

From Prison to Business: Entrepreneurship as a Reentry Strategy

ANH NGUYEN, AEO
SIDNEY GAVEL, AEO
MANU DELGADO-MEDRANO, AEO
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Photo: An ASPIRE MO graduation event in 2019.

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PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
1156 15th Street NW
Ste 400
Washington, D.C. 20005

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org



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ASSOCIATION FOR
ENTERPRISE OPPORTUNITY
1310 L Street NW
Suite 830
Washington, DC 20005

Tel (202) 650-5580

info@aeoworks.org
<https://aeoworks.org/>

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PPI AND AEO
COLLABORATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world,¹ and as many as a third of Americans have some type of criminal record.² Upon reentry, individuals with a justice history, whom we refer to as returning citizens, face significant barriers to economic security and reintegration into their communities. Among the most formidable barriers to reentry are a disadvantaged living environment, low levels of education, mental health challenges, and stigma that excludes them from job opportunities and other resources.

All of these factors contribute to a high recidivism rate among returning citizens and make it harder for them to secure employment.

An alternative yet underappreciated opportunity for returning citizens to circumvent these barriers is to work for themselves by launching their own businesses.

Entrepreneurship presents a promising pathway to economic security and reintegration into communities as it requires minimal formal schooling, provides additional income and control over their livelihoods, and has the potential to uplift the often-low-income communities to which these individuals return.

Additionally, a study in 2020 showed that entrepreneurship can reduce the likelihood of recidivism by 5.3%.³

While entrepreneurship has great potential to reduce recidivism and promote economic stability, returning citizens have to overcome several hurdles in their entrepreneurship endeavors, ranging from a lack of access to capital, collateral consequences of having a criminal record, a digital skills gap, and limited access to wraparound support services.

Entrepreneurship, of course, is not for everyone. That’s as true for formerly incarcerated individuals as it is for working Americans in general. The federal government reports that only about 6% of U.S. workers are self-employed. Moreover, not everyone who strikes out on their own or starts a small business succeeds.

Nonetheless, entrepreneurship can and should be an integral part of a comprehensive strategy for helping former prisoners reintegrate into their communities. All too often these disadvantaged communities have a dearth of homegrown small businesses. And as this report will show, many returning citizens possess unique skills and entrepreneurial instincts they can parlay into self-employment and small business creation. This paper highlights two exemplary entrepreneurship training programs — Aspire to Entrepreneurship in Washington D.C. and ASPIRE MO in Missouri. These initiatives help returning citizen entrepreneurs overcome hurdles to business ownership and integration by equipping them with the necessary skills and connecting them with essential social services such as housing, health care, food security, and other types of support. The experiences of these programs indicate that policymakers could reap

significant benefits for society by investing in entrepreneurship programs aimed at preparing returning citizens for economic and social reintegration.

Through our research and interviews with the people who run these programs, we identified four key pillars of support that federal and local policymakers could collaborate to erect to help formerly incarcerated people start and run their businesses:

BOOST PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN RETURNING CITIZENS:

1

Establish concrete, actionable policy commitments to channel public investment to returning citizen entrepreneurs. These commitments can range from expanding business and employment opportunities for returning citizens to furthering investment in entrepreneurship programs with a reentry focus.

PROVIDE PRE-RELEASE SUPPORT:

2

Establish partnerships between Departments of Corrections or Departments of Justice, community-based organizations, and other government agencies, such as the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the Department of Commerce, to bring services to incarcerated individuals in the correctional system *before release*.

STRENGTHEN THE CONTINUUM OF CARE:

3

Increase outreach efforts to help returning citizen entrepreneurs, nonprofits, and community development groups access relevant government resources and opportunities, as well as provide public services with a reentry focus.

ENGAGE THE PUBLIC:

4

Commit to showcasing public support and engagement with successful initiatives that assist returning citizen entrepreneurs.



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From right, Kristi C. Whitfield (Director of the Department of Small and Local Business Development DSLBD), Joyce Moore (owner of SyDiddy Chic, a finalist in 2022 WeAspire Pitch), Victoria Glaude (owner of Tori Autumn, a finalist in 2022 WeAspire Pitch), and Caroline Howe (Aspire Program Coordinator).

While local government leaders are especially well-suited to implement all of the core pillars of support listed above, the responsibility to strengthen assistance for returning citizen business owners should not fall solely on them. Federal and local leaders should collaborate in erecting the above pillars of support for entrepreneurs with a justice history. Federal policymakers should look for opportunities to seed local initiatives and give wide discretion to mayors and local government leaders on how best to use federal dollars. By actively supporting and cultivating entrepreneurship among returning citizens, we can provide an alternative pathway toward successful economic and social reintegration and foster an inclusive economy.

THE KEY CHALLENGE: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

Problems in the justice system

The American justice system faces the twin problems of high incarceration and high recidivism rates. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), about 1,691,600 Americans had been incarcerated in a state or federal prison or local jail by the end of 2020.⁴ Those released face a high likelihood of being re-admitted to the justice system, at 66% within three years of release and 88% within ten years.⁵

Without sufficient support, many returning citizens face daunting challenges in securing economic opportunities and reintegrating into their communities. The unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated people of working age (25-44) is notably high — at 27.3% — making them five times more likely to be unemployed than their general public peers.⁶ In the first four years of reentry, a third of those released from federal prison in 2010 found no employment

at all, and less than 40% were employed at any one time.⁷ With the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment for formerly incarcerated individuals has only worsened.⁸

Studies have shown a positive association between unemployment or low incomes and the likelihood of incarceration at both the Congressional District and State levels regardless of race, ethnicity, or location.⁹ And according to the Urban Institute, 16% of formerly incarcerated citizens making less than \$7 in hourly wage are likely to reenter the justice system, compared to 12% of those making \$7 to \$10 and 8% of those making more than \$10.¹⁰

Barriers for reentry

Incarceration intensifies existing disadvantages returning citizens face and creates new barriers for economic and social reintegration. Among the most formidable barriers to reentry are all the problems endemic to low-income communities, including a concentration of poverty factors, education gaps, mental health challenges, and exclusion from resources and opportunities due to stigma. All of these factors can be interconnected and can magnify one another, making reentry and secured employment even more challenging for returning citizens.

Disadvantaged environment

Returning citizens often face a set of disadvantages that create and perpetuate poverty before and after incarceration, including limited employment opportunities, high housing insecurity and susceptibility to crime, and rundown infrastructure.¹¹ Incarcerated individuals are also concentrated at the bottom rung of the national income distribution,¹² and those experiencing incarceration in their early 30s are more likely to have grown up in

poverty, single-parent homes, and economically and socially distressed neighborhoods.¹³ The concentration of these factors exacerbates instability and weakens the economic and civic life of the communities that people return to from prison, making reintegration more difficult.¹⁴

Education gap

Incarcerated individuals often have lower formal education levels and limited educational opportunities before, during, and after incarceration.¹⁵ The 2018 report *Getting Back on Course* finds that more than half of those serving in prison have only a high school diploma or GED, while a quarter has not finished high school.¹⁶ A lower education level is associated with a lower employment rate and a higher likelihood to have low-paid, low-skill jobs, which are disappearing in the current economy that increasingly demands higher-skilled workers.

Mental health challenges

Incarceration can exacerbate unresolved trauma from before prison and add further mental health challenges. Experiences with violence and abuse¹⁷ during incarceration can cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic attacks, depression, and paranoia,¹⁸ and can even contribute to increasing the risk of suicide attempts.¹⁹ According to the BJS's 2011-2012 National Inmate Survey, a third of prisoners and almost half of jail inmates²⁰ had an existing history of mental health problems.²¹ About 14% of state and federal prisoners and 25% of jail inmates reported experiencing serious psychological distress during incarceration. The rate of current and lifetime PTSD among incarcerated men is 30-60%, compared to 3-6% in the general male population.²² Not only is lower mental health associated with a higher likelihood of incarceration,²³ but it can also pose

obstacles for returning citizens to maintain employment by interfering with necessary stress-coping skills in a common workplace.²⁴

Stigma

The stigma of having a criminal record also often excludes returning citizens from resources and opportunities for successful economic and social reintegration.²⁵ Most employers are often reluctant to hire those who have been convicted before.²⁶ In addition, the American Bar Association has documented over 38,000 statutes that institute barriers to employment, housing, voting, and other benefits for those with a criminal background. Of these statutes, more than 80% are to exclude returning citizens from job opportunities.²⁷

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A REENTRY STRATEGY

Entrepreneurship presents an alternative pathway to economic security and reintegration into their communities for many returning citizens. By working for themselves or launching a small business, returning citizens can gain an additional source of income while having greater control over their livelihood and potentially uplifting their own communities while avoiding prohibitive schooling requirements. A study in 2020 by Kylie Hwang and Damon Phillips estimates that entrepreneurship reduces the likelihood of reoffense by 5.3%, particularly among Black formerly incarcerated individuals, suggesting that entrepreneurship is a helpful alternative for some of the most disadvantaged individuals in the labor market.²⁸

Benefits of Entrepreneurship

Minimal formal education requirement

Many forms of entrepreneurship require minimal formal schooling. Returning citizens can start a business using existing skills or vocations that do not necessarily demand formal training.²⁹

In fact, some returning citizens who previously had to forge their own pathway to survival with minimal opportunities, such as in the case of illegal enterprises, may already possess unique entrepreneurial aptitude and preferences for self-employment.³⁰

Additional income

Entrepreneurship provides an additional, and in some cases, main income source to help returning citizens establish financial stability. Moreover, median wages from running a microbusiness are greater, sometimes even double, than minimum wages for low-skill jobs.³¹ According to a 2020 study, returning citizens running their own businesses earn about 11.4% more in hourly wages compared to their peers in traditional employment.³²

Flexibility and control over their livelihood

Running their own business opens a pathway for returning citizens to have more control over their livelihood instead of relying on employers who may be hesitant to hire them or who may not understand their unique circumstances and needs. Returning citizens can, for example, work independently to fulfill online orders in their studio or workshop. In addition, returning citizen entrepreneurs can avoid typical workplace pressure and gain more flexibility as they work through the psychological effects of trauma, a complicated process that takes time and support.³³

Uplifting community

Beyond personal gains, returning citizen entrepreneurs also have the potential to uplift their communities by creating additional employment and thereby disrupting one factor that leads to recidivism. Business owners who are returning citizens are likely more receptive to hiring other returning citizens, thereby helping

their justice-impacted fellows gain financial stability.³⁴

Challenges to Returning Citizen Entrepreneurship

While entrepreneurship has great potential to reduce recidivism and promote economic security, returning citizens who choose to be self-employed have to overcome several hurdles in their entrepreneurship endeavors. Challenges to business ownership range from a lack of access to capital, collateral consequences of having a criminal record, a gap in digital skills, and limited access to support services.

Lack of access to capital

Returning citizens have restricted options for financing their businesses. As mentioned above, they often have limited personal savings and wealth — a typical source of microbusiness startup capital — due to low income levels. They are also less likely than their non-incarcerated peers to obtain financial capital from commercial banks or the government.³⁵ On the one hand, returning citizens tend to have insufficient credit to secure loans due to identity theft, inability to make payments on revolving credit accounts, lack of credit activity, and few opportunities to rebuild their credit after release.³⁶ On the other hand, most local community development financial institutions and mission-based lenders, who work with small businesses and are making initial strides in providing financing for returning citizens, lack awareness of right-fit capital options for this population.³⁷ Innovations such as a new scoring mechanism developed by R3 Score and put into action by the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) to better assess the potential risk of returning citizen applicants for loans are noteworthy solutions to serving this population and should be scaled.

Having a criminal history also poses a hurdle for many returning citizens in accessing government support typically available for aspiring entrepreneurs. For example, the SBA had long disqualified business owners with criminal records for loans and other aid. It was only in 2015 that, with AEO's advocacy, the SBA Microloan Program opened up for people on parole or probation. Similarly, the first round of the Paycheck Protection Program in the 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act disqualified business owners with a recent criminal history, denying up to 212,655 small businesses and as many as 343,198 of their employees of pandemic relief support.³⁸

Collateral consequences

Returning citizens have to confront the collateral consequences of having a conviction both in their personal life and in running a business. Probation and parole conditions after release, such as employment requirements, travel restrictions, and curfews, can make starting and scaling a business harder. There are also administrative barriers, such as challenges getting occupational licenses due to stigma, significantly higher business insurance premiums, and other hurdles to meeting business requirements.³⁹

Gap in digital skills

After years in prison, incarcerated individuals often face a large digital skill divide as they return to a vastly transformed, technology-driven economy. Limited digital literacy restricts returning citizens' ability to take advantage of existing business assistance programs or opportunities through digital platforms such as online marketplace, social media, and e-commerce.⁴⁰ In addition, most programs that offer business support and basic social services have an online presence. Without the skills to

seek and navigate these resources, returning citizens are at a disadvantage in pursuing entrepreneurship and securing stability post release.

Need for trauma-informed wraparound support

Life stability is a prerequisite for any entrepreneurship venture. Therefore, there is a great need for trauma-informed wraparound support, such as affordable housing, food security, personal credit, healthcare, medical advocacy and counseling services, and other basic resources, so that returning citizen entrepreneurs can focus on their businesses. "A lot of people think the key to recidivism is employment and job creation, but it does no good to give a broken person a key to a gate," shared Pat McGee, Director of Prison Initiatives at the Prison Entrepreneurship Program, in an interview with AEO for the Endeavor Ready report. "If they can't manage their life, they can't manage anything else that they have."⁴¹

PROOF POINTS: EFFECTIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROGRAMS

Entrepreneurship training programs can equip returning citizens with the necessary skills and wraparound services to lead a productive life upon reentry. The following case studies demonstrate the niche role that entrepreneurship training programs fulfill by combining reentry needs with business development and workforce preparation. Furthermore, Aspire to Entrepreneurship and ASPIRE MO demonstrate that business development training initiatives for returning citizens are most successful when they have close collaborations with government agencies, particularly those at the municipal and state levels.

CASE STUDY 1: ASPIRE TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP WASHINGTON, D.C., FOUNDED IN 2016

Aspire to Entrepreneurship started in 2016 at the request of Mayor Muriel Bowser to support justice-involved resident entrepreneurs. As a government-led initiative, the program is able to leverage several resources available through other government agencies and in the community. Government support for the program is most important in three areas: (1) program initiation and funding, (2) holistic wraparound support thanks to interagency collaboration, and (3) policy action to help returning citizen entrepreneurs build an economic foundation.

Program description: Aspire to Entrepreneurship offers a combination of direct financial assistance, training, technical assistance, community building, and wraparound services to build up a strong and supportive entrepreneurship ecosystem for formerly incarcerated residents in D.C. At its core, the program organizes an intensive 12-week business incubator on business development and a pitch competition for \$2,000-\$10,000 cash awards for cohorts of returning citizens with business ideas. In addition, thanks to its unique interagency collaboration, Aspire to Entrepreneurship is able to connect returning citizen participants with a host of essential wraparound services – such as affordable housing, food security,

personal credit, healthcare, medical advocacy and counseling services, and other basic resources – to help them establish stability while still being able to participate effectively in the training.

Program outcomes: To date, Aspire to Entrepreneurship has 125 returning citizen entrepreneur graduates. Of the 60 graduates in 2021 and 2022, ten now hold a position in the city government, while more than 45 are working in their business in a part-time or full-time capacity. According to Caroline Howe, the program coordinator, participants shared that the program helped keep them “focused,” “out of trouble,” and “in a community of peers equally motivated to have a positive impact in our communities.”⁴²



Photo by Princeton Tymus of rulPhoto

From right, Kinta Brown (owner of United Mindz, a winner of 2022 WeAspire Pitch), Ralph Clark, and Maurice Dixon (owner of Chef Reese, a winner of 2022 WeAspire Pitch).

Asia Stevenson, the owner of DriporDrown, Auto Detailing, is an Aspire to Entrepreneurship 2022 \$10,000 winner. Stevenson started washing cars with a bucket and a sponge over 5 years ago before buying a power washer and a vacuum with her 2020 stimulus check. With support from Aspire to Entrepreneurship and its partner, CFO Services Group, Stevenson officially registered her business and got her accounting records in order. She used her \$10,000 award to buy a sprinter van, higher-level polishing and cleaning tools, and other supplies to take DriporDrown to the next level.



Photo by Princeton Tymus of rulPhoto

Sharon Wise is the owner of Wise Workz, a winner of the 2022 WeAspire Pitch.

Government support: Government support plays a critical role in the operations and success of Aspire to Entrepreneurship in at least three ways: (1) program initiation and funding, (2) extensive wraparound support thanks to interagency collaboration, and (3) ancillary policy action to help returning citizen entrepreneurs build an economic foundation.

First, with the D.C. mayor's support, Aspire to Entrepreneurship is run by the District of Columbia Department of Small and Local Business Development. The program receives funding from the City Council, which has grown more consistent with the program's demonstration of success, according to Howe.

Second, leveraging its collaboration with other government agencies, the program is able

to connect returning citizens with extensive business and life wraparound resources, including government agency staff who are willing and ready to support. "We have people from regulatory agencies, the Office of Tax and Revenue, the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs, people who work on housing, who can come in and talk in the program," Howe shares. "For example, for barriers like having to go to a government office and get a business license if you don't have a driver's license, we can really talk you through the steps to get your driver's license. And if that's not possible for any reason, we can provide some of our colleagues' contacts so they can think about other ways to meet your needs."

Finally, the D.C. government has taken policy actions to help returning citizens secure employment, which then provides critical financial stability and additional resources to become self-employed or start a small business. In 2014, the city passed its "ban-the-box" law, which bars employers from inquiring about applicants' criminal backgrounds before making a conditional offer. Some government grants also include incentives for hiring returning citizens, such as the Clean Team program that funds different groups to clean and maintain D.C. business districts and main streets. According to Howe, many participants in Aspire to Entrepreneurship come from the Clean Team program, which helps them gain economic security so that they can focus on their business ideas.

CASE STUDY 2: ASPIRE MO MISSOURI, FOUNDED IN 2018

ASPIRE MO was launched in 2018 under the leadership of Kellie Ann Coats, Executive Director of the Missouri Women’s Council at Missouri Department of Economic Development (MO DED), and Jessie Yankee, Director of the Missouri Women’s Business Center at Central Missouri Community Action (CMCA) in response to a fast-growing rate of female incarceration in Missouri. Through a public-private collaboration between MO DED, Missouri Department of Corrections (MO DOC), and CMCA, ASPIRE MO was able to navigate the government system to gain high-level support from different state agencies, most significantly in (1) program initiation, (2) in-prison service offering, and (3) public engagement. Jessie Yankee, one of the program leaders, shared:

“Having a partner at the Department of Economic Development was priceless and invaluable to us because she had the understanding of the State priorities and where our program could align strategically, which we needed to make this program happen.”

Program description:

Operating in the Women’s Eastern Reception Diagnostic and Correctional Center, ASPIRE MO offered a 20-week training program for women with a felony offense who have at least six months left to serve. The program focused on business ownership combined with workforce readiness, using an existing curriculum taught at the Missouri Women’s Business Center, coupled with training for soft skills such as personal finance and leadership.



ASPIRE MO holds a graduation event in 2019.

At the end of each cohort, ASPIRE MO organizes a major graduation event and invites high-level government officials and relevant nonprofit organizations. These events serve to both celebrate participants' achievements and increase government support.

Program outcomes:

Since its onset, there have been 28 graduates from ASPIRE MO. Of those, 96% remain out of prison, 92% are employed with an average rate wage of \$18.12 per hour, and four business startups have been started by graduates.

Government support:

Since its launch, ASPIRE MO has received considerable support from different government agencies. The operations and impact of ASPIRE MO particularly benefit from government support in three areas: (1) initiation and financing; (2) collaboration with MO DOC to offer in-prison services, and (3) public engagement from high-level government officials.

First, ASPIRE MO started as a public-private collaboration between MO DED and CMCA. The program also works with local Workforce Development Boards in Missouri to provide financial assistance for participants upon release.

Second, close collaboration with Anne L. Precythe, the Director of the MO DOC, is another



Missouri Governor Mike Parson, right, and First Lady Teresa, left, alongside two ASPIRE MO graduates, Nigaila Gibbs and Emily Kirchoff, whom Gov. Parson highlighted in his 2020 State of the State Address.

crucial factor to ASPIRE MO's success. With Precythe's leadership and support, ASPIRE MO was able to provide not only entrepreneurship training in two women's prisons but also resources to further equip incarcerated participants for success, such as professional clothes, headshots, and even digital devices like computers, hot spots, and Wi-Fi.

Finally, ASPIRE MO receives public recognition from high-level state government officials, including the Governor of MO, Michael L. Parson. In his 2020 State of the State addressing all state government departments, Governor Parson highlighted ASPIRE MO and two of its returning citizen graduates, which helped the program gain recognition.

FOUR PILLARS OF SUPPORT TO HELP RETURNING CITIZENS BECOME ENTREPRENEURS

Returning citizens offer critical assets and talent to our economy. Helping them channel their talent and ability in lawful enterprises should go hand in hand with progressive efforts to promote more inclusive entrepreneurs, especially in low-income communities.

Through our research and interviews with the two programs above, we identified four pillars of support that policymakers at both the federal and local government levels should champion. To best enact and embody these pillars of support, Washington policy leaders should fund initiatives on a pay-for-performance basis and give mayors and local officials maximum discretion to deploy those dollars creatively on the ground.



1. BOOST PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN RETURNING CITIZENS:

Establish concrete, actionable policy commitments to channel public investment to returning citizen entrepreneurs. These commitments can range from expanding business and employment opportunities for returning citizens to furthering investment in entrepreneurship programs with a reentry focus.

Policymakers should commit to increasing financial opportunities for returning citizen entrepreneurs. For example, government financial assistance for small businesses should be extended to those owned by returning citizens, similar to the recent

changes to the SBA's Community Advantage Pilot Program to expand loan services to "any business with an Associate who is incarcerated, on probation, on parole, or has been indicted for a felony or a crime of moral turpitude."⁴³

Furthermore, policymakers should invest in entrepreneurship programs with a reentry focus, targeting areas with high concentrations of returning citizens. These programs should combine both business and workforce development, leveraging existing entrepreneurship training programs offered by local nonprofits or federal resource partners, such as Small Business Development Centers, Women's Business Centers, Veterans' Business Centers, and Minority Business Development Centers, as has been done by ASPIRE MO. Further, the training should emphasize skill building, such as credit and financial capabilities training, while using trauma-informed training practices. In addition, following the recommendations of Senator Ben Cardin's (D-MD) NEW START Act, federal policymakers should require the SBA to establish a grant program for organizations or partnerships that support entrepreneurship programs and/or offer microloans for returning citizens. These programs should be required to have a standard of service quality and outcome metrics to ensure that they are delivered at the highest quality levels.

Finally, local government agencies should expand employment opportunities for returning citizens so that they have a stable economic foundation and resources to work on their businesses. This can manifest in a 'ban-the-box' law or sealing criminal records after certain criteria to protect returning citizens from hiring discrimination, in a grant condition, in tax reduction, or in insurance for employers hiring

justice-involved individuals.⁴⁴ In addition, local municipalities should establish an office that specifically serves returning citizens and works to remove barriers to reentry, similar to the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs in Washington, D.C.

 **2. PROVIDE PRE-RELEASE SUPPORT:**

Establish partnerships between Departments of Corrections or Departments of Justice, community-based organizations, and other government agencies, such as the SBA and the Departments of Commerce, to bring services to incarcerated individuals in the correctional system before release.

The best time to start entrepreneurship training is in prison — before returning citizens have to divide their attention to settling down and navigating a drastically changed world. Yet, most in-prison programs for returning citizens do not have an entrepreneurship component, and most entrepreneurship programs do not have access to incarcerated individuals.

Departments of Corrections or Departments of Justice are in the best position to bring support into prison, as seen in the case of ASPIRE MO. These departments should collaborate with community-based organizations and other government agencies in order to bring entrepreneurship training courses, wraparound support services, and critical resources like digital devices into correctional facilities. They should facilitate one-on-one advising sessions for incarcerated individuals with other government and community resource partners in prison to ensure that returning citizens have

all of the resources, personal documents, and information needed to seek support upon reentry. In addition, these departments should appoint a liaison between business training programs and incarcerated individuals to help these programs reach the most relevant target population.

 **3. STRENGTHEN THE CONTINUUM OF CARE:**

Increase outreach efforts to help returning citizen entrepreneurs, nonprofits, and community development groups access relevant government resources and opportunities, as well as provide public services with a reentry focus.

Government agencies have long been offering various support services for both returning citizens and for social justice programs that work with them. Navigating these resources can be a challenge for those outside the system, however. Our research and the experiences of Aspire to Entrepreneurship and ASPIRE MO indicate that having a strong connection with local government agencies is critical for organizations and individuals to navigate and access these resources. Therefore, policymakers at the city and county levels have a critical role in strengthening the continuum of care for returning citizens by proactively connecting them and social justice initiatives to relevant government and community resources.

To this end, Washington policymakers should connect community-based initiatives that work with returning citizen entrepreneurs with funding and networking opportunities with relevant agencies such as the SBA,

Departments of Commerce, and Departments of Corrections. In addition, mayors and local governments must improve community outreach efforts so that returning citizen entrepreneurs gain more awareness of available resources and opportunities in the community and through government agencies.

Local government leaders should also create new and leverage existing public services to support returning citizen entrepreneurs, such as by funding and extending reentry-focused digital literacy programs in public libraries, or by providing free digital devices for newly released individuals. According to Howe, “the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs and a few other programs in the district have started providing people with devices like a tablet with a keyboard or a phone.” Such access to free phones and free service “has made a really big difference,” she shared.

4. ENGAGE THE PUBLIC:

Commit to showcasing public support and engagement with successful initiatives that assist returning citizen entrepreneurs.

Public recognition is strategically important for social justice programs. With their success being widely recognized, these programs will be in a better position to obtain public and private funding needed to support their operations and scale up their impacts. Given their niche in the support ecosystem for returning citizens, entrepreneurship programs will particularly benefit from government engagement and recognition. Both Aspire to

Entrepreneurship and ASPIRE MO have been able to better secure consistent financing with the demonstration of success. Thus, government leaders should commit to showcasing their engagement and support for successful entrepreneurship initiatives for returning citizens.

Public engagement can manifest in many ways. For example, federal resource partners and local policymakers should make frequent educational site visits to entrepreneurship training programs in correctional facilities. Local leaders can highlight the success of returning citizen entrepreneurs and exemplary social justice initiatives in the public press, while federal partners of entrepreneurship programs for justice-involved individuals can make community engagement and success demonstration a requirement for funding.

CONCLUSION

Returning citizens in the U.S. face significant barriers to economic security and reintegration into their communities. However, there are opportunities for U.S. government, civic, and business leaders to help the stream of returning citizens find good jobs, achieve financial stability and, if they have the aptitude and inclination, go into business for themselves. As the examples in this report show, entrepreneurship can be a promising alternative pathway for some returning citizens to achieve economic success and a smoother reentry into society. Our challenge now is to extend that opportunity to more people and scale up proven initiatives, by applying the four pillars of support presented in this report.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anh Nguyen:

Hailing from Vietnam, Anh Nguyen is a Research Associate in the Department of Data and Analytics at AEO, where they lead and assist several quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation projects on the micro-business industry. Prior to joining AEO, Anh worked at the UNDP Global Programme on Nature for Development to support a global analysis of over 50 countries' nature-based solution commitments in nature, climate, and development policies, as well as efforts to advance sustainable development solutions of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities around the world. Anh holds an M.A. in Sustainable International Development from the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University and a B.A. in Global Studies at Bridgewater College. Their passions lie in capacity building and social justice for underserved groups, including ethnic/racial minorities, sexually marginalized, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Sidney Gavel:

Sidney works within the Research Division under the Department of Data and Analytics where she assists other research associates with various data-related tasks throughout the lifecycle of assorted projects. Additionally, she also works as a research and teaching assistant for the College of Communication and Information at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where Sidney is currently completing an M.S. in Information Science. Her previous experience in data science comes from a B.S. in Physics and Astronomy, also from the University of Tennessee, as well as her ongoing research assistantship.

Manu Delgado-Medrano:

Manu Delgado-Medrano is the Research Director at AEO. Manu is a seasoned expert in research, economic and financial analysis, and behavioral science. Manu has extensive experience in both quantitative and qualitative methods, including economic and financial modeling, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, data analysis and visualization, survey design and execution, behavioral design, public and regulatory policy design, quantitative/statistical/econometric analysis, impact evaluation, and project design, management, and implementation. Manu's research experience has focused primarily on small and micro-businesses, microfinance, consumer finance and consumer goods, marketing, healthcare, economic development, real estate, mobility and transportation, urban development, and telecommunications.