From Incarceration to Inclusion:

How D.C. Can Lead on Reentry Workforce Innovation

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Executive Summary

Across the United States, criminal records create lifelong barriers to stability for justice-impacted people, with employment among the most significant. Even individuals with arrests or minor misdemeanor convictions can face persistent exclusion from the labor market. **Second chance hiring, which employs people despite or because of their criminal records, offers a practical, evidence-backed strategy to reduce these barriers while helping employers respond to ongoing worker shortages.**

In early 2023, the Council for Court Excellence launched the Second Chance Hiring Alliance (SCHA) to convene Washington, D.C.'s reentry workforce ecosystem including employers, government agencies, returning citizens, community-based organizations, and workforce development and job readiness programs. After extensive stakeholder engagement, events, webinars, and research, SCHA identified a persistent disconnect: **D.C. continues to face a severe labor shortage while too many justice-impacted people remain unemployed or underemployed, despite the presence of multiple government and nonprofit interventions.**

Washington, D.C. is uniquely vulnerable to poor reentry employment outcomes. The District's incarceration rate is extremely high, and D.C. Code offenders serving more than a year are sent to Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) facilities across the country, which disrupts community ties and weakens the employment networks that support successful reentry. This occurs alongside a worker shortage for businesses in the District that should create greater opportunities to expand the labor pool through second chance hiring.

The public safety and business case is clear. Individuals employed after release are less likely to return to incarceration, and second chance hires often show strong retention, lower turnover, and comparable or better performance than other employees, which creates measurable savings for employers and improves workforce stability.

Improving The Reentry Workforce Ecosystem In D.C. By Learning From Peer Jurisdictions

To identify actionable strategies for D.C., SCHA examined peer reentry workforce ecosystems in Prince George's County and Baltimore, MD and Denver, CO. Across jurisdictions, six recurring intervention types emerged: (1) offices overseeing reentry, (2) advisory boards, (3) government-run

workforce development programs, (4) nonprofit-run and government-funded workforce development programs, (5) financial incentives for employers, and (6) record relief policies.

D.C.'s reentry workforce ecosystem includes each of these major components, but stakeholder feedback suggests that coordination, capacity, and service delivery gaps are limiting impact:

1. **Office Overseeing Reentry: Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA).**
   MORCA (est. 2007) is D.C.'s primary hub for returning citizens, connecting people to services and managing and supporting several programs. In FY24, MORCA served 5,485 people (1,620 new), but only 17.6% obtained employment and 213 were employed for more than 120 days. Stakeholders describe MORCA as a well-known "lighthouse" for returning citizens, but cite inconsistent support, weak handoffs, travel burdens, unclear coordination across providers, and uncertainty about leadership and resourcing entering FY26.

2. **Advisory board: The Commission.**
   The Commission on Re-Entry and Returning Citizens (est. 2013) is meant to advise the Mayor, D.C. Council, and MORCA, but appears underutilized and not well known in the field, with ongoing challenges around membership and engagement.

3. **Government-run workforce programs and wraparound services.**
   D.C. relies on several models: the READY Center which provides referrals to those exiting D.C. Jail (with follow-through gaps); Project Empowerment for paid transitional work (praised for access, critiqued for job quality and mobility); LEAD Out! LEAD Up! for pre-/post-release continuity (limited reach for FBOP returnees); and OJT wage reimbursement to support earn-and-learn training (very low level of awareness of the program among reentry experts in the field).

4. **Nonprofit-run, government-funded workforce development programs.**
   The Georgetown Paralegal and Pivot programs are viewed as high-value, higher-skill pathways, but are small relative to need and don't always translate into sustained placement.

5. **Employer incentives: Access to Jobs.**
   MORCA's Access to Jobs wage subsidy is seen as promising, but awareness is low, scale is limited, and stakeholders worry the structure may not drive higher-wage mobility or could incentivize churn after subsidies end.

6. **Record relief: Ban the Box, record sealing, and expungement.**
   D.C. has Ban the Box, record sealing, and expungement policies. Stakeholders cite late-stage disqualifications and weak enforcement and loopholes that can override the spirit of the Ban the Box policy.

Topline Takeaways

Overall, the comparative analysis underscores that D.C's challenge is not a lack of programs, but system design. Clarity of roles, coordination across providers, sufficient capacity for warm handoffs and follow-up, and alignment of training and incentives with real labor market pathways (including technology and digital literacy) are lacking. Strengthening these elements can help D.C. expand its

effective labor pool, support employers facing shortages, improve economic mobility for returning citizens, and advance public safety through stable employment.

- D.C. has built a sizable reentry workforce ecosystem, but outcomes remain uneven, suggesting gaps in coordination, capacity, and follow-through rather than a simple lack of programming.

- MORCA is widely viewed as the "lighthouse" for returning citizens, yet stakeholders report confusion about its role, inconsistent service delivery, and a need for stronger staffing, funding, and warm handoffs.

- D.C.'s reentry advisory structure (the Commission) appears underutilized and not widely known, limiting its value as a policy and coordination lever.

- Referral-heavy models (e.g., READY Center and MORCA) risk losing clients between handoffs, especially when transportation, follow-up support, and program-capacity awareness are limited.

- Earn-and-learn models are essential, but stakeholders want training that is more dynamic and responsive, especially on digital literacy and evolving workforce needs.

- High-performing training pipelines (e.g., Georgetown Pivot/Paralegal) are praised but small in scale, and placement sustainability remains a persistent challenge across programs.

- Employer incentives show promise but may be too small and too narrowly structured to shift the labor market at scale without expanded funding and guardrails against churn.

- Ban the Box is well-intended, but enforcement and transparency issues persist, with stakeholders urging clearer upfront employer criteria and stronger mechanisms to prevent late-stage disqualification.

Proposed Next Steps

The findings point to a clear opportunity for D.C. to move from a fragmented set of well-intentioned programs to a more coordinated, data-driven reentry workforce system.

- Strengthen coordination with FBOP to allow the District and its partners to better plan for reentry before people return home.

- Standardize data collection and reporting across government-funded programs to improve accountability, enable evaluation of what works, and support smarter policymaking.

- Clear communication and promotion of existing programs, paired with expanded employer incentives and earn-and-learn models, to better align workforce supply with labor market demand.

- Finally, D.C. must clarify the role and resourcing of MORCA, improve case management and follow-up across providers, assess and strengthen enforcement of Ban the Box, and ensure workforce training remains responsive to a rapidly changing economy.

Together, these steps would help D.C. expand its labor pool, support local employers, and create more consistent, equitable employment pathways for justice-impacted residents.