



Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony

In Support of

Senate Bill 101, An Act Concerning Workforce Development Programs for Incarcerated Person and Persons Reentering the Community After Incarceration

Commerce Committee

February 22, 2022

Good afternoon, Senator Hartley, Representative Currey, Senator Martin, Representative Buckbee and distinguished members of the Commerce Committee. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony **in support of Senate Bill 101, An Act Concerning Workforce Development Programs for Incarcerated Person and Persons Reentering the Community After Incarceration.**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. As a community foundation, we manage approximately \$1 billion in assets. In the past two years, the Foundation has distributed a record-breaking \$97 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the Foundation has awarded grants of more than \$894 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and improve social and economic mobility for Black and Latinx residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation seeks to increase stable employment opportunities for adults and youth in our region facing barriers to employment. The Foundation's efforts integrate work with the Capitol Region Council of State Governments, the Metro Hartford Alliance, and stakeholders to advance a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Our efforts work towards accelerating inclusive economic growth and increasing opportunities for engaging people who often have been left behind. This requires us to educate, train, and retain talent, including underserved and underrepresented populations, to meet the needs of employers more fully. The proposed Department of Economic and Community Development evaluation informs this ongoing work.

This work recognizes that all residents of our region need access to training and employment options that provide a sustaining wage. In Greater Hartford, there are a number of job openings, but there is misalignment between the skillsets required and the skills of the current workforce. The Foundation's efforts focus on increasing training opportunities, hiring and retention of residents with significant barriers to employment, including returning citizens and opportunity youth disconnected from school and work. The Foundation's work includes expanding job opportunities for Black and Latinx residents through locally owned small businesses and increasing access to capital for Black and Latinx small business owners and entrepreneurs to support their growth.

There must be a public commitment to addressing basic human needs in employment programs, including access to food, mental and physical health care services, and housing to support the success of

participants. This requires providing adequate support to the nonprofit organizations delivering these services.

Research has demonstrated that people employed after release are less likely to return to prison. Using time in prison to develop essential skills can increase the ability of people once released to qualify for jobs in the community.

We need to be equally committed to ensuring access to education and workforce development programs for men and women incarcerated, and as they rebuild their lives in the community, as an essential strategy for preparing for employment and successful reentry. For these reasons the Foundation supports Senate Bill 101's provision to direct the Department of Economic and Community Development to evaluate these workforce development programs.

The Foundation has funded critical reentry supports to help returning citizens succeed, including preemployment training and job placement assistance offered through the Reentry Welcome Center in Hartford and the BEST Chance Program, which provide individuals with access to basic services and referrals to numerous other programs. Over the past three years, the Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA) also expanded legal services available to Greater Hartford youth ages 16 to 23 transitioning from confinement to address access to education, employment, and other basic needs. CCA is part of the ecosystem of nonprofits working with Roca, COMPASS Youth Collaborative, and Our Piece of the Pie to address the needs of opportunity youth in Hartford. The Foundation has also provided support to Asnuntuck Community College for its Second Chance Pell (SCP) incarcerated students in Enfield correctional facilities.

Our own investments in supporting returning citizens have reinforced the need to acknowledge key issues including:

- The stigma of incarceration undermines the ability of returning citizens successful reentry into the community undermines their ability to access training and secure employment and other services.
- With access to training that leads to jobs, the men and women coming home from prison can make a successful transition and contribute to their families and community.

It is important for DECD to evaluate the landscape of programming offered to returning citizens to ensure that state-funded programs are well structured and coordinated. Community-based reentry workforce training programs ideally need to build on programming people receive while in prison to support continuity and avoid duplication. We also need to consider the impact of the pandemic in prisons and strategies for continuing to make training programs accessible.

The greatest challenge to creating career opportunities for returning citizens is finding employers willing to consider giving them an opportunity. Our investments in supporting returning citizens have shown us that with support can make a successful reentry into the community. **For this reason, the Foundation offers its support for Senate Bill 101 including the creation of an employer toolkit to facilitate employment of people returning from incarceration.**



We need to ensure that education and training institutions have what they need to build the skills and experience returning citizens need to succeed in the 21st century. We also recognize that businesses must play a bigger role in guiding the content of education and workforce training programs to meet their needs. We must also support businesses in exploring ways to ensure their work environments are inclusive and supportive for all workers.

The toolkit should highlight the array of services and supports available to returning citizens to ensure workers are supported in being successful in the workplace. For example, BEST Chance participants can receive job retention services to support successful transition into new jobs. BEST Chance also assists active participants with obtaining clothing for work, transportation assistance with bus passes, and works to connect clients with community partners for additional assistance to address challenges with childcare or housing. These supports are critical to sustaining new jobs and advancing career pathways.

To complement the toolkit DECD will develop, employers will need more opportunities to talk with other employers who have opened jobs to qualified returning citizens. It's important to hear their experience in hiring people who have a criminal record, both firsthand accounts of the benefits and safeguards integrated into their hiring policies and practices. Working with employers on these issues is now part of the work and our investment in the Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford, working with the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut and other funders. Employers already hiring returning citizens will be an important resource in informing the toolkit.

The Foundation is eager to partner with legislators, advocates and businesses to eliminate barriers to employment for returning citizens to ensure that all residents have an opportunity to participate in the workforce and achieve economic stability and have opportunities to thrive and enhance Connecticut's economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.