

OPENING DOORS TO QUALITY JOBS

INCREASING ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT THAT FOSTERS SOCIAL MOBILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Justice-impacted individuals experience persistent barriers to employment preventing reentry success, weakening local economies, and undermining public safety. Fostering successful reentry takes a two pronged approach: removing arduous and arbitrary barriers that systematically exclude justice-impacted people from life and family sustaining careers and investing in subsidized workforce development courses and programs that offer financial support while setting people on the path to lucrative employment opportunities.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the expansion of Workforce Pell, represent important progress. However, WIOA has stalled in Congress and the finalized rules for Workforce Pell do not immediately mobilize the grants to their full potential. The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) urges lawmakers—at both the state and federal levels—to invest in workforce development programs, leverage tax incentives, facilitate public-private partnerships, and implement other employer-focused strategies that engender quality jobs.

BACKGROUND

Each year, more than half a million people return home from incarceration, eagerly seeking work. However, many qualified individuals are excluded from employment opportunities due to policies unrelated to job performance or public safety.

In addition to the structural barriers formerly-incarcerated individuals may face, available job opportunities often lack livable wages or health benefits. For example, in low-wage jobs employees struggle to afford basic life necessities, afford healthcare, or invest in their futures for themselves and their families. Furthermore, employment that lacks skill-building opportunities effectively stalls economic growth, leaving individuals stuck in place.

These limitations are too often overlooked, ignoring how quality employment results in profound benefits for both individuals and entire communities.

QUALITY JOBS FOSTER SOCIAL MOBILITY, INCREASE PUBLIC SAFETY, AND STRENGTHEN ENTIRE COMMUNITIES

THE CHALLENGE

After reentry, formerly-incarcerated individuals continue to be punished through collateral consequences. For example, today, thousands of rules nationwide prevent justice-involved people from holding professional licenses.¹ These consequences are often applied without considering how much time has passed since returning from incarceration or an individual's education and employment efforts. As a result, formerly-incarcerated individuals are locked out of quality jobs despite appropriate qualifications or potential.

¹ MDRC

ERIC'S STORY

When Eric returned from incarceration, CEO's pre-apprenticeship program helped him gain hands-on experience in sustainable construction, solar installation, and carpentry – skills that led him to join the local Carpenters union. Now, Eric installs solar panels and supports his wife and kids with union benefits and steady work.

“

THIS CHANGED MY LIFE A LOT. I WANT TO KEEP WORKING IN THE UNION AND RETIRE FROM IT. I LOVE WHAT I'M DOING, AND THE BENEFITS MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE.”

Eric, Buffalo, New York

WHY QUALITY JOBS ARE ESSENTIAL TO REENTRY



600,000² people are released from prison each year and face an unemployment rate nearly **5 times³** their peers



On average, justice-impacted individuals earn **\$6,700 annually⁴** after reentry



Accounting for other factors, the recidivism rate for individuals with stable employment drops by **58%⁵**

THE SOLUTIONS

1. Invest in Reentry Employment

Lawmakers should invest in robust paid reentry job training that equips justice-impacted individuals with the wrap-around supports needed immediately following release. Such opportunities are especially important for those who may be returning from prison with no prior work experience or after a long period of incarceration. These investments must be made across the spectrum of training opportunities to meet the various needs of justice-impacted job seekers.

2. Track Data and Encourage Collaboration

States and workforce agencies should collect longitudinal measures of job quality, and incentivize partnerships across reentry organizations, unions, training providers, and employers to provide a better pathway to a job. Many states are behind in building the robust data tracking infrastructure critical to implementing and strengthening education and training opportunities including short-term credentials, apprenticeships, employment & training programs, Workforce Pell, and more.

² BJS | ³ Prison Policy Initiative | ⁴ Brennan Center for Justice | ⁵ Council on Criminal Justice

THE SOLUTIONS

3. Tax Incentives, Public-Private Partnerships and Other Employer-Focused Strategies

Policymakers should use tax credits, public contracting preferences, and other incentives to encourage employers to hire and retain justice-impacted workers in quality jobs. Incentives should reward employers that provide living wages, benefits, skills training, career advancement opportunities, and supportive workplace practices. For example, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) should be reauthorized and strengthened to more effectively engage justice-impacted jobseekers and small businesses.

5. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity

The reauthorization of WIOA will help fund targeted training, career services, and transitional support to help justice-impacted individuals secure economic stability and reduce recidivism. However, the WIOA legislation released by the House Education and Workforce Committee in April is largely partisan proposed cuts and consolidations that would impair integral reentry services.

4. Expand the Workforce Pell Grant

The federal government should address current limitations on the Workforce Pell Grant by expanding partnership allowances between Pell-accredited institutions and workforce programs, expanding Workforce Pell to federally funded workforce programs that are not Title IV accredited, and ensuring that success metrics associated with the grants consider individualized progress among program participants.

6. Transportation Worker Identification Credential Efficiency Act

Congress should enact the TWICE Act to remove barriers that prevent qualified justice-impacted individuals from accessing careers in the maritime and transportation sectors. The legislation would streamline the Transportation Security Administration's waiver process for individuals seeking a TWIC Card. At a time when supply chain employers continue to face significant workforce shortages, the TWICE Act would expand access to quality jobs while maintaining strong security standards. To learn more about this legislation, visit our TWICE policy brief.

BY THE NUMBERS

Justice-involved individuals commonly find employment in sectors experiencing the most severe impacts of the current worker shortage, with nearly **1.9 million** open jobs in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and retail trade.⁶

CEO PARTICIPANTS ARE:

48%

more likely to be employed than their non-participating peers⁷

19%

less likely to be convicted for a felony after three years⁸

123%

boost in income⁹

CONCLUSION



Failing to invest in the development and corporate incentivization of quality jobs has significant impacts on both individuals and the economy at large. Removing the barriers to these employment pathways ensures formerly-incarcerated people are supported on their pathway to employment and success. By prioritizing employment and training that supports long-term mobility, policymakers can guarantee that no motivated individual is left behind.

