

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORK AND WELFARE
JOINT HEARING ON “THE DIGNITY OF WORK:
LIFTING AMERICANS OUT OF POVERTY”
Ms. Sodiqa Williams, Senior Vice President, Safer Foundation, Esq.**

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Introduction:

Subcommittee Chairperson Darin LaHood, Subcommittee Ranking Member Danny K. Davis, and Honorable Members of the Subcommittee – good morning,

My name is Sodiqa Williams, I am Senior Vice President of Reentry Services for the **Safer Foundation (Safer)**. Thank you for providing this time and space to give testimony. It is especially appropriate because April is Second Chance Month – the time when Congress and our nation raise awareness about the successes and challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals in our society. During Second Chance Month we promote policies, programs, and opportunities that support rehabilitation and reintegration for the 1 in 3 Americans who carry the lifetime burden of an arrest or conviction record.¹

The Safer Foundation was launched in 1972 by two men of the cloth, Bernie Curran, and Gus Wilhelmy to provide non-sectarian mentoring and workforce development services to people returning to the community from jail and prison. Bernie & Gus believed then, as we do now, that helping people returning from incarceration secure private-sector employment builds a more solid foundation for their lives and makes our communities safer. They put those two ideas together and named the organization Safer Foundation. What Bernie & Gus knew to be true in 1972, is still true today!

For 52 years, Safer Foundation has provided a full spectrum of re-entry workforce development and rehabilitation services to men and women, adults, and youth, in Illinois & Iowa. Today, we are a national leader in supporting the efforts of people with arrest and conviction records to become employed, and productive members of the community. Since 1972 our work has expanded to include academic and vocational career education, community corrections, where we operate two residential work release centers housing over 600 men for one to two years before their release from state prison, education services inside of Cook County jail, the nation’s largest single-site detention center. We provide services to individuals in our local specialty courts like the drug court, and those on parole or mandatory supervised release from our state prisons. Our Youth Empowerment Programs in Illinois and Iowa provide academic education, cognitive behavioral therapy, mentoring, job readiness, and placement services to justice-involved youth 16-24 years old.

Safer Foundation assists up to 1,500 clients each year to obtain high-quality private-sector employment in industries critical to our regional economic success. Our clients are employed in Healthcare, Transportation/Distribution/Logistics, Manufacturing, Construction, IT, Financial Services, Hospitality, and Food Services. Our Safer Demand Skills Collaborative model was created to build connections between employers, training partners, and our workforce development services to enable clients to earn industry-recognized credentials and secure living wage employment in industries with high labor demands.

In recent years, Safer - partnered with JPMorgan Chase on the JPMorgan Second Chance Hiring Pilot. That program connected individuals with criminal records to substantive, living-wage careers, in the financial services sector where demand for skilled labor is high. Research suggests that post-prison high-quality, higher-wage employment results in fewer arrests or returns to prison when compared to low-wage, low-job quality employment.² The pilot's success was demonstrated by JPMorgan Chase's significant increase in the hiring of people with criminal records, and contributed to the launch of the Second Chance Business Coalition, highlighting a broader shift towards inclusive employment practices within the financial industry.³

For the past 4 years, we have also been the lead agency in the Supportive Reentry Network Collaborative - a holistic, comprehensive, reentry navigation model providing stable housing, substance use disorder and mental health treatment, ambulatory physical healthcare services, job readiness and placement services. The SRNC model addresses public safety through reduced recidivism and public health by addressing the social determinants of health. Two of the most expensive systems for American taxpayers are the prison and jail systems and the healthcare system. People returning from jail and prison are central to addressing public safety and public health. These initiatives highlight Safer's expertise in facilitating access to high-quality, living wage employment that offers stability, dignity, and growth opportunities, to the individuals we serve, and thus counter the misconceptions and stereotypes about the employability of justice-involved individuals.

Safer Foundation programs improve public safety by reducing recidivism, the percentage of people who commit new crimes, arrests, convictions, detentions, reconvictions, and re-incarceration. In Illinois, each person who experiences recidivism costs our state taxpayers over \$150,000.⁴ At Safer, we work diligently to provide living-wage job readiness training, vocational training, and job placement services to returning residents. That work has included serving as a site for US Department of Labor Training-to-Work programs, a workforce development program that enabled over 300 clients to obtain industry-recognized credentials. Only 11% of the first training-to-work cohort and 9% of the second cohort of trainees were re-arrested a year after receiving services, well below the national re-arrest rate of 40%.⁵

People returning from incarceration are disproportionately homeless, food insecure, unemployed, and have physical and mental health issues.⁶ They are far more likely to use the most expensive healthcare available in the US, the emergency room. Our SRNC model ensures that they get connected to preventive care soon after their return to the community, reducing the reliance on emergency room services. Safer Foundation's services improve public safety and public health, a valuable benefit to our society.

The Value of High-Quality Living-Wage Work

The US has over 2 million people in prisons and jails.⁷ In our country, over 3 million people are on probation or parole.⁸ Over 75 million Americans, nearly 24% of US citizens have an arrest or conviction record.⁹ An arrest record alone can result in a vast number of collateral consequences that prevent the individual from basic things like securing licenses and credentials, employment, housing, and education.¹⁰ The more than 44,000 state and federal legal collateral consequences faced by those with arrest & conviction records prevent them from doing *the exact things* that we in the larger society say we want them to do, behave in a - manner, to provide for themselves and their families through -high-quality living-wage work.¹¹

- **High-Quality Living-Wage Work** is pro-social vs. anti-social. It improves self-esteem and is a positive use of time. It also enables the person to become self-sufficient and not dependent on others including the government for sustenance.¹²
- **High-Quality Living-Wage Work** through reentry is critical to the success of the nation's economy. People with Arrest & Conviction records are one of the largest untapped pools of labor available to US businesses.¹³ The current demand for qualified workers is high, and according to the National Federation of Independent Business, many unemployed individuals do not meet the qualifications for industries that are hiring. Fifty-five percent of business owners reported hiring or trying to hire. Eighty-nine percent of those hiring or trying to hire reported few or no qualified applicants for available positions. Thirty-three percent of small business owners have openings for skilled workers. People with records have demonstrated that they are a competent and extremely grateful/loyal workforce to business.¹⁴
- **High-Quality Living-Wage Work** through reentry reduces recidivism¹⁵ – recidivism reduction improves public safety. Recidivism reduction means no new crimes are being committed. It is measured by lower arrests, lower incarcerations, lower convictions, and lower incarcerations. Lower recidivism means fewer victims and safer communities.
- **High-Quality Living-Wage Work** -in the form of workforce development – is a top priority for the states. In 2023, the National Association for State Workforce Agencies' top legislative priorities included maintaining investment for WIOA-funded statewide programs and increasing permanent funding for job training and apprentice programs. In 2024, the National Governors Association identified workforce issues as a priority.
- **High-Quality Living-Wage Work** reduces recidivism and that lowers the tax burden on US citizens.¹⁶ The state of Illinois has estimated that the cost of each recidivism event is more than \$150,000 (policing, detention, legal costs, victimization costs, and a year of prison. These are costs borne by the taxpayers.¹⁷

An example of a proven successful employment program is Safer Foundation's Adult Transition Work Release Centers. The Safer Foundation ATCs have been an effective "best practice" feature of Illinois' correctional system for over 40 years and an integral part of the State's long-term strategy to improve its corrections outcomes. Safer's ATCs provide a robust array of services to individuals in the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections, including job readiness training, GED preparation, substance use disorder treatment, vocational training for industry-specific credentials, family reunification, parenting skills, and other vital cost-effective reentry services. The purpose of the centers is to give individuals the necessary tools to successfully transition back into the community and to obtain employment before being released. In FY23, 86% of eligible clients at Crossroads ATC and North Lawndale ATC were employed. Of them, 83%, maintained 30-day retention.

Residents and ATC graduates actively contribute to the economy by filling positions that generate revenue and profits for Illinois businesses. While finishing their last 1-2 years of a state prison sentence, they pay income taxes, pay fees, and fines, and provide dependent support payments. They also purchase products and services in the community which supports local businesses. In FY 23 Safer's Adult Transition Center residents, while in custody, earned more than \$5.9 million in gross wages. By remaining in prison, these same individuals would contribute zero dollars to their families and our economy. They would be a burden to taxpayers who pay nearly \$44,704 for each incarcerated individual, with limited rehabilitative support to help change behavior.¹⁸ Upon release, our ATC residents have average savings exceeding \$4000.00 per person. Data provided by the State of Illinois demonstrates that Safer ATC residents experience a 16.5% recidivism rate versus a 39% rate for individuals returning directly to communities from prisons.

CONCLUSION

In FY24, Safer expects to provide services to nearly 5000 people with arrest and conviction records. At Safer Foundation, we develop high-impact workforce development models and cost-effective solutions that meet the unique re-entry needs of our clients.

Things Congress Can Do

- We urge Congress to fund \$135 million for the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) Program at the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration which provides workforce development and reentry services to people with criminal legal histories while helping employers identify trained and credentialed employees to hire for open positions.
- We urge Congress to fund \$125 million for the Second Chance Act Program at the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance to provide reentry services and support nationwide.
- Funding comprehensive workforce development that includes wrap-around services helps our clients to stabilize their lives and makes it feasible for them to succeed in training and maintain employment. Individuals cannot succeed in work if they are hungry, homeless, or have no access to transportation and medication to stabilize their lives.
- Finally, we urge Congress to reduce the tens of thousands of legal collateral consequences that create barriers for people with criminal legal records to secure employment.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify when we make nominal investments in people's efforts to secure private-sector employment through reentry, the beneficiaries include all of us – Taxpayers, Government, Families, and Communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.

¹ *Toolkit Criminal Records and Reentry Toolkit* (2023) *National Conference of State Legislatures*. Available at: <https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/criminal-records-and-reentry-toolkit>

² LaBriola, Joe. "Post-Prison Employment Quality and Future Criminal Justice Contact." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. 154–72. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2020.6.1.07>.

³ Cerullo, Megan (2019) *JPMorgan Chase hired more than 2,000 ex-convicts last year*. Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jpmorgan-chase-hiring-people-with-criminal-records-through-second-chance-hiring-program/>

⁴ "The Cost of Recidivism." CSG Justice Center, Council of State Governments Justice Center, csgjusticecenter.org/publications/the-cost-of-recidivism/.

⁵ Durose, Matthew R., Cooper, Alexia D., Snyder, Howard N. "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010," Bureau of Justice Statistics, April 2014. Available at <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>

⁶ Brennan Center for Justice. "Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings: How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Deepens Inequality." Brennan Center for Justice, www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/conviction-imprisonment-and-lost-earnings-how-involvement-criminal and Kearney, Melissa S. "The Economic Challenges of Crime & Incarceration in the United States." Brookings, 22 Dec. 2014, www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-economic-challenges-of-crime-incarceration-in-the-united-states/.

⁷ "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024." Prison Policy Initiative, 24 Mar. 2024, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html.

⁸ "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024." Prison Policy Initiative, 24 Mar. 2024, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html.

⁹ "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024." Prison Policy Initiative, 24 Mar. 2024, www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html.

¹⁰ Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council 2024 Data, Costs, and Baseline Projection for Impact Reports, <https://spac.illinois.gov/publications/fiscal-impact-analysis>

¹¹ Jennifer Bronson & E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2017*, Bureau of Justice Statistics (April 2019), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p17.pdf>; Justice Center, National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, Council of State Government Justice Center (2019), <https://niccc.csgjusticecenter.org/>.

¹² Cullen, Francis T., et al. "The End of Mass Incarceration: Opportunities for Reform." *Beyond Bars: A Path Forward from 50 Years of Mass Incarceration in the United States*, edited by Kristen M. Budd et al., 1st ed., Bristol University Press, 2023, pp. 95–105.

¹³ Second Chance Business Coalition." Second Chance Business Coalition, secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/, <https://secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/>

¹⁴ Why It Matters." Second Chance Business Coalition, secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/why-it-matters, <https://secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/why-it-matters>.

¹⁵ Davis, Lois M., et al. "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults." RAND Corporation, 22 Aug. 2013, www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html.

¹⁶ The Price We Pay: Economic Costs of Barriers to Employment for Former Prisoners and People Convicted of Felonies." Center for Economic and Policy Research, June 2016, cepr.net/report/the-price-we-pay-economic-costs-of-barriers-to-employment-for-former-prisoners-and-people-convicted-of-felonies/.

¹⁷ The Cost of Recidivism." CSG Justice Center, Council of State Governments Justice Center, csgjusticecenter.org/publications/the-cost-of-recidivism/.

¹⁸ The true per capita cost for housing one inmate for one year, including all benefits and pension costs is \$44,704." In "Prison Resource Consumption by Offense Class." Sentencing Policy Advisory Council, April 6, 2018. Available at http://www.icjia.state.il.us/spac/pdf/SPAC_Prison_Resource_infographic_2019.pdf.