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Good afternoon, Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Ramos, and Bronson, and members of the legislature. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the FY 2026 Executive Budget.

I'm Jim Martin, Executive Director of the Association of Community Employment Programs for the Homeless (ACE). ACE serves New Yorkers with histories of homelessness, addiction, and incarceration, who are ready to re-enter the workforce and achieve long-term economic independence. Each year, we serve about 200 new participants in Project Comeback, our workforce development program, provide services to over 600 program graduates in Project Stay, our employment retention program, and employ over 150 program graduates full time in our supported employment program.

Project Comeback provides adult education, industry specific certifications, job placement assistance, individualized counseling, work experience opportunities, wrap-around supports, and life-long aftercare services – ensuring participants can achieve their goals and maintain their gains.

ACE has requested the inclusion of \$500,000 in the FY26 State Budget to support Project Comeback. These funds will empower underserved New Yorkers by addressing the dual challenges of unemployment and legal barriers, equipping participants with the tools to achieve economic independence and long-term stability.

\$400,000 will support paid work experience initiatives under Project Comeback, providing participants with structured opportunities to gain hands-on work experience while earning a paycheck. \$100,000 will fund legal services, including "Know Your Rights" workshops, RAP sheet corrections, and advocacy for justice-involved individuals to overcome systemic barriers to employment.

Our Project Comeback 2024 cohort was 88% male, 12% female; 43% self-identified as African-American or Black, 35% self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, of any race; 13% self-identified as White, not of Hispanic origin, and the remaining 9% self-identified as either Asian, Native American or multiracial. 31% of participants did not have a High School Diploma or its equivalent and 45% of participants read below the sixth-grade level. 85% of participants had a diagnosis of substance use disorder and 62% had been diagnosed with additional, co-occurring mental health conditions. 58% were chronically homeless as defined by the U.S. Federal Government and 100% were unemployed at the time of entering the program.

The barriers of housing instability, untreated mental health conditions, and low educational attainment, are further compounded by justice involvement: 85% of participants had past involvement with the justice system and 67% were previously incarcerated in a state or federal prison.

For individuals re-entering the workforce after incarceration, two aspects of Project Comeback are particularly critical: *work experience training* and *legal assistance*. Together, these provide participants with the skills, coaching, and confidence to re-enter the workforce, while removing systemic and institutional barriers to recognizing their full potential.

Work Experience Training: Creating Pathways Forward



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Participants at ACE engage in work experience training where they build recent work experience for their resumes while learning the rules and expectations of the workplace. Participants work closely with site supervisors who coach them in positive work habits and encourage them in their vocational journey. The bulk of work experience opportunities consist of providing sanitation and beautification services throughout NYC. Participants are often stationed in communities where they have lived, rehabilitating those spaces while transforming their relationships with those neighborhoods and themselves.

Participants receive an hourly stipend for their work experience training. This stipend is a vehicle that allows them to achieve their goals and funds their job search activities – including obtaining IDs and interview attire, keeping their phones on, providing car fare for interviews, and more. Many participants are receiving a paycheck for the first time in their lives. To support participants as they adapt to having a steady paycheck, ACE provides a financial curriculum focused on assets, banking, and credit, as well as one-on-one financial coaches who help participants address and negotiate past debt, back taxes, child support arrears, or other financial liabilities that can otherwise de-incentivize full-time, on-the-books employment.

Legal Services for Justice-Involved Participants: Ensuring Access to Opportunity

In 2024, 68% of ACE participants reported histories of incarceration. Legal involvement often creates significant barriers to securing stable employment. ACE's legal services, led by an on-site attorney, are a critical component in addressing these challenges. ACE's legal services, led by an on-site attorney, are a critical component in addressing these challenges. The legal support program includes Know Your Rights workshops to educate participants on their legal protections under laws such as New York's Fair Chance Act. The attorney provides RAP sheet review and repair sessions and helps participants seal records and obtain Certificates of Relief from Disabilities. She also helps participants to vacate warrants, navigate legal proceedings, and represents those facing unjust employment denials or professional licensing denials due to their criminal records.

These services are crucial for ensuring participants have equitable access to employment opportunities while also creating pathways to long-term economic stability by eliminating legal barriers that have traditionally excluded justice-involved individuals.

Funding Request and Need

The continued success of ACE's programs relies on our ability to sustain and expand services that empower individuals facing significant barriers to employment. Of our 2024 cohort, 62% of participants secured full-time employment to date. Of the 2023 cohort, 65% of those with a known employment status were employed one-year after securing employment. These achievements are possible because ACE are equipping individuals with the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. However, the waitlist for program entry is at an all-time high, and support is needed to allow us to serve more New Yorkers in 2025.

With \$500K in funding from New York State, ACE will:

- Expand paid work experience opportunities to serve more individuals, enabling them to gain the skills, confidence, and recent work experience needed to secure full-time employment.
- Provide essential legal services that address systemic barriers to employment, such as RAP sheet errors, unresolved warrants, and employment denials, helping participants access opportunities to achieve lasting economic stability.



- Sustain and enhance program delivery to ensure participants receive the wraparound support needed for long-term success.

This funding will allow ACE to scale its impact, enabling more underserved individuals to rebuild their lives, achieve economic independence, and reconnect with their families.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.