

# CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

## Public Hearing Public Protection Budget Committee

February 12, 2021

### TESTIMONY

My name is Jessica Centeno, and I am the New York State Deputy Executive Director for The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO). I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony about our program model and work across NY, and the need for increased resources to help people coming home from prison access employment.

CEO's mission is to provide immediate, effective, and comprehensive employment services to individuals recently returning home from incarceration. As the largest provider of reentry employment services in New York, we serve individuals on parole and probation supervision, with an intentional focus on serving individuals facing the most significant barriers to remaining free from incarceration and the criminal legal system while also returning \$3.30 for every \$1 of public investment. CEO's partnership with DOCCS and DCJS has been critical to our work throughout the state, helping provide pipelines of participants and supporting the cost of our program. But in order for us to continue to provide these essential services, maintaining these resources in the budget is crucial.

### **Background on CEO**

Our four stage program has two core components: transitional employment and vocational services, helping formerly incarcerated individuals get and maintain jobs that can sustain them and their families. After our participants complete a 4-day job readiness training, CEO hires and provides them with immediate, paid employment through our transitional work crews. To provide transitional jobs, CEO operates more than 30 work crews across New York State that provide public sector agencies with a variety of general labor services. Access to immediate work on a transitional work crew helps our participants gain stability and motivation as they work with a dedicated team of staff to attain long-term employment outside of CEO and support them navigate any potential obstacles to employment.

In FY 19 alone CEO enrolled over **2,700** people, hired more than **2,000** as CEO employees in transitional jobs, and made more than 1,500 permanent job placements with 200 plus businesses in New York State. While we had to reduce our crew capacity

to maintain safety and enable social distancing during the pandemic, we still enrolled **1,733** people and hired more than **1,000** into transitional employment during this public health and economic crisis.

### **COVID-19 Response Efforts**

CEO has remained fully engaged in its emergency relief efforts to support formerly incarcerated job seekers while simultaneously providing essential services throughout the Coronavirus pandemic. We converted all vocational services to a work from home configuration, in which staff engage participants remotely. To ensure our transitional work crews continue to operate, we instituted protocols to safely operate teams using guidance from the CDC and other public health authorities. We continue to offer remote training options and coaching sessions for participants, even those who cannot work on our transitional work crews, to maintain engagement.

It has been well established that COVID-19 is impacting communities of color who are also overrepresented in the legal system at a disproportionate rate in New York, and who are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 both in mortality as well as loss of employment. Exacerbating this is the fact that this crisis has hit the nonprofit community extremely hard. Organizations like CEO that provide fundamental services to individuals suffering from a legacy of intentional disinvestment and criminalization are struggling to operate throughout the pandemic, despite the fact that these services are more in demand and urgent than ever.

### **Funding Priority: Maintaining Funding for Vocational Services and Transitional Work Opportunities**

CEO has a number of priorities for the public protection budget committee to help ensure we can continue our work in a sustainable way and are able to provide more transitional work opportunities to people coming home from incarceration.

Currently, CEO's vocational services funding in New York City is funneled through the DOCCS Vocational Development Contract, and covers 1/5 of the costs of CEO's intake and outreach specialists, Pathways to Employment our job readiness orientation, job coaching and job development, retention services and additional skills trainings. In upstate New York, CEO's vocational services are funded through a performance based contract with DCJS, which pays CEO based on employment outcomes achieved for our participants. These funding streams are absolutely critical to maintain during the COVID-19 response and economic hardship.

Currently, the DOCCS Neighborhood Works Contract allows CEO's New York City and upstate sites in Buffalo, Albany and Rochester to provide paid transitional work opportunities for people on parole throughout the state. CEO also serves individuals on probation and other court-involved young adults in New York City and Buffalo. Without this contract, many of these individuals would not have access to work upon coming home. Maintaining these services is absolutely critical to the pandemic response, economic recovery, and racial and socioeconomic equity.

These are sound investments and policy changes the state can and should adopt through the budget. At CEO, we don't just put people to work; we help keep them out of prisons and jails. Our program offers a unique triple-bottom line of economic and social impact to the state through high quality local services, creating a pathway to permanent jobs for people after incarceration, and promoting public safety via reduced recidivism.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

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