



## **Hartford Foundation for Public Giving testimony on**

### **House Bill 5127, An Act Requiring a Needs Assessment for the Delivery of Postsecondary Education Programs in Prisons**

#### **Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee**

**February 22, 2024**

Good afternoon, Senator Slap, Representative Haddad, Senator Kelly, Representative Haines and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of **House Bill 5127, An Act Requiring a Needs Assessment for the Delivery of Postsecondary Education Programs in Prisons.**

**Most people in Connecticut prisons eventually return to their communities and need academic and training programs that can lead to good jobs. To effectively build on existing education and job training offerings in prison, the Connecticut Department of Correction would benefit from assessing additional staffing, facility space, and resources needed to meet the post-secondary education needs and services across its facilities. Providing these programs inside prisons is essential for the men and women to build the skills needed for successful reentry.**

**The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region.** Over the past two years, the Foundation has distributed \$104.5 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 \$998 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and advance equitable social and economic mobility for Black and Latine residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation seeks to increase stable employment that advances careers for adults and youth in our region who often are left behind. This commitment requires us to educate, train, and retain talent, including underserved and underrepresented populations, to meet the needs of employers more fully and to support people in achieving their full potential.

The Foundation's efforts focus on increasing training opportunities that lead to hiring and retaining residents with significant barriers to employment, including men and women returning from prison and opportunity youth disconnected from school and work. A longstanding best practice for education and other reentry supports is to begin in prison, ideally three to six months before release, when residents can focus on building their academic and industry skills. **Building a continuum of education and support services pre- and post-release provides the essential support needed for successful reentry.**

The Hartford Foundation has supported this work for many years. We know that the programs with public-private funding are better able to address the layers of need and sustain the work. Adequate public support is essential if we are to address the training and wraparound substance abuse counseling, and physical and mental health needs data show are prevalent in youth and adult reentry populations. No one entity can do this work alone. The work requires strong partnerships.



Research has demonstrated that people employed after release from incarceration 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 better jobs. We need to be equally committed to ensuring basic education and workforce development programs the need for each participant to assess their drug and alcohol use and mental health challenges, and other basic needs essential to retaining jobs secured in the community and rebuilding their lives. This is an essential part of preparing to meet the demands of work and reentry. **For these reasons, the Foundation offers its support of House Bill 5127 to assess the availability of postsecondary education programs in Connecticut correctional facilities.**

The [2024 State of Reentry \(SOR\) Report](#), commissioned by Career Resources Inc. in collaboration reentry center and other leaders, highlights the barriers people face when trying to obtain work upon their release. Sixty-five percent of the incarcerated population whose sentences ended within six months did not have a high school diploma.. In addition, 93 percent of individuals who were incarcerated with sentences ending within six months had less than five years of employment history or vocational training. Eighty-five percent of community supported individuals in Connecticut had five years or less of employment or vocational training, 32 percent had two years or less of employment experience, with four percent never having been employed. **This is the third year the SOR study documented similar persistent challenges in these areas.**

Since 2018, the Foundation has funded critical reentry supports to help returning citizens succeed, including reentry planning, job readiness and industry training, housing, health, transportation and other basic needs, and job placement assistance offered through the **Reentry Welcome Center in Hartford**. The center is led by [Community Partners in Action](#), with additional funding from the City of Hartford and other state and federal resources and working with a broad referral network of service providers. Since 2015, the Foundation also has been supporting the [BEST Chance reentry program](#) coordinated by [Capital Workforce Partners](#), with support from the Connecticut Department of Labor and other funding, and a network of providers. Both programs also provide returning citizens with access to basic services and referrals to community-based food, shelter, health, and other programs.

Capital Workforce Partners is also part of a collaborative effort led by [Career Resources Inc.](#) to implement the **U.S. Department of Labor's Pathway Home Program**. The program is designed to enroll 400 participants, with 360 completing a pre-release curriculum, and 280 placed in employment, over a three-year period. Participants are able to sign up for this program 200 days prior to release to take advantage of various skills trainings while incarcerated or are referred to training programs, including BEST Chance upon immediate release.

The Foundation has supported the [Center for Children's Advocacy](#) and an ecosystem of nonprofits working with to [COMPASS Youth Collaborative](#), [Our Piece of the Pie](#) and [Roca, Inc.](#) to address the needs of opportunity youth in Hartford. Each has been supported by a collaboration with the Hartford Foundation, the City of Hartford, and Dalio Education. The Foundation has also provided support to Asnuntuck Community College for its Second Chance Pell (SCP) incarcerated participants in Enfield correctional facilities.

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



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- The racial discrimination and stigma of incarceration can undermine the ability of returning citizens to successfully reenter the community and to access training, secure employment housing and other services.
- With access to training that leads to quality jobs, people coming home from prison have the ability to make a successful transition and contribute to their families and community.

In order for community-based reentry workforce training programs to be truly effective, they should build on programming that people receive *while in prison* to support continuity and avoid duplication. The proposed assessment will provide guidance to DOC as to where there needs to be significant new investments in basic education and vocational programming, as well as post-secondary programs that include training to support soft skills that many employers see as critical in preparing people for entering the workforce. **We encourage legislators to identify immediate as well as long-term resources that can enhance, support, and sustain programs in Connecticut's correctional facilities that can address longstanding racial and economic disparities. We also urge legislators to address the need for additional resources to support the Department of Correction's Unified School District #1 to ensure adequate basic education, career, and technical education programming to the approximately 2.800 students it serves annually.**

Our work has shown us that one of the greatest challenges to creating career opportunities for returning citizens is finding employers willing to consider giving them an opportunity. Businesses must play a larger role in guiding the content of education and workforce training programs, as the Foundation has seen through our co-funding of the Workforce Solutions of Collaborative of Metro Hartford. We must also support businesses in exploring ways to ensure their work environments are inclusive and supportive of all workers.

While there is an array of community services available to returning citizens to ensure they are successful in the workplace, services that address individual needs critical to sustaining jobs, advancing career pathways, and successful reentry, more programs are needed pre-release. **By assessing existing post-secondary programming in our correctional facilities, we can fully determine where additional resources are needed to build on existing efforts and successfully reintegrate and contribute to their communities.**

In its 2014 [report](#), the **Council of State Governments Justice Center highlighted Connecticut's bipartisan efforts to become the first state to enact justice reinvestment legislation.** In 2008, legislators passed additional data-driven criminal justice reforms, and the state experienced improved public safety outcomes, including a decrease in the overall crime rate including in violent and property crimes. The state also saw a significant increase in its prison population.

Since Connecticut's groundbreaking justice reinvestment legislation was first enacted nearly two decades ago, **34 other states have worked to pass similar data-driven legislation.** We now have the opportunity to continue to ensure that Connecticut is a leader in making meaningful reinvestments to keep people out of prisons and improve community safety.



In November 2023, Hartford Foundation staff toured the MacDougall-Walker Correctional Institution to learn more about the educational and vocational training provided at the facility. We were impressed with the dedication and enthusiasm of staff and program participants. It was clear that the programs need a significant infusion of resources and additional staffing to enhance course materials and reach a larger number of residents. **We recommend the Committee consider with DOC immediate funding needs that can address critical needs for its education programs, including funding to conduct a thorough assessment to avoid straining the limited facility staff and resources.**

The Foundation is eager to partner with legislators, government partners, advocates, and businesses to eliminate barriers to employment and access to education support for returning citizens to ensure that all residents have an opportunity to participate in the workforce, achieve economic stability, and have opportunities to reach their potential, 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](mailto:policy@hfpg.org) or 860-548-1888.