



2021 REENTRY PRIORITIES

PREPARED BY

The Connecticut Reentry Collaborative Policy Working Group

INTRODUCTION

The Connecticut Reentry Collaborative Policy Working Group, established this year, is made up of service providers and advocates from the ten reentry roundtables working together to support and advocate for reentry policy in Connecticut. The goals of the Policy Work Group are to consolidate and coordinate the efforts of various organizations and stakeholders working on behalf of returning citizens in order to maximize our impact and achieve legislative improvements for the reentry community statewide.

We spent the fall of 2020 hearing from policymakers and advocates about their efforts and bills, as well as hearing from one other about the most pressing issues in our own work. This report is the result of those discussions. In it we have outlined our legislative and policy priorities for 2021 and onward. We recognize that the potential for this legislative session might be limited due to COVID-19 constraints, but put forward these priorities as both short and long term goals for reentry in Connecticut. We look forward to working with our partners in our communities, the Department of Corrections, the governor's office, and the Capitol to push for bold and lasting changes in the Connecticut criminal justice landscape so that men and women returning from prison have as much opportunity and access as any other Connecticut resident.

2021 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Policies that already have corresponding legislation in the pipeline.

- 1. Clean Slate**
- 2. Anti-Discrimination in Employment**
- 3. Anti-Discrimination in Housing**
- 4. Reentry Housing Assistance Program**
- 5. Restoration of Voting Rights**

LONG TERM POLICY GOALS

Policies that have not yet been proposed in legislation.

- 1. Justice Reinvestment**
- 2. Standardized Identification Policy**
- 3. Healthcare Continuity**
- 4. CJPAC Reentry Representation**
- 5. Statewide Reentry Coordinator Position**

2021 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

EMPLOYMENT

Clean Slate

In Connecticut and across the country, minor sentences become life sentences because employer discrimination blocks the pathway to employment for returning citizens. As a result, the consequences of incarceration last long after men and women have served their sentences. Though returning citizens have the opportunity to apply for a pardon three years after their last misdemeanor conviction and five years after their last felony conviction, this process is burdensome, costly, bureaucratic, and subjective. As a result, most of the approximately 5,000 Connecticut residents who complete their prison sentences every year are forced to contend with the systemic barriers Connecticut imposes on men and women with a criminal record.

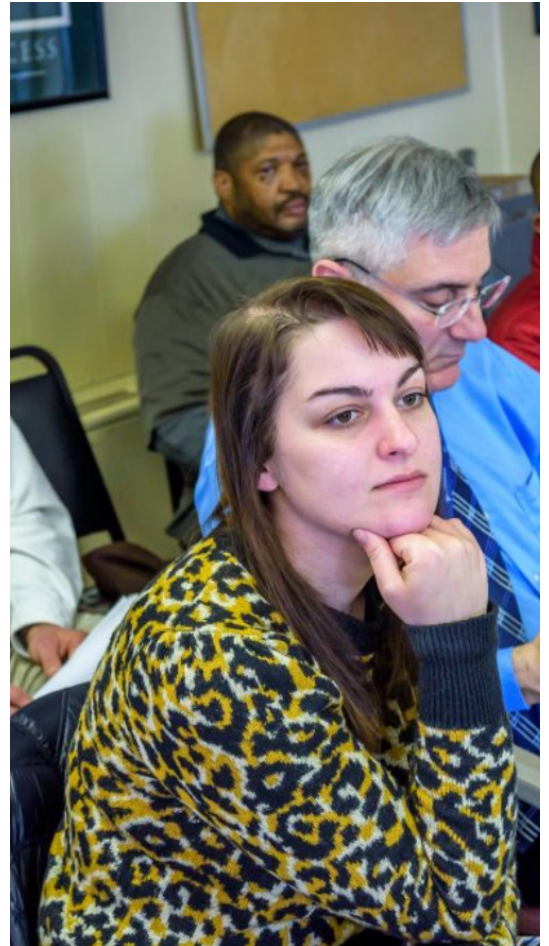
Clean Slate is the solution. The legislation provides for the automatic erasure of criminal records for certain convictions after a set period of time (the same as would be necessary to be eligible for a pardon) for men and women who remain free of the criminal justice system upon release from custody. In addition to eliminating barriers for the formerly-incarcerated, Clean Slate would also improve public safety by causing the dramatic reduction of recidivism rates and boost the economy, reducing unemployment and increasing economic activity in the state.



EMPLOYMENT

Anti-Discrimination in Employment

According to the ACLU, there are over 500 collateral consequences associated with a criminal record, many of which concern barriers to employment. Such barriers disproportionately impact Black and Brown people, furthering the systemic racial inequity and injustice that exists in our state. Justice-impacted men and women should not have to rely on pardons, which can be obtained only through a lengthy, costly, and arbitrary process, to get hired for a job. It is time to put an end to discriminatory hiring practices.



That is why we support **anti-discrimination legislation** that would expand the public sector protections for people with a criminal record to the private sector and modify the existing individualized assessment process for potential employees. Under this legislation, no employer would be able to deny a person employment on the basis of his or her criminal record unless they make a determination based on an individualized assessment that includes the nature of the crime and its relationship to the job, the time elapsed since the offense, and the degree of the individual's rehabilitation.

HOUSING

Reentry Housing Assistance Program

In the spring of 2020, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness and Connecticut Department of Corrections (DOC) established the **Reentry Housing Assistance Program** to ensure that every person preparing to leave prison has stable housing upon release. DOC staff seeks housing alternatives for individuals that they identify as potentially homeless. If not able to find housing, DOC staff refer clients to the Coordinated Access Network, which then supports clients as they develop a housing plan and continues to work with clients upon release. This program, which currently focuses on the End of Sentence population, has already seen great success, with about 23-25 referrals per month. In the upcoming legislative session, we support legislation that would codify this program into law and allocate funds in DOC's budget to support it. Such additional resources would also enable DOC to better connect with and support women, whose reentry needs are often overlooked.

Anti-discrimination in housing

Across the state, returning citizens are too often forced to live in shelters because of rejection from landlords due to their criminal records. In these cases, landlords make judgments about an individual based on convictions that have no relation to their reliability as a tenant and might be as many as several decades old.

An Act Concerning Consideration of Criminal Convictions of a Prospective Tenant seeks to change this. The policy states that there should be no blanket denials made on the basis of a criminal record and no questions about criminal convictions in any housing applications. Landlords can, however, conduct criminal background screening within a certain time period, and consider a denial only if the felony or misdemeanor, if repeated, would adversely affect the health, safety or welfare of other tenants. Though only a first step, this legislation would help to decrease barriers to housing for the formerly-incarcerated population in Connecticut.

LONG TERM POLICY GOALS

JUSTICE REINVESTMENT

Increased Funding For Reentry Statewide

The Connecticut incarcerated population has decreased significantly in the past 25 years. This past year, Connecticut has seen a rapid reduction in the carceral population in large part due to a decrease in arrests during COVID-19. This decarceration means significant savings for the state. These savings should be **reinvested into community programs** that would create opportunities, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety. We must also work to ensure that the trend of decarceration continues even after COVID-19.

One such area in need of funding in our communities are Reentry Welcome Centers similar to those in Hartford and New Haven. These centers serve as drop-off locations for men and women being released from the Department of Corrections and offer comprehensive services such as housing, healthcare, and employment support. By ensuring that there is a warm hand-off from DOC to the community, we help guarantee a more seamless reentry into society. There is currently a lack of funding for both the continuation and creation of such programs. In cities such as Waterbury there is widespread support for the initiatives, but a lack of monetary support for their establishment. Such investment into the community means that returning citizens are more supported upon release and thus less likely to re-offend.



IDENTIFICATION

Standardized Identification Requirements

For men and women being released from prison, identification is everything. Without a state ID, social security card, or birth certificate, a person cannot get a job, medicine, or benefits. Too often, returning citizens are released without any form of identification and the burdensome cost of obtaining it is prohibitive. This means that their lives are virtually on hold until they can secure some form of ID. Currently, the Department of Corrections stated policy is that it attaches IDs to each returning citizen's discharge plan. Despite these efforts, service providers in Connecticut's largest cities continue to see countless recently-released individuals without any form of identification.

This is why we propose **standardized identification requirements**. This would include a program that ensures all men and women released from DOC have their IDs in hand, whether the one taken from them upon incarceration or a new one that DOC prints for them before they leave. It may also include a program whereby DOC sends identity information to the DMV or to other benefits organizations to verify individuals' identity so that they do not face barriers in qualifying for their IDs or other benefits. It is imperative that we codify such standards into law so that the ID process is streamlined and reliable.



HEALTHCARE

Healthcare Continuity

It is crucial that men and women being released from prison receive the healthcare that they need, especially in the midst of COVID-19. Numerous studies have shown that returning citizens have a significantly higher risk of death in the two weeks after their release than the general population in the same period. The state should hire **formerly-incarcerated community health workers** to be embedded in community health centers statewide, connecting recently-incarcerated patients with health and social services through outreach, educational, and advocacy efforts, as modeled by the national, empirically-validated, **Transitions Network methodology**. In addition, to eliminate gaps in insurance coverage, the state should apply for a Medicaid waiver to allow incarcerated patients to apply for reinstatement of Medicaid before release.

CJPAC REPRESENTATION

Reentry Representation on the Criminal Justice Advisory Commission

The Criminal Justice Advisory Commission (CJPAC) focuses on issues related to criminal justice in Connecticut, yet has no representatives from the reentry community. We hope to see this change in the coming year with the **addition of a reentry service provider or justice-impacted individual to CJPAC**. Only through representation can we ensure that reentry issues are front and center in conversations around criminal justice statewide.

STATEWIDE REENTRY COORDINATOR

Creation of a Statewide Reentry Position

In Connecticut, thousands of people return home from incarceration every year. Statistics show that 95% of incarcerated residents will eventually be released. Meanwhile, national studies show that around 83% of people recidivate within ten years of discharge from a correctional facility. The State of Connecticut needs to ensure that people have adequate resources when returning home from incarceration. Therefore, we propose that the state provides funding for a **statewide reentry coordinator position** to coordinate service provision with local governments, service providers, and state agencies.

The incumbent will be responsible for analyzing, monitoring, and reporting the performance of reentry grants, contracts, and initiatives. The coordinator will identify gaps, support initiatives to fill those gaps, and create a seamless transition from prison to the community by working closely with the Department of Corrections, local governments, and service providers. The incumbent will also coordinate statewide efforts amongst the reentry centers, local reentry coordinators, and reentry roundtables to apply for philanthropic and federal grants. This position should be funded by the state but housed in a qualified non-profit organization to ensure independence and autonomy. This position can also serve as a reentry representative on bodies such as CJPAC and the sentencing commission.