

From Incarceration to Inclusion:

How D.C. Can Lead on Reentry Workforce Innovation



cce

SCHA
SECOND CHANCE
HIRING ALLIANCE

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About CCE

The Council for Court Excellence (CCE) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that brings people together to conduct research, educate, and advocate to make D.C.'s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community. CCE envisions a D.C. where individuals, organizations, and government work together to build safe and thriving communities with a trusted legal system that meets the needs of its people, protects their rights, and promotes dignity and justice for all.



About SCHA

The Second Chance Hiring Alliance (SCHA) is convened by the Council for Court Excellence and led by a core group of business and nonprofit leaders, workforce development programs, government agencies, and justice-impacted people. SCHA empowers D.C. area employers to hire justice-impacted job seekers by providing them with real resources, networks, and support. SCHA equips businesses with information and tools to feel confident when second chance hiring. Visit <https://scha-dc.org> for more information or to join.



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Overview

Struggling to access employment is just one of the 40,000+ collateral consequences facing people previously convicted of crimes in the United States.¹ Even those with relatively minor misdemeanor charges or convictions can face barriers to employment, among other challenges, for the rest of their lives. The practice of second chance hiring – employing people despite or even because of their criminal records – is one way to address that major barrier to success and stability.²

In early 2023, the Council for Court Excellence launched the Second Chance Hiring Alliance (SCHA), a coalition of Washington, D.C.-area employers, government agencies, returning citizens, community-based organizations, workforce development programs, and job readiness programs working to reduce barriers to employment for people who were previously incarcerated (also known as returning citizens) and those with criminal records (collectively, “justice-impacted people”). These individuals and organizations collectively make up the “reentry workforce ecosystem” in Washington, D.C.

After dozens of conversations, events, and webinars, and hours of research, it became clear to SCHA staff that, while the local government and other various players in the reentry workforce ecosystem were trying their best to place people in jobs, it still has not been enough. Too many justice-impacted people are still struggling to find work, and Washington, D.C. still has a labor shortage.³ In an attempt to identify strategies to address this disconnect, the SCHA team, along with partners at the Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (RBIJ), decided to look at other comparable jurisdictions in the United States to learn what their reentry workforce ecosystems look like and determine if lessons could be applied to D.C.

This paper examines the reentry workforce ecosystems of Washington, D.C., Prince George’s County and Baltimore, Maryland, and Denver, Colorado. It also reviews the various interventions or strategies used by these jurisdictions to train and place justice-impacted people in jobs. Finally, it identifies takeaways from this comparative research and offers next steps to policymakers on how they can continue to improve D.C.’s reentry workforce landscape, build D.C.’s economy, and support businesses struggling to find employees.

The Employment Landscape for Justice-Impacted People in Washington, D.C.

With U.S. job openings exceeding 7.6 million as of January 2025, employers across industries are struggling to find and retain workers.⁴ As of August 2025, D.C.’s Worker Shortage was classified as “Severe” by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, with only 93 available workers for every 100 open jobs.⁵ One clear way to address this problem is to increase qualified candidate pools – and this is where second chance hiring can come in.

Unfortunately, however, the persistent challenge of worker shortages coexists with the parallel problem of underemployment of justice-impacted people. In the U.S., one in every three adults has some sort of criminal record, which contributes to unemployment and underemployment of people with records and costs the U.S. economy more than \$80 billion.^{6,7} According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), within the first year of release, the joblessness rate for formerly incarcerated people in the U.S. is 63%.⁸ BJS’s “report shows that of more than 50,000 people released from federal prisons in 2010, a staggering 33% found no employment at all over four years post-release.” In contrast, the highest overall unemployment rate the U.S. has experienced in recent history was 15% in 2020.⁹ Therefore, even when the U.S. unemployment rate was at its worst, the average unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated individuals was over four times as high as the national average.

Because of some unique traits of Washington, D.C.’s legal system, it may be especially vulnerable to higher rates of unemployment, while also experiencing higher rates of worker shortages. First, the District’s incarceration rate per 100,000 residents is 816, which is one of the highest incarceration rates in the U.S..¹⁰ This leads to a higher proportion of returning citizens seeking employment when they have finished serving their sentences. Second, people from D.C. serving sentences of longer than a year for D.C. Code offenses can be sent anywhere across the country to one of the Federal Bureau of Prison’s (FBOP’s) 122 institutions.¹¹ This dispersal further isolates them from their communities, including family, friends, reentry service providers, faith communities, and previous employers, all of whom can help with a more successful transition back. What this means is that an important group of individuals – many of whom have significant professional experience, skills, trades, and enthusiasm for work gained both before and during their incarceration – have a harder time entering the D.C.-area workforce.

Fortunately, however, the data is clear that the public safety, economic, and business benefits of second chance hiring are significant. Those who are employed after release are less likely to return to incarceration.¹² Justice-impacted employees have been found to have higher retention and lower turnover rates than the general population, resulting in significant recruitment cost savings for companies.¹³ Data from the Society for Human Resources Management shows that 85% of human resources leaders and 81% of business leaders say that second chance hires

perform the same or better than other employees.¹⁴ There is a clear business case for second chance hiring, which includes lower turnover rates, increased retention, loyal and hard-working team members, and adding valuable and unique perspectives to internal teams – which in turn increases productivity.¹⁵ Ultimately, dismantling workforce barriers for justice-impacted individuals is both a moral imperative and a strategic advantage for employers facing labor shortages.

In recognition of these truths, there are dedicated organizations and government agencies in D.C. and in other places around the country focused on providing services to and improving reentry outcomes for justice-impacted people; offering job training and workforce readiness programs for returning citizens; connecting justice-impacted people with employers; and coordinating policy, communications, and other reentry services that might otherwise be siloed. Despite these dedicated professionals and meaningful government investments, the challenges of justice-impacted employment nevertheless remain prevalent and must be examined and addressed.

Improving the Reentry Workforce Ecosystem in D.C. by Learning from Peer Jurisdictions

This research sought to generally understand how D.C.’s reentry landscape compares to other places, understand the reentry workforce ecosystems in various “peer” jurisdictions that had key demographic similarities to D.C. and, if promising or effective, bring those lessons back to Washington. However, identifying appropriate comparisons to Washington, D.C. was particularly difficult given its status as a special federal district. It is not merely a city, nor is it legally a state or county, and its labor market is unique given the large federal government presence. In selecting comparative jurisdictions for this paper, several data points were considered including population, demographics, income, economy and labor markets, metrics related to criminal justice involvement of the population, and the existence of robust reentry policies. After prioritizing those geographically closer to D.C., the following jurisdictions were identified in partnership with RBJJ:

- Prince George’s County, Maryland
- Baltimore, Maryland (unless otherwise noted, the paper focuses on Baltimore City, not Baltimore County)
- Denver, Colorado

Information was gathered from various websites, interviews were conducted with experts and practitioners from each jurisdiction, and a Workforce Development Convening (WDC) was held with experts in D.C. See the Methodology for a more thorough breakdown on how jurisdictions were chosen and data gathered.

In doing this research, six different program types or interventions used to promote reentry hiring were identified. They are listed in no particular order below. Note that while the work of the

Second Chance Hiring Alliance is focused on justice-impacted people more broadly, nearly all the programs identified in each jurisdiction were either focused on returning citizens exclusively or open to returning citizens; most did not appear to be accessible to those with criminal records who had not been incarcerated.

1. **Offices Overseeing Reentry** – A centralized office or agency focused on assisting returning citizens to find housing, health, employment, or other related resources.
2. **Advisory Boards** – A body comprised of governmental and/or non-governmental individuals that collaborate to advise on reentry initiatives in the city.
3. **Government-Run Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services** – Programs primarily run by the government, either exclusively focused on or open to returning citizens.
4. **Nonprofit-Run and Government-Funded Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services** – Programs primarily run by nonprofits, usually partially funded by the government; either exclusively focused on returning citizens or open to returning citizens.
5. **Financial Incentives for Employers** – Programs that reimburse or subsidize employers who hire returning citizens.
6. **Record Relief** – Includes laws that prohibit employers from inquiring about applicants' criminal records ("Ban the Box"), automate the sealing of past criminal records ("Clean Slate"), and/or remove convictions permanently (expungement).

The following case studies capture the information gathered about Washington, D.C.'s reentry workforce ecosystem and the three other jurisdictions, organized by program or intervention and incorporating takeaways or quotes from the experts interviewed. Because SCHA is based in and focused on D.C., and there was access to more information about what occurs in the District, the D.C. case study is more detailed.



Workforce Development Convening in D.C. (Sept 2025).

Washington, D.C.

1. Offices Overseeing Reentry

Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA)

As the first legislatively mandated office in the country specifically created to serve previously incarcerated individuals, MORCA has been a national leader in reentry since its establishment in 2007.¹⁶ MORCA was designed to serve as a central hub that connects returning citizens to essential services such as employment, health, education, housing assistance, transportation, and social services.¹⁷ For example, MORCA manages and/or supports the Commission on Re-Entry and Returning Citizens, Georgetown Paralegal program, Access to Jobs grant, Commercial Driver License training, workforce program referrals, peer navigation, and more.

In Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24), MORCA employed 19 full-time employees (FTEs).¹⁸ That year, 5,485 returning citizens utilized MORCA, and, of those, 1,620 were new clients.¹⁹ In that same year, only 17.6% of MORCA clients successfully obtained employment, which is a drastic drop from FY23, when 77% obtained employment according to MORCA's own reports. In FY24, 213 MORCA clients were employed for at least 120 days.

In their FY25 Performance Oversight hearing, MORCA was asked to “evaluate the value and feasibility of establishing a data collection system to monitor the effectiveness of employment initiatives for returning citizens, including employment stability and recidivism rates.” MORCA noted that they were working to develop a data collection system to track the engagement of clients with their office and monitor their employment outcomes. They also indicated that they do “not have oversight of systems to accurately determine [the number of returning citizens returned from incarceration in FY 24 and FY 25]....There are individuals that are convicted, released, and move to or back to the District from institutions from around the country without us knowing unless they seek out services from MORCA. FBOP stated that they could not provide us this information.” The testimony does note that MORCA is working on establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the FBOP, though it was unclear what information the MOU would cover and notes that FBOP said it will not provide info to MORCA until the MOU is finalized.²⁰

As of the beginning of FY26 (October 1, 2025), MORCA had been moved from being housed under the Mayor's Office of Community Affairs to being housed under the Executive Office of the Mayor and does not currently have a director.²¹ It is unclear what portion, if any, of their budget was preserved in this transition.

INTERVIEW AND CONVENING FEEDBACK

At the Workforce Development Convening (WDC) hosted by SCHA in September 2025, a table consisting of workforce development leaders and justice-impacted people shared their thoughts on MORCA. Several people expressed the belief that having access to government funding gives MORCA the ability to play a larger role in coordinating resources between various community-based organizations (CBOs) and agencies that serve returning citizens. However, currently, there is confusion about MORCA's specific function and how it coordinates with other reentry services. Multiple participants suggested that D.C. establish a continuum of care, where different organizations in the community fill specific, defined roles for returning citizens. They felt that MORCA cannot do it all, especially with the limitations that come from being a government entity.

Participants also reported issues with inconsistent support, including issues with referrals and understaffing. A workforce development leader mentioned that many MORCA referrals simply say "go here" without facilitating a warm handoff, which results in clients (returning citizens) getting "the runaround." They also mentioned an instance where MORCA continued referring people to a program that was at full capacity, so the program had to turn many people away, breaking their trust. Participants agreed that MORCA must stay up-to-date on what programs nonprofits are currently offering and their program capacity to avoid misleading returning citizens.

A justice-impacted attendee described MORCA as the "lighthouse" for returning citizens, where everyone knows to head right after release. However, MORCA primarily provides referrals, which means that clients must arrange transportation to a secondary location to receive help. The participant emphasized "how much strain that can be for returning citizens just to travel." WDC attendees and interviewees felt MORCA has the potential to be the centralized reentry hub D.C. needs, but it would require more staffing, funding, and coordination.



"DC is rich with resources. But if you don't know where to plug in, that's really the problem."

—WDC ATTENDEE

TAKEAWAYS

- Overall, while participants saw value in having a dedicated government office for reentry affairs, they felt MORCA needed to address understaffing, coordination, and service delivery issues to fulfill its potential.
- Interviewees described MORCA as an important, central coordinating and advisory agency for people returning from D.C. Department of Corrections (DOC) and FBOP facilities. However, MORCA's precise role in coordinating the reentry ecosystem remains relatively unclear. What's more, MORCA does not even have access to the information it needs to plan for or provide services to returning citizens prior to their release.
- Interviewees suggested that MORCA may not be able to handle all the individualized needs of returning citizens, so it should establish a continuum of care where specific services are formally contracted out to appropriate nonprofits.
- There is confusion about the future of MORCA as there is currently no director and no standalone budget for its programming.

2. Advisory Board

Commission on Re-entry and Returning Citizens

The Commission was established in 2013 to advise the Mayor, the Council of the District of Columbia, and the Director of the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs on the process, issues, and consequences of the reintegration of returning citizens into the general population.^{22,23} When originally established, the Commission was intended to have 15 public voting members appointed by the Mayor and 14 ex-officio (non-voting) members, including members like the Attorney General, Director of Human Services, President of the University of District of Columbia, and Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department.²⁴ The Commission has struggled to maintain ex-officio attendance. As of 2025, there are six total members, comprising four returning citizens and two public members. In addition, the Commission indicated that it was in a building stage and had not yet set its top priorities.²⁵ They also mentioned that they recognize low attendance from both public and ex-officio members as an issue and were working to improve it. The Commission met seven times in 2025, and from their public agendas, it appears they have been working on promoting the Commission, defining its role, and discussing improvements to Ban the Box.²⁶

INTERVIEW AND CONVENING FEEDBACK

When discussing the topic of advisory boards in D.C. at the WDC, none of the attendees mentioned the Commission, suggesting it is not well-known or utilized by people in the reentry field. The interviewees and WDC attendees expressed broad support for having an advisory board for reentry issues but only if it was paired with mechanisms to make political impact.

TAKEAWAYS

- Stakeholders are not aware of the existence of D.C.'s Commission on Re-Entry and Returning Citizen Affairs and therefore cannot utilize it as a tool for advocacy and engagement.
- There are currently only six out of 15 public voting members serving on the Commission. More voting members need to be appointed.

3. Government-Run Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

LEAD Out! Program

LEAD Out! is a post-release employment program launched by the DOC's Division of College and Career Readiness in 2021 and is available to District residents within six months of release from DOC or FBOP who have a history of opioid or stimulant use.²⁷ This program runs in tandem with the LEAD Up! pre-release program, where DOC residents live in an educational community (housing unit), working toward a specific goal such as a GED, post-secondary degree, industry certification, or preparing to transition to the LEAD Out! program where they receive support before returning to the community. The LEAD Out! program's current offerings include professional development, digital and financial literacy, technical skills, employability assessments, certificate programs, job training, relapse prevention, crisis intervention, and peer support. Participants interview with a District employer that has agreed to partner with LEAD Out! Once they are placed, LEAD Out! pays \$17.50 per hour for full-time work for the first six months of employment. In FY24, LEAD Out! had 67 participants.²⁸

On-the-Job (OJT) Training Program

The OJT program was launched in 2013 by the Department of Employment Services (DOES) and is an "earn and learn" program that allows employers to hire and train candidates while receiving 50-75% wage reimbursements for up to six months.²⁹ In FY24, 81% of participants completed the program, and 71% percent of program completers remained with their companies at least six months.³⁰ The OJT program is not exclusive to returning citizens.

Project Empowerment

Established in 2001, Project Empowerment is administered by DOES and is designed to provide paid transitional jobs and training for D.C. residents facing significant barriers to work, including returning citizens. Project Empowerment pays participants a training wage of \$9 per hour while enrolled in the program for work up to 40 hours per week.³¹ According to DOES, "the program's work readiness model is designed to provide nearly 700 unemployed District residents with

opportunities to grow in education, training, and subsidized employment placements each year.” In FY24, 130 individuals successfully completed Project Empowerment’s Transitional Employment Program Job Readiness Training.³²

The READY (Resources to Empower and Develop You) Center

Established in 2019, the READY Center is designed to be “a portal of entry for pre- and post-release [jail] residents to get connected to agencies that provide specific services.”³³ It is run by D.C. Department of Corrections (DOC) in partnership with other local agencies and CBOs.³⁴ The READY Center begins its work with residents inside the D.C. Jail prior to release, for smoother reintegration. An analysis published in 2023 showed that non-READY Center participants were more likely to return to jail sooner than READY Center participants.³⁵

The READY Center refers clients to agencies and CBOs that provide comprehensive reentry services, including help with housing, mental health and substance use support, benefits enrollment, and more. Clients are mainly referred to programs that are not provided in-house at the READY Center, yet transportation is not necessarily provided to these other locations, other than by the free Visions of Winning (VOW) Transportation shuttles provided directly from the D.C. Jail.³⁶ In FY24, only 39 people utilized VOW Transportation, but in the first quarter of FY25, 125 clients had already utilized it, showing growing popularity for this service.³⁷

The number of clients coming through the READY Center more than tripled from FY23 to FY24, jumping from 2,273 to 7,825 participants. Meanwhile, there are only six full-time employees assigned to the READY Center, and as of February 2025, two of those roles were vacant.³⁸

INTERVIEW AND CONVENING FEEDBACK

LEAD Out! – *This specific program was not mentioned by interviewees or anyone at the WDC. However, the concept of a program that begins behind bars and continues post-release was considered positive. However, participants mentioned a major challenge is that most D.C. residents are incarcerated in FBOP facilities and do not have access to the same programming as those in DOC. In this case, people released from FBOP would not have access to the LEAD Up! program and would need to be connected directly to LEAD Out!*

OJT – *While WDC attendees did not mention the OJT program, when discussing the need for earn-and-learn programs, a workforce development leader mentioned, “We have people saying, I want a job, any job. I need to pay rent. And then we’ll say, Okay, but what are you going to do once you get that job? How are we going to break this cycle of entry level job? Well, I need to go to training. Okay, but how do you have time for training? ...when you’re working a crappy job that changes your schedule every two*

weeks, you're not going to get to a training." Workforce development and government officials at the WDC agreed that earn-and-learn programs would be beneficial for returning citizens to financially support their lives while simultaneously gaining training and work experience.

Project Empowerment – WDC attendees had high awareness of this program and had mixed reviews of its effectiveness. While the program was lauded for its accessibility to join, the outcomes were not as desirable. It was agreed that Project Empowerment was particularly helpful as it gives people without work history some work experience to list on their resumes. However, a workforce development leader described issues with Project Empowerment placements sometimes being “dangerous and re-traumatizing,” with poor job quality and employers not actually hiring participants after the program subsidy ended. Robert Barton, returning citizen and Executive Director of More Than Our Crimes, said, “Some people like it. Some people don’t. From my perspective, it’s just manual jobs. [With manual jobs], there’s no economic mobility. For others, that may be a lifesaver.” A workforce development leader at the WDC questioned, “How are you designing the program to respond to the zeitgeist in this changing world where the definition of workforce readiness could change in the next year, especially with AI? How do we make somebody workforce ready in a world that is just constantly changing?”

The READY Center - WDC participants mentioned that the READY Center made referrals without providing any follow-up support, which reduces the delivery of resources. A workforce development leader mentioned, “Every week, we get 20-30 referrals electronically. And then, when we do the follow-up call to the client, either we can’t reach them, or we schedule an appointment, and they don’t show up.” Robert Barton mentioned using the READY Center and MORCA and called out the need for more “handholding” and centralized, direct services to avoid having justice-impacted people “running from place to place like a hamster on the wheel.” A table at the WDC consisting of a justice-impacted individual, a government official, and workforce development leaders discussed the idea of a centralized hub that provides wraparound services. Another participant proposed the idea of having a representative of each of those organizations stationed at the READY Center to provide that service directly and merge that with MORCA, so everyone would have just one place to go. “It should be a one-stop shop,



We’re breaking trust...We need a continuum of care so we’re not sending 20 people to a place where they shouldn’t even be. We’re wasting money, wasting time, and knocking down momentum.”

– WDC ATTENDEE

anytime on any given day. [The READY Center] only has three partners, there's gonna be DMV, DHS, and DOES. What if you need clothes, food, different kind of resources?" A government official pointed out that the READY Center is "really aimed at the average DOC person, who has an average stay of 14 days" in the D.C. Jail. They explained how the READY Center doesn't serve as the one-stop shop for all returning citizens in D.C. if "the majority of people are coming home from the Feds."

TAKEAWAYS

- Government earn-and-learn programs, like Project Empowerment and OJT, allow returning citizens to commit fully to training and developing skills, which allows them to build valuable work experience while also being able to pay for their basic needs.
- The LEAD Up! LEAD Out! programs start behind bars and continue after release, which is a model that was highly supported by interviewees. Unfortunately, returning citizens being released directly from FBOP facilities that are not processed through the D.C. Jail will not experience a continuous program like this.
- Many clients will leave the READY Center with a referral, but they do not necessarily end up accessing the resource.
- WDC attendees strongly recommended that job training be more dynamic and responsive to the changing needs of various industries, particularly as it relates to technology and digital literacy.

4. Nonprofit-Run and Government-Funded Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

Georgetown Pivot Program

This program is a collaboration between Georgetown University and DOES, established in 2018 to provide a business and entrepreneurship-focused certificate program to returning citizens. It combines classroom training with subsidized internships at local businesses and nonprofits, aiming to change employer perceptions and provide returning citizens with the skills to become entrepreneurial leaders.³⁹ According to Pivot's website, 92 participants have graduated from Pivot since 2019, and 91% of participants are employed within three months of completion.⁴⁰

A program like Pivot is one of those treasures because at least a person is coming from an institution that's respected, and they get some time and a space where they can grow in other ways."

— WDC ATTENDEE

MORCA-Georgetown Paralegal Program

Established in 2018, this program is a partnership between MORCA, DOES, and Georgetown University Law Center. The Paralegal Program offers an intensive 16-week paralegal certificate program to returning citizens.⁴¹ Participants receive a stipend while they are in the program, and upon completion, they receive employment support to help them secure full-time positions in the legal field.⁴² In FY24, 35 individual candidates interviewed for the program, 13 completed the course, and four employers hired fellows after graduation, though it is unclear how many program graduates were actually employed.⁴³ In its FY25 Performance Oversight responses, MORCA addressed several policy recommendations from the Committee on Housing, including a concern that not all graduates of the paralegal program secured employment after completing the program. MORCA's response: "[We are] in ongoing discussions with Georgetown University to improve employment outcomes for graduates. Each year, we work to address barriers identified during the program, and we are committed to enhancing the overall success of the program."⁴⁴

"Transparency from the employer side helps us route graduates so they're not wasting their time."

– WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT LEADER

INTERVIEW AND CONVENING FEEDBACK

The Georgetown Pivot Program was frequently mentioned as a standout success. Multiple tables at the WDC discussed how Pivot provides both training and externship opportunities at businesses, though participants noted challenges when the program ends, and participants struggle to secure permanent positions. Workforce development experts at the WDC expressed the limits of their programs' capacities to adjust to the varying needs of returning citizens, equipped with different levels of education, vocational training, and rehabilitative programs in the prisons across America.

Attendees at the WDC had high awareness of the Georgetown Paralegal program and discussed how programs equip justice-impacted people with the unique skills needed to be competitive in D.C.'s employment market. A WDC participant mentioned that given "Washington is a very competitive job market, highly skilled and highly educated... there's never enough Pivots, Paralegal programs, entrepreneurship programs."

When discussing workforce development programs generally, the theme of adaptability to meet the job market's needs was repeatedly mentioned. An employer stated, "There

are gaps in training on software skills—Excel, pivot tables—and everyday tech like clocking in on phones... We need programs to strengthen these tech competencies.” A justice-impacted person mentioned the BreakFree Education Fellowship, provided by BreakFree Education of D.C. whose mission is to radically improve education in juvenile and criminal justice systems.⁴⁵ They mentioned that “they were teaching me and also willing to pay me a stipend while learning basic computer tasks, like cutting and pasting links, which is exactly what you need when you’ve been away for a long time,” speaking to both the importance of earn-and-learn structure and basic digital literacy.

TAKEAWAYS

- Employers may not be hiring people to work full-time after they’ve completed a workforce development program. Some employers feel like the quality of employees leaving workforce development programs is inconsistent.
- Programs that are partnerships between nonprofits and/or workforce development organizations and government agencies are generally well-regarded, though they are only able to serve a small part of the target population.
- One common challenge is participants still struggling to find jobs after completing these programs, though it is unclear why.

5. Financial Incentives for Employers

Access to Jobs Grant

MORCA administers the Access to Jobs grant program, which was established in 2020, to subsidize funding for employers to hire returning citizens for work of up to 32.5 hours per week.⁴⁶ The returning citizen must have completed a workforce development and life skills program, have been unemployed for a period of at least three months prior to being hired, and be currently enrolled in a mentoring program specifically for returning citizens in D.C.⁴⁷

MORCA covers 40% of the minimum wage for the first year and 80% for the second year. In FY24 and FY25, MORCA awarded \$155,000 with employers receiving anywhere from \$15,000-\$90,000 each.⁴⁸ MORCA estimates this program can afford to cover 10 people in their first year, and only five in the second year. In FY24, seven employers had completed the application, and three grantees were awarded program funding, supporting the subsidized employment of eight full-time and five part-time returning citizens in D.C.⁴⁹ The window for the FY26 application was Sept. 12-Oct. 3, 2025.⁵⁰

INTERVIEW AND CONVENING FEEDBACK

In interviews with D.C. employers, workforce development programs, and other government agencies, awareness of this program was low to zero. Attendees at the WDC expressed interest and excitement at the prospect of this program but did share concerns about the length and amount of wage reimbursement. They expressed concern that employers may fire an employee after the two-year subsidy is concluded. They also mentioned that only covering a percent of minimum wage may work as an incentive for certain businesses, but it likely would not incentivize businesses that offer jobs with higher, sustainable salaries and opportunities for upward mobility.

TAKEAWAYS

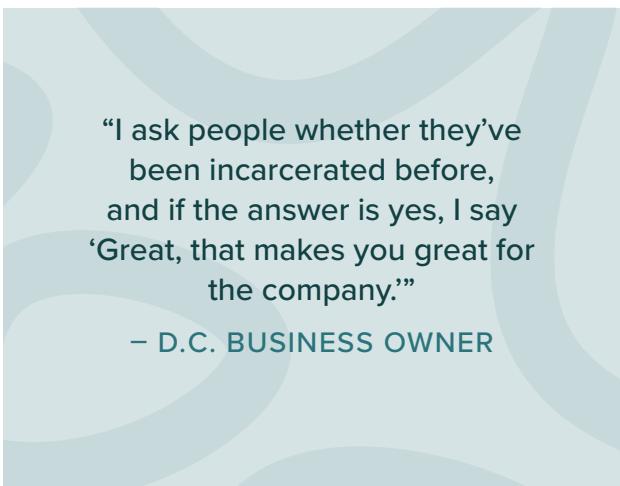
- Many WDC participants thought the Access to Jobs grant seemed like a beneficial incentive for businesses to hire returning citizens. However, there were concerns about the coverage inadequately incentivizing higher-salary positions and the risk of employers abusing the program by firing employees after coverage finishes.
- Currently, the program may only be able to support the salary of 5-10 returning citizens maximum. With a larger pool of funding, the program would be accessible to more employers and returning citizens.

6. Record Relief Laws

Ban the Box

THE FAIR CRIMINAL RECORD SCREENING ACT (FCRSA) OF 2014

FCRSA prohibits employers from asking about an applicant's criminal history on an initial application or during the interview process. An employer is permitted to inquire about criminal convictions only after extending a conditional offer of employment. Violations are supposed to be reported by the individual applying for the job. Enforcement is handled by the D.C. Office of Human Rights (OHR), with penalties for violations including fines that are shared with the complainant.⁵¹ The maximum penalty would be \$5,000 for employers with 100 or more employees. There was no updated information



“I ask people whether they’ve been incarcerated before, and if the answer is yes, I say ‘Great, that makes you great for the company.’”

— D.C. BUSINESS OWNER

available about how many violations had been reported or the amount of penalties collected by OHR since a report released in 2019.⁵²

Record Sealing

SECOND CHANCE AMENDMENT ACT

In D.C., the law provides automatic record sealing for non-convictions and misdemeanors over 10 years old, sealing by motion for misdemeanors over five years old, and certain felony convictions over eight years old.⁵³

Expungement

SECOND CHANCE AMENDMENT ACT

In D.C., the law provides automatic expungement for decriminalized offenses and expungement by motion for non-convictions and cases where the crime was committed by someone else.⁵⁴

INTERVIEW AND CONVENING FEEDBACK

Workforce development leader Don Gatewood provided critical feedback on Ban the Box. He argued that while well-intentioned, these laws can be “more problematic than anticipated” if employers are not transparent upfront about their hiring criteria regarding criminal backgrounds. He has seen candidates go through entire interview processes, only to be rejected at the final stage due to their record, creating an exhausting and frustrating hiring experience for the applicant. He believes Ban the Box can work best when employers are transparent about what specific convictions might disqualify a candidate for a particular role. Similarly, an attendee at the WDC mentioned, “I’ve seen it quite a few times... the person makes it all the way to the end and gets rejected. They say, ‘I wish I had known this in the beginning so I wouldn’t have to go through the interview process.’ It could be false hope for a person to make it all the way to the end and potentially get an offer, only to find out at the very end that, because of this blemish, we cannot.” Another attendee at the WDC said, “some employers use third party online platforms as a workaround to early screening,” indicating that employers may be finding loopholes to violate Ban the Box.

CEO Will Avila, whose company is built on hiring returning citizens, highlights significant systemic barriers which could be alleviated by record relief laws. He points out that he has seen some government and union contracts that contain blanket bans against employees with criminal records, despite these record relief laws. These restrictions prevent his company from bidding on larger projects, limiting growth and the number of people he can hire.

TAKEAWAYS

- Employers may be violating the Ban the Box laws. Justice-impacted applicants may need support to submit a complaint regarding an employer violation, and they often do not have the time nor resources to pursue a complaint.
- Ban the Box was praised for enabling employers to meet an applicant and judge them based on their qualifications before knowing about their criminal history. However, people at the WDC expressed wishes that employers were upfront about inability or unwillingness to hire people with specific criminal backgrounds or parole and probation restrictions.



Brief Case Studies from Other Jurisdictions

Prince George's County, MD

1. Offices Overseeing Reentry

Returning Citizens Affairs Division (RCAD)

RCAD is the primary county-level office overseeing reentry. Established in 2022, RCAD operates under the Office of the Executive.⁵⁵ Michael Williams, the former Director of RCAD, described its mission to coordinate the efforts of various county agencies to prevent duplication, fill service gaps, and create a cohesive “ecosystem” for returning citizens; it does not provide direct services.

2. Advisory Board

Re-Entry Advisory Board

Established in 2020, this board was comprised of stakeholders, including justice-impacted individuals, who provided recommendations to the city council on how to improve the reentry system. Their 2021 final report advocated for a centralized coordinating body, which directly led to the establishment of RCAD.⁵⁶ The board itself was not a permanent, ongoing body, but rather a task force that fulfilled its mandate and is no longer active.⁵⁷

3. Government-Run Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

Bridge Center at Adam's House

The Bridge Center connects returning citizens, young adults, and veterans with wraparound services to support transition into the community, including job training and employment services.⁵⁸ This program is a collaboration between the PG County Health Department, Department of Social Services, and Department of Family Services. Its website states that “over 2,000 residents receive services each year, with a client re-offending rate of less than 1%.”

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Former director of the Bridge Center, Dr. Ron Garrett, explains that they offered more referrals than direct services. During his time there, the direct services that were available were case management, a job club run by an Employ PG staff member, and peer support. However, the Bridge Center was not part of the county budget. It was primarily grant-funded, which meant any given program was not guaranteed to continue operating year to year. Dr. Garrett found that “98% of people that came to the Bridge Center had one objective: to get a job.”

4. Nonprofit-Run and Government-Funded Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

Employ Prince George's (Employ PG)

Employ PG is a nonprofit that acts as the county's official workforce development arm, and serves as the staff, fiscal agent, and administrative agent of the Prince George's County Local Workforce Development Board.⁵⁹ While it serves all job seekers, it has developed a specialized focus on populations with barriers to employment, including returning citizens, through a program called Pathways to Success (PTS). PTS is a workforce development program customized for returning citizens and jobseekers with multiple barriers to employment. It is built on a learning model where participants are placed into work-based learning opportunities and mandated to participate in various one-on-one and group setting trainings designed to build their career readiness, financial literacy, decision-making, critical thinking, occupational skills, literacy, math computation, and basic life skills.⁶⁰

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

SCHA was unable to speak with any staff member at Employ PG, despite reaching out several times.

Pathways to Government (PTG) Initiative

The Pathways to Government Initiative creates direct hiring pipelines for returning citizens into county government jobs. It is a key partnership between the Returning Citizens Affairs Division (RCAD), which identifies suitable roles and removes internal barriers for returning citizens, and Employ Prince George's, which prepares and refers qualified candidates. In FY2024, the program's first full year, the initiative placed 11 returning citizens into various county government positions.⁶¹

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Former RCAD director Michael Williams noted that a critique of the program was that more time and resources were needed, particularly to educate government agency staff on the benefits of hiring returning citizens and preparing returning citizens for employment.

Welcome Home Project

The Welcome Home Project is a workforce development program established in 2025 offering returning citizens tuition-free vocational training and certifications in high-demand, skilled trades. The program is a collaboration between the Returning Citizens Affairs Division (RCAD), Prince George's Community College (PGCC), Employ Prince George's, and the nonprofit Training Grounds, Inc. Participants must have been incarcerated for five or more years and be released within 18 months of their acceptance. They receive stipends of up to \$1,000 while they are in training. The training is focused on high-demand, high-growth industries such as trades (like electrical and HVAC), information technology, and healthcare.⁶²

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

According to Michael Williams, the initial cohort served ten returning citizens.

5. Financial Incentives for Employers

Re-Entry Employment Incentive Program

The Re-Entry Employment Incentive Program will provide wage reimbursement to qualifying employers that hire justice-impacted people. The program will be administered by Employ Prince George's, including managing the application process and disbursing funds. For each qualifying returning citizen hired, the program will reimburse the business \$5 per hour for up to 40 hours per week, with a maximum of 1,000 hours annually for up to two years.⁶³ In FY25, Employ PG had received \$300,000 in County Grants for this program, and they intend to carry that funding into FY26.⁶⁴ The program has funding set aside but has not yet launched, so no returning citizens or employers have been served by the program.

6. Record Relief Laws

Ban the Box

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY EMPLOYMENT FAIRNESS ACT

Prince George's County Employment Fairness Act (CB-019-2024) became effective in September 2024, expanding upon a previous 2014 ordinance. It prohibits an employer from inquiring about an applicant's criminal record or conducting a background check until after the first interview has been completed.⁶⁵ There was no information available about how many violations had been reported or the amount of penalties collected since enforcement started.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Alonzo Turner Bey, current Director of RCAD, was unemployed for about six months after release from incarceration but had familial support during his reintegration. After this period, Turner Bey applied for a position with a rural farm. He explained that while criminal background checks in Maryland cannot be used to deny a qualified individual employment, businesses may use a third-party vendor to investigate criminal history and use their findings to disqualify a candidate. This was what occurred during his application process with the farm, and when asked if he reported their violations, he stated he did, but that the state did not provide any follow-up to him.

Record Sealing

MARYLAND SECOND CHANCE ACT OF 2015

This law authorizes the “shielding” of criminal records. Shielding is a process that allows individuals to request the court to remove certain kinds of records about certain criminal convictions from public view. However, under the Second Chance Act, individuals are only allowed to have one shielding petition granted in their life which may or may not include every conviction on their record. There is no automated clean slate law for sealing records.⁶⁶

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Flagger Force, a traffic control company that operates in PG County, evaluates all backgrounds holistically. They do not look at the crime or background specifically, but at how it would impact the business. For example, if the job requires a lot of travel, there could be a barrier for people with certain locational restrictions. However, Lauren Polczynski, Senior HR Manager at Flagger Force mentioned that they “do not have any hard or fast deal breakers from a conviction standpoint.” Flagger Force is a supporter of

Clean Slate laws and are discussing partnerships with organizations that provide record expungement to support their employees through that process.

Expungement

MARYLAND EXPUNGEMENT REFORM ACT OF 2025

Maryland law allows certain criminal convictions to be expunged after satisfactory completion of the sentence, including parole, probation or mandatory supervision. When individuals can file for expungement varies based on the crime for which they were convicted.⁶⁷

Takeaways and Comparisons

It appears that most or all workforce development programming in the county run through Employ PG, while reentry services as a whole are managed by RCAD. This may provide more efficiency and effectiveness compared to other jurisdictions because Employ PG can provide centralized resources and expertise, instead of workforce development as an add-on to other services. However, because SCHA was unable to talk to the staff at Employ PG, nor locate public metrics or data about their programming, there is no way to compare jurisdictions.

Baltimore, MD

1. Offices Overseeing Reentry

Baltimore's Office of Returning Citizens

The Baltimore Office of Returning Citizens was created in 2024 to coordinate services and develop support networks for Baltimoreans re-entering society. Legislation originally stated that the office would be housed within Baltimore Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE).⁶⁸ However, as of September 2025, the Office has not yet been funded or fully established, so it is not possible to assess its success rate so far.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

MONSE has confirmed that the Office of Returning Citizens is still in the proposal phase.

2. Advisory Board

Re-entry Action Council

The Re-entry Action Council (RAC) is an advisory body created to guide MONSE on issues affecting returning citizens. The council is comprised of between 14 and 25 members with lived experience, subject matter experts, and representatives from community-based organizations serving the re-entry population.⁶⁹ While the most recently published RAC meeting agenda was for February 27, 2024, members of the RAC confirmed the council is still in effect.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

MONSE uses the RAC's input to guide reentry programming. Gordon Pack, a justice-impacted reentry coach and coordinator, mentioned that MONSE asked for the input of the RAC before moving forward with creating the Returning Citizens Behind the Wall program.

3. Government-Run Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

Hire Up

Hire Up is a transitional jobs program for unemployed or underemployed adult residents of Baltimore, administered by Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) and MONSE (not exclusive to returning citizens). Participants are placed in jobs for up to six months and are guaranteed at least 35 hours of work per week at a rate of \$16 per hour.⁷⁰ The program provides wraparound support, including free career navigation, legal services, financial counseling, and job placement assistance for transition to permanent employment. Of those who completed the program, 70% were hired into permanent positions, with 50% securing full-time jobs with city agencies.⁷¹

Returning Citizens Behind the Wall Program

The Returning Citizens Behind the Wall Program (RCBTW) is a workforce development program operated by MONSE, in partnership with the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) and MOED. The program is available to Baltimoreans incarcerated at the Baltimore City Correctional Center and employs individuals during their incarceration, paying them at least minimum wage for their work release labor.⁷² This work is in partnership with other city agencies, such as the Department of Parks and Recreation. The wages earned by participants are held in account and disbursed to them in a lump sum approximately six to eight weeks after their release. They are provided with reentry support for a few months before and after release.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Gordon Pack praised the program, emphasizing how receiving \$10,000 earned wages in lump sum soon after release provides a crucial financial cushion. MONSE said they currently have 211 active participants in the program.

Re-entry Center at the Northwest One-Stop Career Center

This Re-entry Center is managed by the Mayor's Office of Employment Development. Conveniently located in a shopping mall, this center provides a range of employment-related services, including reentry-specific workshops and connections to job opportunities. In FY24, 2,162 Baltimore returning citizens received employment assistance services through the Re-entry Center, and 401 clients obtained employment.⁷³

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Founder and CEO of Lillian's Southern Box Catering, Kenya Jenkins, mentioned that she would often join her employees in visits to MOED's Re-entry Center, and she found that MOED was the most visible source of support for employers hiring returning citizens in Baltimore. For example, they provided her employees with food handling licenses, free of charge, which reduced a financial barrier for justice-impacted people to work at her catering company.

4. Nonprofit-Run and Government-Funded Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

Project SERVE

MONSE partners with many community reentry initiatives, like Living Classrooms' Project SERVE. Participants, while still incarcerated, begin receiving "wrap around" services, and on the day of their release, they become full-time SERVE members. Members spend four to six months in the program where they are provided with training and resources, so they may obtain sustainable living-wage employment.⁷⁴ According to an interview with Cheryl Riverie, Managing Director of Workforce Development at Living Classrooms, Project Serve strives to serve 200 participants a year.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK:

Cheryl Riverie describes, "In our program, four months is the max, and then we place them. Project Serve is like a dress rehearsal. They treat it as a job, so they can get workplace skills before we put them out in the world."

Gordon Pack mentioned that Baltimore is generally teeming with active nonprofits providing various services to returning citizens. He mentions that, like D.C., there are many nonprofits and people trying to help in different ways, but they lack coordination with one another. “People don’t know all the resources available to them. If one actor, like a government office or a large nonprofit, combined everything together, some of these nonprofits would lose their funding and jobs.”

5. Financial Incentives for Employers

None found.

6. Record Relief Laws

Ban the Box

FAIR CRIMINAL-RECORD SCREENING PRACTICES LAW

This city law, enacted in August 2014, prohibits employers in Baltimore with ten or more full-time employees from inquiring about an applicant’s criminal history on an initial job application or at any point before making a conditional offer of employment.⁷⁵

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Kenya Jenkins says that “Ban the Box has allowed us to focus on people’s skills and passions before their background” and generally believes that record relief laws “create a sense of hope and self-worth for employees who have demonstrated growth and responsibility” and have already “paid their debt to society.” As an employer, she believes these laws “make it easier for us to identify the untapped talent or the great talent that may otherwise be overlooked.”

Record Sealing

MARYLAND SECOND CHANCE ACT OF 2015

Same as Prince George’s County.

Expungement

MARYLAND EXPUNGEMENT REFORM ACT OF 2025

Same as Prince George’s County.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

When asked about what policies may impede formerly incarcerated people's ability to find work, Kam Bridges of Job Opportunities Task Force stated that negative perceptions of people in this population can create more challenges than legal obstacles do. He believes one of the most important policy strategies to improve employment opportunities for people with criminal records is passing expungement laws to ensure that mistakes do not haunt people for their whole lives.

Takeaways and Comparisons

- Baltimore's Returning Citizens Behind the Wall program starts while incarcerated and continues post-release. The LEAD Up! LEAD Out! Program in D.C. is similar, but RCBTW allows people to build work experience in the community at minimum wage while still incarcerated and have seed money, paid as a lump sum weeks after release.
- The RAC gives direct input on actions MONSE takes and programs created for returning citizens, unlike D.C.'s Commission on Re-entry and Returning Citizens which doesn't appear to have similar input actions or programs.

Denver, CO

1. Offices Overseeing Reentry

Denver Community Re-Entry Center

The Denver Community Re-Entry Center is a state-level facility operated by the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC). It serves as a hub for the Community Re-Entry Specialist (CRES) program, which provides integrated case management and support services for returning citizens.

2. Advisory Board

None found.

3. Government-Run Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

The Denver International Airport (DEN) New Heights Program

DEN New Heights Program, established in 2023, is a partnership between the CDOC, Bayaud Enterprises, and DEN, which is part of the City and County of Denver local government. DEN

New Heights offers employment and work experience to those exiting incarceration or already in transitional halfway programming. The program provides 12-week work placements at the airport for rotating crews of up to ten people, aiming to serve approximately 40 individuals per year.⁷⁶ In addition to working onsite at DEN, participants will attend employment retention classes to support their transition. Participants are provided with breakfast and lunch daily, supplementary clothing items, hygiene products and transportation to their worksite. DEN New Heights team members receive same-day payment at the end of each workday. SCHA was unable to find published data on program outcomes, as of September 2025.

4. Nonprofit-Run and Government-Funded Workforce Development Programs and/or Wraparound Services

Work and Gain Education & Employment Skills (WAGEES)

Established through Colorado House Bill 14-1355 in 2014, the WAGEES program provides state-funded grants to community- and faith-based organizations that support people returning from incarceration. The program was designed to strengthen reentry outcomes by building direct partnerships between the CDOC and local communities.

WAGEES grantees are called “Community Partners” – many of which are led by individuals with lived experience in the justice system – that offer services such as housing assistance, job readiness, education, counseling, and basic needs support. These organizations leverage local partnerships to coordinate resources efficiently and promote long-term stability for participants in 20 locations across Colorado. The WAGEES website emphasizes how important it is that the organizations “reflect the communities they serve.”⁷⁷ In Denver, there are three key service providers: The Empowerment Program, Life-Line Colorado, and Servicios de la Raza.

The Latino Coalition for Community Leadership (LCCL) serves as the intermediary for CDOC, administering funds, selecting and supporting community partners, and providing oversight, training, and data management. LCCL helps ensure accountability, alignment with program goals, and capacity-building across the network, strengthening the overall infrastructure of Colorado’s community-based reentry ecosystem. The model has proven effective, with a state report showing that over half of WAGEES participants from 2015 to 2022 gained and retained a job during their time in the program.⁷⁸ The WAGEES program is designed to complement how local nonprofits meet unique community needs. For example, The Empowerment Center WAGEES Program “is for those who identify as female, trans or non-binary, as we lead with gender responsiveness principles and trauma informed care as our basis of programming,” which matches the organization’s target participants.⁷⁹

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

During an interview, representatives from LCCL explained “When somebody comes out, and they are going to be on supervision in a local community, they get assigned a care manager through the WAGEES program that will help set them up with everything under the sun that you can think of when it comes to stabilizing them.”

5. Financial Incentives for Employers

All direct monetary benefits are provided by the state of Colorado, not the city of Denver.

INTERVIEW FEEDBACK

Ashley Furst is justice-impacted and worked at Breakthrough, a Denver-based organization that emphasizes in-facility programming to ensure successful reentry. She explained that public organizations could invest more into educating employers on the opportunities that come with employing formerly incarcerated people. She stated that in her jurisdiction, a major source of obstacles formerly incarcerated people face when seeking work are employer-specific policies, not local and state laws. Public education to inform employers of the benefits of hiring and retaining people out of prisons would also make it easier for Breakthrough to recruit willing businesses to volunteer for their successful programs. Furst also noted that, while the Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit is useful, qualifying for this program may be cumbersome and unrealistic for businesses, especially small ones. Alternatively, a program with a similar model on the local or state level, as well as a credit for retaining employees, could be beneficial.

James Repenning, Founder and CFO of barbershop R&R Head Labs in Denver, noted that the cosmetology field requires individuals to work as apprentices for 300 hours before being eligible for paid work. However, he noted that, while there are programs in two of Colorado's women's prisons offering cosmetology licensing, there aren't equivalent programs in the men's prisons. As such, it's very difficult for men who may be interested in the field to complete their required hours, especially if they aren't getting paid for it. Offering financial support to businesses to bring on apprentices could help with this gap.

6. Record Relief Laws

Ban the Box

COLORADO CHANCE TO COMPETE ACT

Private employers in Colorado are prohibited from inquiring about a job applicant's criminal history on an initial application or stating in job advertisements that individuals with a criminal record cannot apply. Employers can still conduct a publicly available background check at any point in the hiring process.⁸⁰

Record Sealing

COLORADO CLEAN SLATE ACT OF 2024

This statewide law automates the record sealing process for many past convictions, and some people can qualify for automatic sealing without having to use the court process.⁸¹

Expungement

Expungement of a criminal record is only available for juvenile records, not adults, unless they were wrongly convicted.⁸²

TAKEAWAYS AND COMPARISONS

- Denver does not have a local office of reentry or any significant reentry programming coming from the local government level, however there is a significant amount of programming at the state level, some of which is not covered in this case study.
- CDOC entrusts the LCCL to administer the WAGEES funding, which has more localized connections and knowledge of the service providers across Colorado. D.C. DOC does not have a similar program but could draw inspiration from this structure, increasing synergy with existing local nonprofits and relying on an intermediary to research local service providers, administer funds, manage data, and more.



Takeaways and Proposed Next Steps to Improve the Reentry Workforce Ecosystem in D.C.

Overall Takeaways

Landscape difficult to assess

A resounding theme from this research was the lack of easily accessible information on services and reentry workforce programming available for returning citizens, or support for businesses who want to hire them. As seen in the case studies, there are a variety of programs, designed in a variety of ways, available to help returning citizens obtain employment. However, accessing information about the details of many of these programs – both in D.C. and other jurisdictions – was a challenge. It was frequently difficult to find information online, as websites were outdated or poorly organized. This included websites of government agencies, nonprofit organizations offering reentry programming, and central offices overseeing reentry, some of which did not contain comprehensive lists of programs available in any given jurisdiction. Some organizations that SCHA contacted failed to answer phone calls and emails requesting basic information. Others expressed reluctance or refusal to talk about their programs or share information externally.

Key stakeholders underinformed

Perhaps because information is hard to find online and some entities do not engage with external stakeholders, SCHA found that a significant number of employers, individuals, and workforce development leaders had low knowledge of various government policies and programming available in their community to support their work. This challenge can clearly impact workforce development programs and employers' ability to utilize these resources to relieve financial burden and support returning citizens. Justice-impacted people seeking resources in D.C. expressed that relevant information was scattered, overwhelming, and inaccessible.

Limited data sharing and analyses

None of the jurisdictions had clear and uniform data published about their population of justice-impacted people, their demographics, their rates of employment, and other valuable employment-related details. In fact, the central office serving returning citizens in Washington, D.C. does not even know how many people are being released to the District each year. There was also no

publicly accessible information about how many violations each jurisdiction's Ban the Box or other record relief laws had been reported or the amount of penalties collected since enforcement started (if any). Without this type of data, D.C. and other places are less able to anticipate the needs of returning citizens nor assess whether record relief laws work as intended. Further, even when information was available on the operations of a particular program, almost no information was available on its outcome metrics (i.e., how many individuals served, how many of those individuals obtained employment, what the average rate of pay for that employment, etc.). This is, unfortunately, also true in all case study jurisdictions.

Programs included in this report (either within singular jurisdictions or between jurisdictions) are not required to collect the same data from and about participants, do not appear to use consistent definitions in their data collection, or may not even collect any data or analyze key metrics. All of this makes comparing program efficacy or determining which are achieving their goals or making positive impacts difficult, if not impossible.

Business owners and/or employers supportive of record relief laws

The employers and business owners interviewed for this report were all supportive of record relief laws and of hiring returning citizens in general. Most employers noted that returning citizens are a largely untapped portion of the labor market and recruiting them as employees serves as a competitive advantage. However, they mentioned that checking people's criminal records and/or working through background checks is a barrier they'd rather not deal with at all.

Proposed Next Steps to Improve the Reentry Workforce Ecosystem in D.C.

1. D.C. should work to increase coordination with the federal Bureau of Prisons to get real-time information on numbers of incarcerated D.C. Code offenders, their current locations, and anticipated release dates which can be shared with relevant agencies and nonprofits for planning purposes.
2. All reentry workforce programs funded or run by the D.C. government should regularly collect data on standard data points across programs on all participants and key metrics. The anonymized data should be reported to the D.C. Council and shared publicly at least annually. Ideally, nonprofit programs will also utilize the same data definitions to collect and report comparable information to the community, too.
3. Existing reentry programs should utilize one or more recommended methods – from easily navigable and regularly-updated websites, shared events and partnerships with MORCA, membership in reentry coalitions or alliances, social media, and informal networks both in the community and insides of facilities – to more effectively promote programming widely to returning citizens.

4. D.C. leaders should evaluate the community and business benefits and fiscal impacts of providing more financial incentives to local employers who hire justice-impacted people. The District should consider expanding earn-and-learn programs and implementing new incentives that are popular and effective elsewhere, such as subsidized wages and tax credits, to engage employers in second chance hiring.
5. D.C. leaders need to clarify the scope and status of MORCA, in light of the relocation and budget changes for the Office's programming in the FY2026 budget process. The administration should communicate the status of that Office and what changes have been or will be made clearly to the D.C. Council and community partners. Either through MORCA or a successor entity, the District should explore how to better coordinate reentry services and case management, collect and share data, facilitate more effective referrals and follow-up with the nonprofits and CBOs that provide reentry services.
6. D.C. should evaluate the effectiveness of the current Ban the Box law, including interviewing employers and jobseekers, and reviewing the number of total complaints, resolution of those complaints, and the efficiency and accessibility of the complaint process supported by the Office of Human Rights. The Office of Human Rights should update its 2019 report on enforcement of the fair criminal records screening laws.
7. Workforce development programs should reevaluate their programming regularly to ensure that they are responsive to the skills required to meet the needs of a changing labor market, which could include technological and digital literacy.



Conclusion

Significant work remains to be done in the reentry workforce landscape, across all four target jurisdictions, as supported by interviews across stakeholder groups and assessment of existing reentry programming. The case studies revealed that D.C. is generally on par with our peer jurisdictions, but the District needs to evaluate and invest further to improve the experiences of and outcomes for returning citizens. D.C.'s reentry landscape is fractured given scattered incarceration across the country and lack of coordination upon return. There are improvements that each agency working with returning citizens in D.C. could make, from data collection, promotion of programming, improved coordination, and increased funding, that would collectively work to support the goal of creating quality, long-term employment for all returning citizens. Overall, reentry programs and policies in the District need to be evaluated by the success of their outcomes, meaning that the District needs to implement comprehensive, transparent data collection practices.

While this paper mainly covered government reentry policy and programming, there is a robust network of employers, nonprofits, and individuals making a difference in the District. D.C. needs to support existing efforts, create stronger networks, and funnel increased funding to support those initiatives. As long as there are thousands of justice-impacted Washingtonians and thousands of unfilled job vacancies, D.C. should continue to strategically pursue effective reentry policies and programs to support a thriving economy, build safer communities, and give second chances.



Methodology

Case Study Selection

Identifying appropriate comparisons to Washington, D.C. is particularly difficult, given its status as a special federal district. It is not merely a city, nor is it a state or county, and its labor market is somewhat unique given the large federal government presence. The research team identified several data points when comparing jurisdictions starting with population numbers and demographics, then moving to look at income, economy and/or labor markets, and metrics related to criminal justice involvement of the population. Potential target jurisdictions (states, counties, and cities) that were known to have robust reentry policies, with a priority on those geographically closer to D.C., were identified in partnership with Responsible Business Initiatives for Justice (RBIJ).

After this initial analysis, three jurisdictions were identified to compare to D.C.:

- Prince George's County, Maryland
- Baltimore, Maryland (unless otherwise noted, the paper focuses on Baltimore City, not Baltimore County)
- Denver, Colorado

Figure A shows the initial information gathered about each case study jurisdiction. While not all elements of these jurisdictions model those of the District, each has at least three key features that enable our recommendations to be integrated into the District's reentry workforce landscape. Prince George's County was selected for similarities in the Black population, median household income, and percent of government jobs. Baltimore was selected for similarities in total population, Black population, unemployment rate, and number of people released from prison annually. Denver was selected for similarities in total population, median household income, and unemployment numbers.

FIGURE A

		Washington, D.C.	Prince George's County, MD	Baltimore City, MD	Denver, Colorado	Source	
Population	Total Population	672,079	955,584	577,193	713,734		
Race and Ethnicity	<i>Percent of Population Identifying as One Race or Ethnicity</i>					<i>Census (July 2023)</i>	
	White (non-Hispanic)	36.6	11.1	26.2	54.6		
	Black	42.5	59	59.3	8.48		
	Asian	4.01	3.9	2.49	3.53		
	Percent Identifying as Hispanic or Latino	11.6	21.7	7.87	27.9		
Income	Median Household Income	\$106,287	\$100,708	\$59,623	\$91,681		
	Percent of Population in Poverty	14.5	10.2	20.1	11.2		
	Percent of Population with Bachelor's Degree or Higher	63.6	36.1	35.4	55.6		
Economy	Total Employed Population	371,410	498,220	273,015	421,609		
	Unemployment	5.3%	3.4%	4.10%	4.6%	<i>Bureau of Labor Statistics (Nov. 2024)</i>	
	<i>Industries as Percent of Labor Force</i>						
	Government	30.50%	29.60%	16.80%	13.70%		
	Business and Professional Services	22.90%	10.8	17.80%	19.3		
	Education and Health Services	15.90%	10%	19.60%	13.6		
	Trade, Transportation, Utilities	4.00%	17.80%	17%	13.8		
Criminal Justice	Imprisoned Rate Per 100,000 People	816	162	1,022	378	<i>Various Sources (2024)</i>	
	Number of People Released from Prison Annually (does not include # of people released from jails)	1162	258	1352	Numbers only available at the state level		

Gathering Case Study Data

Current policies and programs on employment reentry were located and gathered for each jurisdiction. Legislation was located by utilizing keywords like “reentry,” “employment reentry,” “formerly incarcerated employment,” and related terms. This information was taken directly from government agency websites, city and county council law databases, and nonprofit or local news outlet articles connecting residents to services. Interviews with leaders in each jurisdiction pointed researchers to additional information, policies, or programming. After initial research to determine what policies and programs each jurisdiction oversees, categories were designated based on

similarities in strategies or interventions meant to address employment among returning citizens. The categories were the following: offices overseeing reentry, advisory boards, government-run workforce development programs and/or wraparound services, nonprofit-run and government-funded workforce development programs and/or wraparound services, financial incentives for employers, and record relief.

To validate information gathered online and gain further insights into the reentry workforce ecosystem of each jurisdiction, a series of interviews were conducted with individuals from Washington, D.C. and each of the three comparison jurisdictions. Interviewees fell into at least one of four categories: justice-impacted individual, nonprofit, government agency, or employer. SCHA attempted to interview at least one individual in each of the four categories from each of the four jurisdictions. In total, 21 people were interviewed. Figure B shows the interviews conducted, the jurisdiction each individual represents, and the category or categories they represent. After compiling information for each case study, the research team asked an expert in each of the four jurisdictions to review the case study to identify inaccuracies or any programs missed. Any suggestions or proposed edits were then incorporated into the paper.

FIGURE B

Jurisdiction	Name	Title	Organization	Category (Government Agency; Nonprofit Organization; Employer; Justice-Impacted Person)
D.C.	Will Avila	Founder & CEO	Clean Decisions	Employer, Justice-Impacted
	Robert Barton	Executive Director	More Than Our Crimes	Nonprofit, Justice-Impacted
	Don Gatewood	Senior Vice President and Chief Workforce Development Officer	So Others Might Eat (SOME)	Nonprofit
	Joseph Gray		Equal Striping	Justice-Impacted
Baltimore	Myleana Beads-Johnson	Community Engagement Chief	Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE)	Government Agency
	Kam Bridges	Senior Policy Advocate	Job Opportunities Task Force	Nonprofit
	Kyla Graves	Re-entry Coordinator	MONSE	Government Agency
	Kenya Jenkins	Public Health Practitioner, Founder	Lillian's Southern Box Catering	Employer

	Gordon Abdullah Pack	Parole Advocate & Reentry Coach, Reentry Coordinator	PREPARE; EMBRACE Initiative at University of Maryland Baltimore County	Government Agency; Justice-Impacted
	Desmond Perry	Peer Support Specialist	Community Peer Project 24/7 Hotline	Nonprofit, Justice-Impacted
	Cheryl Riverie	Managing Director	Living Classrooms	Nonprofit
	Heather Warken	Executive Director	Center for Criminal Justice Reform, University of Baltimore School of Law	Nonprofit
	Chanel White	Chief of Staff	MONSE	Government Agency
	Alonzo Turner Bey	Director	Returning Citizens Affairs Division (RCAD)	Government Agency, Justice-Impacted
Prince George's County	Dr. Ron Garrett	Director of Reentry Health Services and Supports; Adjunct Professor and Site Coordinator	Mettle Works Behavioral Health; Bowie State University, Prison Education Program (BPEP) Department of Behavioral Sciences	Nonprofit, Justice-Impacted
	Lauren Polczynski	Senior Human Resources Manager	Flagger Force	Employer
	Michael Williams	Former Director	RCAD	Government Agency
	Amberly Chalberg		Latino Coalition for Community Engagement	Nonprofit
	Ashley Furst	Former Director of Marketing; Senior Manager	Breakthrough; Aventiv Tech	Nonprofit, Justice-Impacted
Denver	Cory Miskell	Executive Director	Latino Coalition for Community Engagement	Nonprofit
	James Repenning	Founder & CEO	R&R Head Labs	Employer

Finally, on September 4, SCHA and RBJJ convened a select group of 25 D.C.-based employers, workforce development practitioners, government agency staff, and justice-impacted jobseekers. This event was called Bridging Opportunity Gaps in Workforce Development for Justice-Impacted Job Seekers, which we refer to as the Workforce Development Convening (WDC) throughout the paper. During this convening, participants joined facilitated discussions about current conditions and needs within the local reentry and workforce development landscape. They were also

provided with a brief overview of the programs or interventions available in each of the three comparison jurisdictions and asked to reflect on how those programs compare to those available in D.C. All conversations were recorded and transcribed to be used as part of this report.

Limitations

As expressed repeatedly throughout the body of the paper, gathering information on reentry workforce programming was difficult in all four jurisdictions reviewed. SCHA acknowledges that programs may be missing or that information may be available that was not directly accessible to them. In addition, while several attempts were made to interview multiple experts in each jurisdiction, not all were responsive. Therefore, the perspectives provided are necessarily limited to those interviewed.



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