] about buying. Yeah, they've been real good in the resources part." Another shared his optimism about the follow-through LFI showed in providing these resources, saying "they actually come through, give us clothes, give us computers."

For some Fellows, these resources, which were intended to prepare Fellows for engagement in organizing spaces – for example, purchasing suits that could be worn in meetings with legislators – demonstrated LFI's recognition of Fellows' professional development needs and commitment to their future success. In ethnographic observations at Fellowship events, the research team often heard from Fellows that the professional wear provided through LFI was some of the first that participants had ever owned. These shopping trips set Fellows up for future meetings with legislators (discussed in more detail in finding three), as well as providing clothing for job interviews and networking events, including those outside of the Fellowship.

While these purchases helped meet some immediate needs of returning citizens, they did not address the basic needs supports related to housing, employment, or sustainable financial security (beyond the $500 monthly stipend) necessary to support a successful re-entry. Many of these needs were met through informal systems of referrals managed by LFI staff.

"They have been above and beyond when I first started. They took me shopping and bought me gorgeous clothes and computer and stuff that I wasn't even [thinking] about buying. Yeah, they've been real good in the resources part."

Informal Service Referrals

Even without traditional re-entry supports built into the program design of the Decarceration Fellowship (as discussed above), individual staff members built much of the structure for re-entry support through existing relationships with outside organizations. Although earlier program administrators shared an interest in building out more formalized systems of re-entry support (e.g., memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with re-entry service providers), staff turnover meant that many of these desired structures did not exist by the time cohort one Fellows were attending in-person Fellowship sessions in October 2023. However, around the same time that Fellows participated in their first re-entry sessions in the fall of 2023, LFI hired and onboarded Samuel – who was selected from their own network of LFI leaders – to contribute to the implementation of the Fellowship and connect Fellows with re-entry resources as needed.

Throughout the first cohort of the Fellowship, Samuel engaged leaders and re-entry service providers in Fellowship sessions, first as mental health providers and eventually as educators and speakers who provided access to programming for Fellows in need of employment and housing. Through these networks, four cohort one Fellows received paid workforce development opportunities, coupled with supportive housing while actively engaged in the Fellowship. In interviews, multiple Fellows shared that, even up to six months after programming, they continued to participate in a group chat where Samuel shared information on re-entry resources, including opportunities for paid work, housing, and continued leadership development.

For example, after graduating from the Fellowship, participants continued to benefit from Samuel's networks of support, with one Fellow noting that "[Live Free staff] resource us; it's a lot. They give it to us all the time... Anytime [the program administrator] gets [a resource] he send it" in the cohort one group chat and tells us to "sign up, sign up." Through Samuel, Fellows received access to informal referrals for services (e.g., meeting re-entry program staff through Fellowship sessions, as discussed later) and expressed gratitude for the efforts of individual staff members as they accessed LFI facilitated re-entry resources. For Fellows who struggled to transition after incarceration, Samuel's networks of support created an invaluable resource through which they could access basic needs services and develop a baseline level of financial and housing security.

The tangible ways in which LFI met the re-entry needs of Fellows – through stipends, purchasing of professional clothing and computers, and informal referrals for services – represented a welcome change in how many Fellows interacted with re-entry service providers. Before their involvement in LFI, Fellows reported feeling skeptical of re-entry nonprofits and having been let down by organizations that intended to support them in their re-entry process. According to one Fellow who had tried to receive help from a local re-entry nonprofit, "you go there, you talk to them, you sign the paper, you leave, they get paid for having you sign the paper, you don't really get nothing but maybe a bus pass." Another Fellow reflected on his experience trying to access housing at a community organization for which he received a referral directly from IDOC, noting that "I go all the way to Aurora from Union Station downtown with no money... I get there, and they tell me they don't got no room." These past experiences with re-entry nonprofits often left Fellows feeling disheartened and skeptical of the ability for LFI or other, similar organizations to follow through on their word. One Fellow, when reflecting on his expectations for the Fellowship, noted that "I was expecting to see what the program was about because I done seen plenty of programs that people would get out and they'd go to them, but it really don't be about nothing. So a lot of people be skeptical." For Fellows who had previously been let down by re-entry service providers, the consistency of and follow through with supports provided by LFI, no matter how modest or informal, presented a welcome change.

Fellowship Challenge:

Re-entry needs and structural barriers (e.g., parole restrictions) got in the way of full participation for Fellows with the highest level of need for re-entry services.

In its original Decarceration Fellowship program design, LFI focused primarily on the skill-building and leadership development of Fellows rather than focusing on the provision of basic needs services and re-entry supports through the development of more formalized, standardized systems of re-entry support. By providing paid leadership programming, LFI hoped to make significant progress in developing Fellows into policy organizers and community leaders within the first year of returning home from incarceration. This program model, specifically focused on leadership development and civic engagement, did not include in-depth planning for meeting the re-entry needs of participants, however. Instead, the Fellowship provided more informal systems of support for Fellows as they returned home (as discussed above), coupled with intensive training and exposure to policy organizing that would help them successfully transition into community organizers and leaders immediately following their experiences of incarceration. Ultimately, Fellows' re-entry experiences – namely employment and housing situations – often served as barriers to full participation in the Fellowship, and the lack of full-time case management support within the program limited cohort one Fellows' ability to fully address these issues.

Employment Barriers

Many cohort one Fellows identified employment as a key barrier to successful re-entry, noting that finding "background-friendly" jobs (e.g., those that either didn't run background checks or were accommodating to employees' criminal histories) was particularly difficult. More than one participant reported experiences of entering final interviews – and in some cases even starting work – at jobs, only to find out later that they were ineligible for the job because of their background. In the case of one Fellow, an older charge that he believed was closed prevented him from getting a job at a local events venue: "Why they didn't hire me…I come to find out they had an old case in my background that was never closed. So, I go down there and take care of that, get that expunged…people still ain't hiring me now." In another case, a Fellow started working a job only to lose it a month later because his employer ran a background check after he had already started working.

As Fellows were returning home from incarceration, work and financial stability were top of mind; when asked what he was most concerned about coming home, one Fellow shared in an interview that "I didn't believe the economy would be so hard on just employment, because before I left it wasn't no problem finding a job. I always had a job. I had some type of stability…I expected to come home, get a job right away, and start providing for myself. But that took me a little time." In baseline surveys, five of nine Fellows reported having never held an above-the-table job (e.g., a job not related to "the street"), further challenging their ability to find work as they returned home. Although the $500 monthly stipend was helpful to Fellows, as noted above, the amount of the stipend also generally meant that Fellows were supplementing their income with additional work, which created scheduling conflicts between work shifts and Fellowship sessions.

In some cases, Fellows' full-time jobs prevented them from fully participating in programming, because they were unable to request regular time off to attend twice monthly Fellowship sessions. For one Fellow, who received a partial stipend after missing a Fellowship session for a work shift, "I eventually switched shifts where I could be able to do the program, but I was trying my hardest, but I felt like I had been punished because I had employment." Ultimately, the decision between work and Fellowship sessions was made even harder for this Fellow because "even though the $500 a month, that's not gonna really do anything, that doesn't even pay my rent, so I had to get a job." As Fellows transitioned back into their communities, finding employment – often a challenging process due to their backgrounds – was a key priority in their path to stability.

Housing Barriers

Not only did some Fellows' employment prevent full participation in the Fellowship, precarious or unstable housing situations also complicated program attendance. For two participants, who lived in the same halfway home, staff within the house presented an insurmountable challenge to full participation in the Fellowship. According to one Fellow, "being in that halfway house...they don't really want you to mess with Live Free because they think Live Free is a radical group because Live Free is about people...expunging their records... so they actually told us that we couldn't come to that program." Instead, these Fellows participated in their "leisure time," usually consisting of a six-hour period on a Saturday. They were unable to fully engage with programming and did not attend the full three-day organizing training, for which they received only partial stipends. Ultimately, these Fellows were only able to engage with the Fellowship roughly half as much as other participants – who were often attending sessions on the last Friday and Saturday of each month. This, however, was not an isolated experience for these two Fellows. As noted in survey data included in the appendix of this report, four of nine participants reported in baseline surveys that they were living in halfway houses or other transitional, correctional housing. Another Fellow who also moved into a halfway house after returning home shared his expectation that LFI would provide tangible help with housing after he returned home from incarceration, as well as his disappointment in unfulfilled expectations: "they knew my situation as soon as I exited, but it was 'okay, we're going to do what we can do for you.' I think they spread themselves too thin." Even Fellows not directly impacted by housing issues noted in interviews that this was a primary barrier for others; one participant noted in follow-up interviews that "a lot of Fellows couldn't come 'cause of their situation with these other places they're in like" the halfway houses.

Although the Fellowship hired a well-connected program lead who referred participants for employment and workforce development programming, his late onboarding (as the re-entry sessions were starting) in addition to the high level of need among some Fellows meant that resources were often not available early enough to meet the needs of individuals as they returned home and engaged in programming. This was mentioned in multiple interviews, where Fellows recommended that, in future cohorts, LFI provide more rapid responses to re-entry needs. For one Fellow, this would look like "more reliable...sources, more income so [future Fellows] can really get on their feet, give 'em a start, give 'em a really good kickstart." Another Fellow, when asked what they hope LFI would learn from their experience, shared that "housing is a big issue" in addition to finances, "because a lot of people go back to the street because they ain't got nothing going on with no money and they got to eat, so they go back to doing whatever they were doing." Reflecting on other Fellows who couldn't fully participate because of parole restrictions (including housing and movement restrictions), another participant recommended that LFI program staff "should talk to the people before people get out to have this movement already for them if they going to be in this class...most of the people Live Free gonna get gonna be house arrest people. So they need to talk to them some type of way so they don't have to go through that no more."

Research Finding 2:
Networking/Relationship Building

Fellowship Success:

Fellows cite networks and network building as a key benefit of the Fellowship, and the exposure they gained to formerly incarcerated leaders allowed them to build the skills and confidence to network while also imagining themselves as future leaders.

Through their participation in the Fellowship, Fellows developed close relationships with one another and with informal mentors, and often the connections they made through the program were key sources of re-entry support, generally through trusted members of LFI staff (as noted above). This relationship-building and personal connection was particularly important for some Fellows, who reported in interviews that they had intentionally distanced themselves from their communities of origin out of an interest in self-improvement (e.g., trying not to associate with individuals in their communities who they may previously have been arrested with). Additionally, many Fellows came home to networks of support through their families or loved ones, but as these relationships changed and – in some cases – disappeared over time (due to reintegration, family deaths, etc.), the Fellowship helped meet the social support needs of Fellows by introducing them to leaders with lived experience of incarceration. It was through these models of leadership that Fellows developed optimistic outlooks on their future and felt confident in their ability to succeed in their future work.

Fellows built positive connections not just with formerly incarcerated leaders and LFI staff but also with one another, providing peer support within the program that helped them feel valued and cared for. In the words of one Fellow, "now we are not just a Fellowship, we are a family...they're my brothers, they're my sisters." Developing relationships with one another – many of which lasted well beyond the end of the Fellowship – provided Fellows an opportunity to share in a common experience and build community with others from similar backgrounds. In reflecting on his time in the Fellowship six months after completion, one Fellow shared that "I liked the sense of community. People know the struggle that you've been through, stuff like that. It made you, well, it made me feel good. You know, walk in a room and feel like you had a place. Everybody has a story." Another Fellow reflected on the sense of care and encouragement she received from her relationships within the Fellowship by noting that LFI staff "encourage you and...do care about me. And that's another thing, they really, they did a lot for us to make us feel like we really somebody, they did that. They did do that."

Repeatedly, Fellows pointed to the relationships they developed in the program as a key benefit of their participation. These included relationships with one another and with LFI staff and Fellowship leaders with lived experience of incarceration, who provided the social and emotional support for Fellows to begin imagining a successful future for themselves. One Fellow noted in an interview that "the best thing I've learned from Live Free...is the networking process," adding that, for him, building these networks meant "you get to feel different... Your mind arises, you get the light bulb [going] off in your head... Now you want to think about positive things when you be around a different environment."

"Before I was introduced to...Live Free...I couldn't walk into a room and meet these type of people and have these type of conversations and walk with a viable resource or walk out with a connection build. I probably maybe sit in a corner and talk who I know and stick to what I know. Now, I know so much more and I feel like I'm able to grow in that way...I feel like I know a lot of people and a lot of people know me to help me just elevate."

Notably, many Fellows shared feeling that they walked away from the Fellowship having developed confidence in their own networking and relationship-building skills. When asked specifically about the types of skills he'd developed through the Fellowship, one participant reflected in a final interview that he had built "the networking and the leadership skills," while another mentioned that, after the Fellowship, "I know how to ask for help instead of just trying to figure everything out on my own. I learned people skills." For yet another Fellow, this growth went deeper than skill-building and included building confidence in his ability to meet new people sharing that "before I was introduced to...Live Free...I couldn't walk into a room and meet these type of people and have these type of conversations and walk with a viable resource or walk out with a connection build. I probably maybe sit in a corner and talk who I know and stick to what I know. Now I know so much more and I feel like I'm able to grow in that way...I feel like I know a lot of people and a lot of people know me to help my just elevate." In this Fellow's own words, "these type of people" were often formerly incarcerated people who occupied leadership positions in government offices, nonprofit organizations, philanthropic foundations, and organizing coalitions.

Through LFI, Fellows built their own confidence in approaching and developing mutual relationships with these speakers, all of whom shared in Fellowship sessions the ways their own histories of incarceration influenced their personal and professional progress since being incarcerated. For Fellows, these relationships also offered alternative visions of Fellows' futures and inspiration to develop as leaders themselves. One Fellow, reflecting on his experience meeting these formerly incarcerated leaders, shared feeling that "some of them guys have been gone 20, 30 years, and they came out and they got successful businesses...they ain't let they background stop [them.] So that's empowering in itself, to know that you can do this... you go to them dinner and you meet important people, people in positions [of power]." For Fellows, having access to LFI's network of formerly incarcerated leaders meant having a blueprint for what success might look like in their own futures.

Source: Live Free Illinois

Network Canvas Data

Wave	Average Size of Network	Average % of Network Made Up of LFI Connections
Wave 1 (baseline)	8	19%
Wave 2 (graduation)	10	44%
Wave 3 (6-months post-grad)	8	30%

To assess change over time in the size and makeup of Fellows' support networks, the research team led participants through Network Canvas surveys for all three rounds of interviews. Network Canvas is a research software used to assess participant networks through a series of questions asking them about their relationships with others.

Network Canvas questions asked in each round included:

1. "Who do you discuss important issues with?"

2. "Who would you approach to connect you with resources in your community or to help you get connected with community organizations?"

From Wave 1 (baseline, at program start) to Wave 2 (graduation) interviews, Fellows' networks grew modestly across both survey questions, including a total of eight individuals on average in the beginning of programming and ten individuals on average at the end of the Fellowship. These changes were not sustained over time, with Fellows again reporting an average network size of eight people six months after completing programming.

However, the makeup of these networks – who Fellows relied on for support – changed over the course of programming and somewhat maintained six months after graduation. At the beginning of the Fellowship, on average, 19% of Fellows' support networks were made up of individuals affiliated with LFI (either LFI staff, mentors, speakers, or community organizers). By comparison, at the end of the Fellowship, on average 44% of Fellows' networks were made up of LFI connections, and six months after graduating the Fellowship (Wave 3), 30% of Fellows' networks were made up of LFI connections.

This suggests that while the growth of Fellows' networks may have slowed since the Fellowship, LFI connections still make up a larger share of these networks six months after the program than at baseline.

Additionally, some Fellows felt that participating in the Fellowship helped them leverage their new networks for the benefit of their communities, with one Fellow noting that, "I've gained recognition...from Live Free. It all started with Live Free. Before, when I used to walk in these rooms, I didn't know anybody. Now when I walk in these rooms...I feel like there's more and more people that know me through the work that I do, and through the organizations that I associate myself in." For this Fellow, his connection to community organizations – where he felt that he was positively contributing to his neighborhood – was both a downstream effect of the networks he developed through LFI and an additional source of credibility in future networking spaces.

The ability to build and use their networking skills through the Fellowship often meant that Fellows were excited to share information and resources – particularly LFI related resources – with their communities. In one interview, a Fellow shared an anecdote of walking down the street in his LFI shirt and having strangers approach him to ask about the organization; he shared with the research team his own excitement at being able to share the work of LFI with others in his neighborhood. For another Fellow, participation in the Fellowship eventually led to a full-time job as an organizer (discussed in further detail below), where he was able to use his role to connect people in his community with job and leadership development resources.

Ultimately, Fellows reflected positively on the networks they built through the Fellowship, feeling that these relationships provided them much-needed avenues for connection with other formerly incarcerated people, were reciprocal, allowed them to grow as people, and helped them develop the confidence to give back to their communities. The Fellowship, through its engagement of and introduction to LFI's expansive network of formerly incarcerated leaders, provided Fellows with the skills to continue to build meaningful relationships in the policy organizing space and beyond. Further, Fellows expressed feeling like their relationships within LFI helped them develop a positive image in their communities, further benefitting their relationship building outside of the organization.

Notably, this network- and relationship-building took root even without formal structures around mentorship. These relationships – particularly those between Fellows themselves and between Fellows and LFI staff – have largely outlasted the Fellowship itself, but the lack of structure around mentorship and network building have also meant that leaders' varying levels of availability, interest, and enthusiasm impact the extent to which relationships between Fellows and leaders continue to build over time.

Fellowship Challenge:

Without a formal mentorship component with the Fellowship, relationships between Fellows and formerly incarcerated leaders were ad hoc and lacked the necessary structure to ensure follow-through from all parties.

Although Fellows felt they were building the necessary skills and confidence to expand their networks, the extent to which these networks provided pathways to tangible, long-term relationship-building were limited by the fact that the Fellowship's mentorship component had not yet been implemented in the pilot cohort. The Decarceration Fellowship included a formal mentorship component in early program planning, where Fellows would be connected to LFI leaders with lived experience of incarceration to develop one-on-one relationships and seek advice and guidance as they navigated their re-entry process. The process of matching Fellows with mentors did not happen for cohort one Fellows. Despite this, Fellows themselves attempted to create their own mentor-mentee relationships with Fellowship speakers and presenters.

Although Fellows often tried to maintain ongoing communication with Fellowship speakers – even after graduating from the program – the depth of these relationships was often limited by speakers' available time. Because of their influential roles within their own organizations – as leaders in public offices, nonprofit organizations, family foundations, and organizing coalitions – Fellowship speakers often had busy schedules that prevented them from being able to communicate regularly with Fellows, even in cases where they expressed an interest in doing so. In interviews, Fellows often talked about reaching out to speakers after Fellowship sessions and infrequently – sometimes never – hearing back from the speakers themselves.

One Fellow expressed his disappointment with the lack of follow-through from a speaker representing a state office: "I text you [the speaker], you take a month or two to respond to my text and you say you gave me a resource that wasn't even really a resource. He say that's what he do, but he ain't got back to me yet...I felt a positive that you'll be able to get something done as far as trying to hook me up with housing and stuff, but like I said, the [follow-through] is not there." Even so, this Fellow continued to reach out to the speaker on a weekly basis, even six months after program completion, and noted that "every once in a while, he hit back." Ultimately, the Fellow felt that the speaker offered promising opportunities that could meet his immediate need for housing but was unable to wait months for a response. Even as Fellows recognize that program speakers and leaders are often busy meeting the demands of their own roles, these same Fellows express frustration at the lack follow-through from some of them.

Additionally, the Fellowship's lack of a formal mentorship component meant that relationships between Fellows and speakers often dwindled over time. In interviews six months after programming, Fellows shared that their communication with speakers, LFI staff, and even other Fellows dropped off in the time after the program ended. In some cases, this was because Fellows' own priorities had shifted since their time in the Fellowship; one participant noted that, when LFI staff shared resources with alumni in a cohort one group chat, "I don't pursue those things because I've been pursuing what I've been doing and driving myself crazy with that." Although he still held personal relationships with LFI staff, a shift in priorities led this alumnus to detach from Fellowship-provided resources and networks. For another Fellow, who lacked the capacity to maintain relationships with speakers during the Fellowship largely because of a demanding work schedule, this delay in relationship building presented a barrier to outreach and relationship maintenance six months after the program ended; although he knew the opportunity to reach out still existed in theory, he had yet to take advantage of it, largely because he felt it was too late to do so.

Ultimately, Fellows reflected on the promise of mentorship from LFI staff, leaders, and Fellowship speakers, noting that "if I ever run into them...it'd be all love," even as these relationships inevitably faded over time and were limited at times due to speakers' busy schedules. Fellows often maintained relationships with one another and with program staff through group chats, though the extent to which individuals engaged in group chats varied by person and dwindled for some after graduating from the Fellowship. Although Fellows reflected on relationship building as an important component and key takeaway from their time in the Decarceration Fellowship, the extent to which these relationships maintained over time depended heavily on the capacity and interest of individual Fellows and LFI leaders. Had the program established formal networks of mentorship (i.e., pairing Fellows with mentors throughout and after their time in the program), these relationships may have been deeper and longer lasting, with the responsibility for building and maintaining relationships with mentors no longer on individual Fellows themselves.

Research Finding 3:
Civic Engagement

As previously noted, the Fellowship aimed to build Fellows' leadership skills and civic engagement by equipping them with organizing tools and strategies that could apply across a range of contexts from local efforts in their own neighborhoods to broader criminal justice policy reform. A key part of this theory of change rested on improving the civic engagement and civic connectedness of Fellows within their own communities, which the researcher team tracked through in-depth interviews asking Fellows about their connections to and engagement in community. For the purposes of this report, civic engagement broadly refers to the ways individuals participate in community life to improve current and future conditions of their communities ranging from grassroots organizing to large-scale policy reform.[10]

In the Decarceration Fellowship's program theory, increased civic engagement among Fellows is supported by exposure to organizing principles, education on policies impacting formerly incarcerated people, and connection to leaders with shared lived experience working in criminal justice policy reform. In turn, Fellows would participate in community organizing spaces aligned with LFI's current policy advocacy work and partnerships. Although the program did not explicitly require Fellows to transition to full-time organizing roles at the end of the Fellowship, these leadership and organizing skills would then equip Fellows to enter organizing roles or translate these skills into their chosen professions after their participation. Below, we outline the ways in which the program successfully improved Fellows' knowledge of criminal justice policy reform and (to a lesser extent) provided opportunities for Fellows to engage in their communities. We then outline how Fellows' barriers to programming also limited full participation in community organizing spaces and opportunities for future organizing work.

Fellowship Success:

After their participation in the Fellowship, alumni were more engaged in their communities and knew more about public policy and civic engagement opportunities.

In baseline interviews, Fellows generally reported little engagement in community or civic life before their incarceration. Outside of accessing programming (e.g., summer jobs through the city or youth engagement programming) or attending church, almost none of the cohort one Fellows reported attending community meetings or engaging in community-related activities. In fact, some interview participants shared that before their incarceration they were unaware of the option to attend community meetings, outside of volunteer activities within their church. Additionally, none of the interviewed Fellows who were recruited into programming from community contacts (e.g., participants who had been home less than a year) reported attending community meetings in the time between their release and their participation in the Fellowship.

10 Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What Do We Mean By "Civic Engagement"? Journal of Transformative Education, 3(3), 236-253. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792 (Original work published 2005)

For many Fellows, the Decarceration Fellowship represented their first meaningful connection to civic engagement opportunities and education, as the program filled the self-described gap many Fellows experienced as they headed home and were unsure how to engage in their communities in new, more positive ways.

For example, at the end of the Fellowship (Wave 2) and in six-month post-Fellowship (Wave 3) interviews, participants were more knowledgeable about criminal justice policies, specifically when it came to Clean Slate Illinois,[11] a crucial first step in increasing their levels of overall civic engagement. This was largely due to the program's facilitation of and exposure to opportunities for Fellows to learn about public policy affecting formerly incarcerated people, while at the same time Fellows were educated more broadly about the work of LFI and its partner organizations through Fellowship speakers and trainings.

As one Fellow reflected on what he learned through the program, he described that he learned "a lot. Just the basics really, how to organize people, how to get things done, how to bring people together…how to develop your issues, organize meetings, and all that." For some Fellows, engagement in the program provided them with the tools to become leaders in their communities, even if they hadn't yet engaged in organizing work by the end of the Fellowship. Participants, in follow-up interviews, frequently used terminology borrowed directly from organizing spaces, referencing the power of "one-on-ones" – an important organizing tool in which individuals engage in introductory conversations with others to establish shared values and build common ground – and how the program provided them with "a couple of tools," even if they "haven't been able to put them to work."

Participation in the Fellowship also generally increased Fellows' awareness of policies impacting people with lived experience of incarceration. When asked what he had learned about these policies, one Fellow shared that "they [legislators] do everything to minimize us, they don't want us to do anything. It's crazy… the policies that they make are, like to make us seem like we just the worst of the worst." Another Fellow noted that, of the policies she had learned about, "the one that got me really stuck on is the Clean Slate. I've really thought of that, because I need it myself…to take a lot of things off my background." This knowledge, combined with Fellows' interest in sharing the work of LFI with others, also led participants to talk with others in their network about Clean Slate, even when they felt others might not agree with them. In the words of one Fellow, "with the Clean Slate bill, I kind of be trying to tell friends and family about it, and just even coworkers that may not typically agree with me, but I want them to understand what the bill is doing and the type of barriers that it's tearing down, and that we're getting, we're overcoming by passing this bill."

At the same time, Fellows expressed a sense of realism about the process of passing Clean Slate legislation, with one Fellow noting that "it's very hard to get those policies pushed through…but I guess you just gotta keep organizing and reaching out to your representatives, getting people in their face, and keep trying to push the agenda." Another pointed out that the wealth of policies impacting formerly incarcerated people is a barrier in and of itself – "I think people by fighting there forever because there's too many policies that you're going to have to keep breaking one by one. People be dead by the time you get through with all that." Even so, participants repeatedly stressed feeling optimistic about the organizing work of the Illinois Coalition to End Permanent Punishments (EndPP) and LFI, noting that "I feel like with the Clean Slate and these policies that's put into place with that bill, I feel like the door would just open up and expand in more ways than not."

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11 Clean Slate Illinois is "a growing coalition of impacted leaders, advocates, and allies who represent diverse communities and are dedicated to ending permanent punishments." The work of Clean Slate Illinois includes advocating for statewide policy to universally automate sealing and expungement processes for formerly incarcerated people.

Source: Live Free Illinois

For some Fellows, increased civic engagement and education about policies affecting formerly incarcerated people at the end of programming meant sharing this information about LFI within their own communities and social circles, with one Fellow noting that "the stuff that I be finding [community resources], I be telling other people about." Even so, for this participant, information sharing was his primary way of distributing LFI facilitated resources with his community, as he added that, "I just get the information to everybody else, but it's up to them to take action on it." Despite speaking fluently about the policy work of LFI and sharing information in his community about these policies and other available resources, by the end of programming this Fellow still identified himself as apolitical, noting that "I really try to stay up out of that political stuff" while also mentioning that he wants to give back to his community in other ways: "I was the problem in my community, now I want to be a solutions man."

Additionally, in some cases, participation in the Decarceration Fellowship provided novel opportunities to engage in policy organizing, up to and including LFI-facilitated trips to Springfield, Illinois to meet with legislators. Of the nine interviewed Fellows, five accompanied LFI on at least one trip to the state capitol. These trips provided opportunities for Fellows to shadow organizers as they spoke with policymakers about criminal justice reform policies and appropriations for community resources. Additionally, these trips gave Fellows the chance to experience policy organizing outside of a classroom, where they observed first-hand the way that legislative advocacy happens. One Fellow reflected positively on the social aspects of the experience, noting that "the experience was really fun…I was seeing a lot of people that…I used to be incarcerated with doing the same work with their organization. So, it was a good way to reconnect with people that I ain't seen in a while."

Finally, for one Fellow, this increased knowledge, coupled with a strong network of successful organizers (as mentioned in Finding 2), translated into full-time employment in policy organizing spaces, and serves as a powerful example of what success might look like for future Fellows. Through LFI and the Decarceration Fellowship, this participant was introduced to the executive director of EndPP,[12] with whom he worked directly to get a job as a full-time organizer. Six months after graduating from the Fellowship, this participant still worked for EndPP. He credited the Decarceration Fellowship with teaching him the necessary skills to be a successful organizer, noting that "doing one-on-ones was a very important skill" he learned through the program, adding that "I use [one-on-ones] every day." Reflecting on his participation in the Fellowship, he shared that "at first...I knew that I wanted to fight, but I didn't know there was an arena for me to fight in." For this Fellow, participating in the Decarceration Fellowship educated him about the "arenas" where organizing work happens, equipped him with the skills to be an organizer, and ultimately connected him to a career organizer position.

This experience, however, served as an outlier for the first cohort of Decarceration Fellows, most of whom continued to work in jobs unrelated to organizing throughout and after their time in the Fellowship, as discussed further below.

Fellowship Challenge:

Structural re-entry barriers limited the extent to which Fellows could civically engage in their communities and transition to professional organizing roles after graduating the Fellowship.

For most participants, knowing more about policy organizing did not necessarily translate to increased levels of engagement in their communities, and involvement in directly policy work was even more limited. The challenge of connecting Fellows to jobs in organizing generally came down to two primary obstacles: Fellows' re-entry related barriers to full participation, and the availability of roles in organizing.

When it came to community engagement before incarceration, multiple Fellows shared that they avoided civic engagement at least in part because of their own illegal activity; according to one Fellow, he didn't participate in community groups because "I was too much involved in the streets." Another Fellow noted in his baseline interview that he didn't attend community meetings before his incarceration "because... whatever they were talking about, I was probably in the middle of," adding that he "was right in the middle of" all the "chaos going on" in his neighborhood. Notably, the relationship between "the streets" and community engagement changed for some Fellows after returning home from incarceration but before their engagement in the Fellowship.

In the case of the Fellow above who shared that he didn't attend community meetings because he was "in the middle of" the "chaos," returning home and distancing himself from his old life also meant engaging in his neighborhood less. He shared that his "views or feelings for the neighborhood hasn't really changed except as far as me needing to step back away from it to not be involved in the problems." This was also true for another Fellow, who mentioned in his baseline interview that, since returning home, he had already been shot at after being mistaken for someone he used to associate with. Ultimately, Fellows often weren't civically engaged before their incarceration, and when they returned home, their desire to avoid "the streets" also meant distancing themselves from their neighborhoods more generally as a strategy to avoid potential issues, creating an additional barrier to full civic engagement and community connection.

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12 EndPP is a coalition of justice-impacted leaders and organizers and "was created as an organizing and campaign hub for people directly impacted by the criminal legal system to come together, build a movement, and lead and implement advocacy campaigns to end the impact of a criminal record following people long after incarceration."

In some cases, Fellows were also limited by conditions of their parole; one participant with movement restrictions expressed interest in going to Springfield with LFI but admitted that he didn't have the appropriate permissions through his parole officer to do so. Even in the cases where Fellows did have the movement and ability to attend sessions, engaging in organizing work on top of their regular jobs and re-entry process was an added challenge; in the words of one Fellow, "I don't really have the time. It's just either I'm asleep or [at] work, just sleep or work. And it's just a cycle and…I'm ready to break it." Ultimately, providing access to organizing training and leaders in the policy advocacy space was not enough to overcome the tangible barriers to participation posed by participants' re-entry processes.

Additionally, although multiple participants developed fluency in the language of organizing – frequently referring to one-on-ones, power analyses, and event planning in interviews – organizing jobs were generally not available for most Fellows at the end of programming, and participants were not provided a clear pathway into professional organizing work after graduating. Cohort one alumni engaged in some, limited organizing work after graduating, which they learned about through other program participants and LFI staff. These organizing opportunities largely took the form of phone banking or event management but did not coalesce into full time organizing roles. Ultimately, EndPP provided the most direct route for employment as a full-time organizer, with their one open position provided to a cohort one Fellow, as discussed above.

Finally, a few cohort one Fellows noted in interviews that they were limited in their ability to work full-time in any role – not specifically organizing – because of the conditions of their public aid, generally Social Security Insurance (SSI) which includes income caps for recipients to maintain cash benefits over time.[13] For one Fellow, who was still working part time in a workforce development program six months after graduation, "because I get SSI, I can't go to no job." Another shared that she was working part time to ensure that she maintained her Social Security benefits. Although these Fellows engaged as fully as possible in programming during the Fellowship, continued employment as a full-time organizer would have jeopardized valuable public benefits on which they relied. No matter their level of involvement or interest in the program, these older participants would not have become professional organizers after graduating from the Fellowship.

> *"[My] views or feelings for the neighborhood hasn't really changed except as far as me needing to step back away from it to not be involved in the problems."*

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13 Per the US Social Security Office, "SSI stands for supplemental Security Income" and provides "monthly benefits to people with limited income and resources who are blind, age 65 or older, or have a qualifying disability. Children with disabilities or who are blind may also get SSI."

Research Recommendations & Fellows' Feedback

Recommendations provided below condense findings and direct participant feedback into actionable insights for future programming. This section outlines recommendations and feedback in two components:

1. Recommendations provided by the research team based on the analysis and findings presented throughout this report, and

2. Feedback provided directly from participants during final interviews, with some interpretation and organization by key themes or ideas, some of which may also be reflected in the research recommendations.

Research Recommendations

Based on the findings presented in this report, CORNERS' recommendations for future iterations of the Decarceration Fellowship include:

Recommendation 1 | Early-Program Basic Needs Resource Provision

As noted in Finding 1, re-entry experiences varied widely among Fellows, and more challenging re-entry experiences often meant that Fellows were unable to fully participate in programming. To address this challenge in future cohorts, LFI should incorporate basic needs resource provision early into programming to ensure all participants can fully engage in the Fellowship. For example, the Fellowship could hire a full-time case manager to help connect Fellows to services through community-based organizations providing re-entry services and navigate complicated public benefits systems that may potentially limit their involvement in organizing activities. This role, which prior program leads have fulfilled in addition to running the Fellowship, would provide the necessary supports and follow-up to ensure that Fellows receive service referrals that meet their re-entry needs and that organizations providing those services follow through on providing re-entry resources.

Hiring a full-time case manager responsible for developing these systems would include communicating the program's mission and participant needs with service providers and others involved in the re-entry process – including parole officers and halfway houses – to establish working relationships across stakeholders and ease participants' transition from incarceration. Additionally, a Fellowship case manager could communicate directly with providers, parole officers, and halfway houses before Fellows return home, allowing LFI to anticipate participants' re-entry needs and potential barriers. By establishing permissions to attend programming within probation or parole systems, working with a case manager may reduce the risk of Fellows violating their probation or parole while participating in the program. Ultimately setting up adequate staffing structures to provide these personalized, intensive re-entry supports would ensure future Fellows can fully participate in programming without risking probation or parole violations.

Recommendation 2 | Formalize Mentorship Structure

Finding 2 outlines the levels of variation in the relationship-forming process between Fellows and leaders, which reflects a key opportunity for the program as it continues to grow. Full implementation of the Fellowship should include a well-structured mentorship component that ensures full follow-through, both on the part of leaders and on the part of Fellows themselves, so that Fellows feel the full benefit of the network building provided through LFI. Formalized mentorship relationships, such as setting up one-on-one matches between Fellows and a pool of self-identified mentors, would create structures of accountability between mentors and mentees during and beyond participation in the program.

Recommendation 3 | Clarify Program Curriculum

As discussed in Finding 3, Fellows ranged widely in their levels of civic engagement, which was a central goal of the Fellowship. The limited impact on civic engagement among some Fellows from the first cohort highlights the need for future iterations of the Fellowship to implement a clearly defined curriculum aligned with the program's goals. As noted earlier in the report, the first cohort operated without a formal curriculum, which constrained the program leadership's ability to fully support Fellows in becoming civically engaged leaders in their communities. By establishing a theory of change early in the program design and developing a curriculum clearly tied to the Fellowship's intended outcomes, LFI can improve its civic education, provide more tangible applications of organizing skills, and develop pathways for alumni to engage in community organizing and policy advocacy.

Direct Feedback from Fellows

Additionally, as part of their final interviews, Fellows were asked to share their thoughts on the program and feedback for LFI staff and future program participants. To capture these valuable perspectives, this section presents participant responses to these reflection and recommendation questions as themes, drawing directly from Fellows' own experiences. The goal of presenting these insights with limited interpretation and analysis is to preserve the voice of cohort one Fellows, as experts in their own experience and who can speak clearly and concisely about what they would like to see from the Fellowship in future years.

What should the Fellowship change/what do you hope it looks like in three years?

- Development of LFI's own, in-house re-entry services (e.g., halfway houses) for Fellows to access as they return home or creating linkages with organizations that provide re-entry services for Fellows. Generally, providing "more reliable resources" for Fellows.

- Concrete change in local policies "for the better." In particular, passage of Clean Slate.

- Selection of a program lead from a pool of Fellowship alumni.

- More flexibility around scheduling and attendance.

- Recruitment of more Fellows and growth of the program, including communicating and sharing the work with a national audience.

- Bringing in a pool of more diverse Fellows (e.g., more women, younger participants).

What advice would you give to cohort two fellows?

- Take your participation in the program seriously, and take advantage of every opportunity provided to you, "don't just write stuff off."

- Be patient as you're coming home and engaging with the Fellowship; "at the end of the day, you only can do what you can about what problems that's in front of you."

- Network with people you meet through the Fellowship.

- Be persistent and don't give up, and "trust the process."

  - "Trust the system. Trust the process...trust the process and stay involved. Participate. Don't just take it for granted...apply yourself. Do the things they ask you to do, listen to the speakers that come out...Stay involved and really apply yourself and you'll turn out great."

What's the most important thing you're taking away from the Fellowship?

- Developing leadership skills.

- Being more active in the community.

- Understanding the power a person has to make change in their community.

- Networking and connections to others.

  - "If it wasn't for the people that I met, I wouldn't be the person I am today, a better person."

- Personal development.

  - "The ability to feel that you somebody, that you do matter, and...that you got people fighting to make the playing field even and better for you so you can achieve a goal...They never stopped fighting, and that's what I like."

As the Decarceration Fellowship continues to grow and evolve, feedback from participants and alumni remains important in informing the future work of the program to ensure that Fellowship activities and goals are responsive to the expressed needs and concerns of recently returned citizens.

Appendix: Survey Data

Appendix 1. Re-Entry/Well-Being Participant Survey Data

Category (scale)	Wave One Average Score	Wave Two Average Score	Wave Three Average Score
Overall Wellbeing (0-10)	7	7	6
Financial Wellbeing (0-10)	4	4	5
Physical Health (1-5)	4	3	3
Mental Health (1-5)	4	4	4
Housing (1-5)	4	5	5
Employment (1-5)	3	3	3
Social Support (1-5)	4	4	4

The research team led Fellows (n=9) through Qualtrics surveys in all three rounds of interviews to assess change over time related to re-entry experiences and networks of support. From the beginning to end of programming Fellows' responses remained mostly constant across three categories (mental health, employment, & social support) and slightly changed for four categories (overall wellbeing, financial wellbeing, physical health, & housing). In reference to discrete categories:

- *Overall Wellbeing* – Remained constant, where participants averaged a seven of ten across three waves. Wellbeing scores decreased for four participants as they reported challenges with time management, employment, and health issues, and increased for two participants upon receiving housing at endline and post follow-up surveys.

- *Financial Wellbeing* – Financial wellbeing remained consistently low over time where participants averaged a four out of ten across three waves. Fellows reported mixed results. In endline surveys, some Fellows relied on the Fellowship stipend only as a monthly income source while others had options to access employment through LFI networks.

- *Physical Health* – Fellows averaged a three out of five across waves. The baseline average for physical health is higher than waves two and three, because three Fellows reported lower levels of physical health in follow-up interviews.

- *Mental Health* – Fellows averaged a four out of five over time when self-assessing their mental health. For the most part, mental health scores improved tremendously for some Fellows and more slightly for others. Four Fellows reported lower scores in round two, and three of the four increased their scores in round three. Two Fellows lowered their scores from rounds two to three but responded positively.

- *Housing* – Perceptions of safety in housing increased from a four out of five at baseline to a five in rounds two and three. Four participants were living in correctional halfway housing when they took baseline surveys. And almost all participants were living in their own apartments or with family members and felt safer by the end of the Fellowship and at post Fellowship follow-ups. Four participants were connected to housing through LFI networks and resources, and five – including the four participants – moved into more secure housing since starting the Fellowship.

- *Employment* – Fellows averaged a three out of five overall for employment, and employment satisfaction remained constant for Fellows, as they were asked how satisfied they were with employment prior to incarceration (in baseline interviews) and how satisfied they were with current employment in follow-up interviews. Prior to the Fellowship, five participants said they had never held an above-the-table job before. By the end of the Fellowship, three of those five participants worked at least part-time jobs and felt satisfied with their jobs. In six month follow-up interviews, three Fellows were still not working. Two of these participants had received job referrals from LFI staff but could not pursue them because of personal or physical limitations.

- *Social Support* – Fellows averaged a four out of five when asked if they had access to social and emotional support when needed. Two Fellows lowered their responses to this question in round two, then increased their responses in round three.

Appendix 2. Civic Engagement Participant Survey Data

Category (scale)	Wave One Average	Wave Two Average	Wave Three Average
Neighborhood Engagement (0-4)	3	3	3
Collective Efficacy (0-3)	1	2	2
# of people in your neighborhood do you trust well enough to ask for help if needed?	10	9	7
Trust in Government (0-3)	1	1	1
Civic Engagement (0-4)	2	2	2

The research team led Fellows through survey questions for all waves to understand Fellows' levels of interaction with their communities and civic engagement before their incarceration and through their involvement in the Fellowship. More specifically, the research team asked Fellows' neighborhood questions to understand to what extent Fellows felt like they were a part of their communities, to what extent they had the ability to impact their communities with the help of their neighbors, and to list the number of people in their neighborhoods they knew well enough to ask for help. To understand Fellows' level of trust in government and civic engagement, the research team also asked Fellows how much they trusted local government to do what's right for their communities and how often they voted in elections.

- *Neighborhood Engagement* – On average, Fellows "agreed" that they felt a part of their communities prior to, during, and after programming. On a zero (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree) scale Fellows responded at a three (agreed).

- *Collective Efficacy* – On average, Fellows felt they "somewhat" had the ability to impact their communities with the help of their neighbors prior to, during, and after programming. On a zero (not at all) to three (a great extent) scale Fellows averaged a two (somewhat).

- *Neighborhood Cohesion* – On average Fellows had nine people in their neighborhood that they knew well enough to ask for help if they needed it. Two Fellows were notable outliers in wave one surveys and reported that they knew at least 20 people in their neighborhoods well enough to ask for help if they needed it prior to incarceration and programming. On average across all waves, three Fellows reported that they knew at least ten people in their neighborhoods well enough to ask for help if needed.

- *Trust in Government* – Fellows expressed "little" trust in government on average prior to incarceration and programming, during programming, and after programming. On a zero (not at all) to three (a great extent) scale Fellows reported at one (a little).

- *Civic Engagement* – On average, Fellows reported that they voted in "some elections" prior to incarceration and programming, and during and after programming. On a zero (no elections) to four (every election) scale, Fellows reported two (some elections) on average.