

PROGRAM: Looking Forward

DATE RUN: April 15, 2020

SOURCE URL: <https://medium.com/@NSCRachelU/re-entering-the-fray-e710e8fa4e65>

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# Re-Entering the Fray

[Rachel Unruh](#)

*As Prisons Downsize to Contain COVID-19, Returning Citizens Try to Find a Foothold*



JEVS Human Services in Philadelphia is ensuring that returning citizens have the support they need during the COVID-19 crisis.

With crowded conditions and limited sanitation, our nation's prisons and jails have become COVID-19 hot spots, putting the lives of inmates and staff at risk. As of April 8th, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that Cook County Jail in Chicago was the largest source of known COVID-19 infections anywhere in the nation.

Officials have reduced the jail's population [by 20 percent](#) over the last month, an effort that's in line with other states and localities, where officials have released [thousands of individuals](#) from jails and prisons in an attempt to slow the virus' spread.

Re-entry into society and the workforce is a challenge in the best of times. Prior to COVID-19 when the U.S. enjoyed record low unemployment, returning citizens experienced an unemployment rate of nearly 30 percent due to lack of access to essential supports and training as well as policies and perceptions that restricted their access to jobs. According to the [NAACP](#), a "criminal record can reduce the likelihood of a callback or job offer by nearly 50 percent. The negative impact of a criminal record is twice as large for African American applicants." Now, with some economists projecting that overall unemployment could [approach 16 percent](#) by July, returning citizens will face an even tougher climb.

"We saw what happened in the last major recession in 2008," said Chris Watler Chief External Affairs Officer at the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) on a recent episode of [Skilled America Podcast](#). CEO is a nonprofit that provides employment, training and support services for returning citizens in 28 cities and 10 states.

"We know that people at the bottom of the skills and education ladder never really fully recovered from the last recession," he said. "This situation we're now confronting in the labor market is unprecedented. I expect we're going to see a much higher demand for services."

Jeffrey Abramowitz, Executive Director of Re-entry Services, for JEVS Human Services in Philadelphia expressed similar concern.

***“We’ve come so far in advocating for fairness across the board,” he said. “Give returning citizens equal opportunity, let them show their skills and their talent with everyone else.”***

Abramowitz fears that with the sudden increase in the ranks of the unemployed, it will be harder for these job seekers to get a foot hold.

Fifty-two-year-old Darnell Manuel has a bachelors degree in communications with a minor in business. After experiencing incarceration, he found JEVS’ Looking Forward Philadelphia re-entry program.

“When you have a criminal background, and you get in front of people...you feel like there’s a swinging pendulum ready to knock you down before you can say a word,” he said.

But JEVS Human Services has changed his outlook.

***“They make it comfortable for you to come here and comfortable to say, you know what, I might have another chance at life,” he said. “I might have another chance to raise my child or grandchild, maybe one day have a 401K.”***

So how are organizations like CEO and JEVS Human Services continuing to work with women and men like Manuel in their re-entry programs while also dealing with increased demand for services when social distancing makes these essential programs harder to deliver?

## Sheltering in Place When There's No Place to Shelter

In many cases, the rapid pace at which some cities and states have attempted to reduce capacity in jails and prisons has not been matched with a plan or resources for re-entry support. Many inmates have no home to return to and many shelters won't admit them unless they've been quarantined for 15 days.

Quintin Williams, Field Building Manager with Heartland Alliance, a Chicago-based nonprofit that works on local, state and national re-entry policy, said, "COVID-19 has exposed what we have noticed for a while, that people returning home often don't have safe and affordable places to go."

"If we allow people to come home and we don't provide any support services for them, then that's a big mistake," said Abramowitz. "We're just afraid...that people are going to be left out on the streets and we're doing everything we can to connect them with the places where they'll get the right resources."

Unfortunately, many local and state officials haven't been ready to address these basic needs.

***"State and local governments do not appear to be prepared to provide sufficient pre- and post-release reentry supports to people being released early from detention and incarceration due to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Carlton Mayers II, Senior Policy Manager with Heartland Alliance.***

"They need to collaborate with community-based organizations and direct service providers on facilitating transitional plans that ensure the receipt of effective reentry supports such as safe

housing, adequate medical care, and ample financial resources,” he said.

Mayers wants state and local governments to waive current prohibitions on individuals with criminal records from receiving need-based supports, in addition to leveraging federal funds like the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant program and Emergency Solutions Grants to expand supports.

## Trying to Get a Foothold in the Labor Market

Local organizations like JEVS Human Services and CEO have been working to ensure people get connected to housing and other essential supports prior to and during the pandemic. But they’re also trying to position returning citizens to enter the labor market through transitional employment and skills training.

CEO has had to downsize, and in some cases suspend, its transitional employment work crews to follow social distancing guidelines. And like many workforce development programs across the country, both CEO and JEVS Human Services have had to transition to remote, digital engagement with their clients. But this creates challenges that are particular to serving returning citizens for whom face to face contact has proven crucial for building trust and stability.

“The challenge is working virtually in a world where it’s really hard to gain people’s trust,” said Abramowitz.

“Many of our clients have quite pronounced mental health needs generally,” said Watler. “Many of them are survivors of trauma. Their life may be chaotic. But at CEO there’s some order. When

they come, they come to work or they're meeting with their job coach."

***Remote learning strains the trust and stability these programs have worked to establish. But it also creates access challenges for a population disproportionately impacted by the digital divide.***

"Do people have access to the internet?" asked Watler. "Do they have the technology? A phone, a laptop, a computer? There is still this digital divide and that makes it really hard to do the kinds of things that a lot of other people are doing very easily."

"Digital literacy is one of the biggest barriers that many of our clients have," said Abramowitz. "And yet we're forced to teach them and instruct them and get them on a platform that they may not be comfortable with."

Manuel agreed. "Some of these people have been in jail for 30 years. They don't know what an iPhone or android or a smart phone is."

Organizations like CEO and JEVS Human Services are doing everything possible to keep the men and women in their programs engaged despite these challenges. But they are clear that policymakers need to be a partner at the table.

Watler says that cities and states could provide greater flexibility in how nonprofit contractors deliver services given social distancing requirements and other challenges in the COVID-19 era. Having the flexibility to ensure clients have internet access could go a long way. As could allowing clients to get paid to do

remote learning and remote training and access help in a more flexible way.

He also wants to see some of the states that CEO works in, like New York, drawing down more federal resources that have the flexibility to serve returning citizens — programs like SNAP Employment and Training.

Abramowitz wants to see a comprehensive set of policy responses. “We’re just at the tip of iceberg now,” he said. “There’s a lot that’s going to be happening in workforce development as far as getting people into jobs and opportunities. I truly believe that comprehensive skill development, incentives for employers to hire returning citizens, educating returning citizens, walking with them, there needs to be a holistic approach dealing with this.”

Melissa Young, Senior Director for Research and Policy at Heartland believes that from a policy perspective, COVID-19 decarceration efforts have “continued to demonstrate the need to advance trauma-informed workplace policies and confront and affirmatively address racial inequity across the workforce development field.”

Most of all, Watler wants policymakers and communities to see the promise in returning citizens.

“I want us to keep in mind that in a recovery as we move forward, we want to make sure that we have what we need in place to really help and support our fellow community members who are most vulnerable,” he said.

***“[I want us to] think about people who are leaving incarceration, not just as a problem to be solved. They***

***are amazing people that could be a real resource to the community.”***

Manuel agrees.

“We’re going to need these legislators and these policymakers to open the door. We all need each other, I believe.”