

CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Public Hearing Public Protection Budget Committee February 7, 2023

Dear Chair Helene Weinstein and Chair Liz Krueger, and Members of the Senate and Assembly,

My name is Jessica Centeno, and I am the New York 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 has nearly 40 years of experience in workforce development programming. 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 State, we serve individuals on parole and probation supervision in Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, and New York City 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 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 with navigating any potential obstacles to employment.

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 resumes while earning an income. CEO has specifically invested in Commercial Driver's License (CDL) training and digital skills credentials through partnerships with Google and CompTIA. 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

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expands the possibilities to stronger career pipelines for the individuals we serve and builds a foundation for a stable, productive life for themselves and their families.

Funding Priority: Public Protection

First, CEO would like to thank Governor Hochul and the Department of Criminal Justice Services for the \$11.5M investment in reentry and ATI to support the stability and success of returning New Yorkers. This historic investment will provide an opportunity to enhance and scale resources for formerly incarcerated individuals receiving reentry services. At the same time, core workforce services currently being delivered by organizations like CEO must remain financially viable. CEO urges the legislature to consider our recommendations to ensure the investment brings additional capacity to serve formerly incarcerated people, innovative and new strategies to target this population to increase public safety, and ensure the process is equitable. CEO welcomes an opportunity to work with the managing agency to draft an RFP for these additional dollars.

We want to see targeted investment in public protection - specifically around:

- **Targeted Investments in Evidence-Based Reentry Services and Advanced Training:** Reentry programs, such as CEO, provide vital and comprehensive reentry and workforce services across the state. In the last ten years, CEO served over 20,000 formerly incarcerated New Yorkers and has made increased investments in advanced training opportunities in transportation, construction, and informational technology (IT) to ensure our participants have access to quality jobs with growth opportunities. The expansion of these opportunities for justice-impacted individuals provides clear benefits by reducing recidivism, increasing post-release employment, and saving taxpayer money. Although our level of services and capacity have increased by nearly 60%, our funding through the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) has remained stagnant for over 10 years. In addition to the Governor's historic investment in ATI and reentry, it is also important to adequately support effective reentry programming that have long standing relationships with DOCCS and the Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS).
- **Funding for Direct Cash Assistance:** CEO encourages the committee to provide funding for direct cash assistance for ATI-Reentry program participants. CEO has piloted and evaluated the employment impacts of providing financial assistance upon reentry through the [Returning Citizen Stimulus Program](#). CEO and our local partners distributed \$4.34M in reentry cash assistance to over 1,700 formerly incarcerated New Yorkers as they engaged in vocational training during the COVID-19 pandemic. Early evidence suggests that financial assistance upon release from incarceration does improve recidivism outcomes¹

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272714002485>

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and may help stabilize formerly incarcerated individuals as they transition back into their communities.²

- **Leveraging Federal Funding Streams:** New York has multiple opportunities to access federal funding through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which provides expanded allowances for workforce development training to targeted groups, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program, which permits reimbursement of allowable expenses for SNAP recipients. With IIJA, CEO suggests that lawmakers require implementing agencies to prioritize training and hiring individuals with high barriers to employment in infrastructure projects, including returning citizens. CEO also suggests that the state incorporate subsidized work-based learning (SWBL), a paid training component that was strengthened in the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill, which would allow participant wages during transitional jobs, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, and incumbent worker training, to be reimbursable expenses for workforce training providers.
- **Support the Income Disregard:** Under the current social service law, the impact of the benefits cliff is not addressed. We support the proposed legislation and respectfully recommend that it is expanded, thereby establishing a 6-month, 100% income disregard for New Yorkers receiving cash assistance, as well as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, Supplemental Security Income, New York Child Care Subsidy Program, Section 8-Housing Choice Voucher Program, and/or Emergency Housing Voucher Choice Program and participating in government-funded job training, adult or postsecondary education programs, and/or subsidized and unsubsidized employment opportunities. This will enable New Yorkers to engage in training and advance their careers without the fear of losing critical benefits that support their families. This legislation will impact CEO and the individuals we serve under our statewide SNAP E&T contract. We know first-hand the SNAP program is critical during an individual's reentry period when they face a plethora of hurdles to reintegration in their communities. By implementing this income disregard, these individuals will be able to gain financial stability in a most critical stage of rebuilding their life and shaping their future for themselves, their families and their communities.

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.

² <https://coloradosun.com/2022/05/04/colorado-incarceration-reentry-stimulus-program/>

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Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

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