

# **CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

## **Public Hearing Workforce Development Budget Committee**

**January 31, 2022**

### **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 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 CY 21 alone CEO enrolled over 1,000 people. Of those who worked transitional jobs, 40% were permanently placed into employment outside of CEO. CEO has invested in training opportunities for its participants to help them find better employment. This has

largely been through short-term, stackable, industry recognized credentials that allow participants to build their resume while they are earning an income. CEO's internal analysis of those that engage in training shows a higher likelihood of placement, higher starting wages, and better job retention. CEO's core model of providing transitional work and employment services coupled with training expand the possibilities to stronger career pipelines to the individuals we serve, and build a foundation for a stable, productive life for themselves and their families.

### **Funding Priority: Workforce Development**

CEO has a number of priorities for the workforce development 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.

Each year, thousands of individuals return to our communities from prison or jail in need of employment. Black individuals disproportionately bear the harm of incarceration and have also been exposed to the health and economic effects of the pandemic at significantly higher rates. The unemployment gap between black and white workers has grown even more during the pandemic, creating an urgent imperative to generate effective workforce solutions. An investment in additional workforce development resources would provide an opportunity to direct funds toward employing individuals returning from incarceration, who are among those most affected by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic.

Improving public spaces and economic prosperity goals for New York State go hand in hand. Specific neighborhood improvement efforts can be paired with workforce development opportunities; for example, the Center for Employment Opportunities work crews focus on beautification efforts throughout the city, and this work helps participants gain stability and motivation so that they can ultimately succeed in long-term employment.

### **We want to see more investment in workforce program - specifically around:**

Dedicating workforce funds to support evidence-based reentry employment programs, specifically those that provide transitional employment and vocational services, will provide more economic mobility opportunities for individuals returning from prison and jail. Focusing on providing evidence-based, person-centered employment services to those with the greatest barriers to employment and the highest likelihood to return to incarceration has the greatest impact on the workforce.

Leveraging federal funding streams such as Subsidized Work-Based Learning (SWBL) under the SNAP E&T program in NYS by incorporating subsidized wages to support work-based learning including:

- Transitional jobs
- Pre-apprenticeships
- Apprenticeships
- Customized training
- Incumbent worker training
- On-the-job-training

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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