



**NJ** REENTRY  
CORPORATION

REENTRY TRAINING AND

EMPLOYMENT REPORT

# 2021



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from NJBIA President & CEO Michele Siekerka . . . . .	3
Letter from Governor Jim McGreevey . . . . .	4
Board of Trustees . . . . .	5
Top-Line Overview . . . . .	6
Detailed Narrative . . . . .	7-19
Overview . . . . .	7-10
Three-Pronged Reentry-Focused Approach . . . . .	10-16
Reentry Services . . . . .	12
Potential Asks . . . . .	16-19
NJRC Business Partners . . . . .	20

New Jersey Business & Industry Association



Dear Reader,

The New Jersey Business and Industry Association (NJBIA) cares deeply about promoting a robust economy and the opportunity for “Second Chances.”

To that end, we have recently formed the Reentry and Workforce Development Workgroup in partnership with Gov. McGreevey and the New Jersey Reentry Corporation (NJRC) in order to strengthen the collaboration between employers and New Jersey’s reentry population and remove barriers to successful reentry.

This effort, composed of leaders in the business and nonprofit communities, has the potential to drive action on partnerships for workforce development, training and the employment of court-involved persons, making a significant impact upon their lives.

Employment and career development are often the most challenging, yet critical, barriers facing individuals who are reentering society following their incarceration. National research indicates that up to 75% of individuals remain unemployed in the year following their release.

However, research also shows that employment helps reduce recidivism, and sets former inmates on a path to successful independence. Identifying and developing strategies that put the business community and employers in the position of change leaders is critical. Marry this with the current workforce challenges we have in New Jersey, with tens of thousands of middle-income jobs remaining unfulfilled due to gaps in skill sets.

Clearly, leveraging the reentry population toward these opportunities is a win-win-win – for the individual, the employer and the economy of our great state.

We look forward to making the goals of this initiative a reality.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michele N. Siekerka".

Michele N. Siekerka, Esq.  
President and CEO  
NJBIA

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Dear Advocate,

This has been an obviously challenging year. With the leadership of Governor Murphy, Senate President Sweeney, and Speaker Coughlin, we have significantly met the challenges, which were set before us.

This Reentry Training and Employment Report addresses a primary need to provide “industry-recognized credentials” to our program participants to afford them better employment and career prospects.

NJRC presently has enrolled 11,179 program participants of which 6,465 are enrolled in clinical addiction treatment, 1,034 are enrolled in Medication-Assisted Treatment, and 8,063 are enrolled in Medicaid and receiving health care services through a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) or a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC).

NJRC served half of the persons released during the Public Health Emergency. Every day we provide federal and state benefits, including Food Stamps, housing referrals, legal services, MVC IDs and driver’s licenses, medical and behavioral (mental health and addiction) health care, and workforce training and employment.

During the pandemic, our employment rate fell from a height of 64.7 percent down to 48.9 percent. NJRC has worked with Labor Commissioner Robert Asaro-Angelo to provide for training; the need is more apparent than ever.

Thanks to the generosity of Wendy Neu of Hugo Neu Corporation, NJRC will now launch the [Governor’s Reentry Training and Employment Center](#) in Kearny, New Jersey. The facility is a three-story 25,000 square foot facility with nine (9) classrooms, twelve (12) resource offices, which will provide for five (5) major industry certifications: 1) Solar Technology, 2) Construction, 3) CISCO Certification, 4) Automobile Mechanics, 5) Medical Coding/Health Care Maintenance, and providing for GED/high school diploma, as well as, private access to Telemedicine and Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT).

Working with NJBIA, NJLWD, and our business partners, we have developed a pipeline from incarceration release to reentry to stabilization to training to employment. We believe in a God of Second Chances. Please join with us as we pursue our mission to provide court involved persons with career opportunities.

Best,

Jim

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## TOP-LINE OVERVIEW

Second Chances Month presents an opportunity to promote smart investment in reentry at a critical moment for the court-involved population and the country. Release without opportunity is not sufficient; we need to align our systems and strategies and create opportunities to ensure that these individuals thrive. Focusing Second Chances month efforts on employment is a way of acknowledging the dire state of the economy and employment for the reentry population while drawing attention to how upcoming federal initiatives and spending can be targeted towards solutions.

This report identifies several key areas:

- **Critical Juncture.** Discussion of what makes this moment so critical – unemployment combined with accelerated release of vulnerable individuals at risk of overdose.
- **Smart Investment in a Model of Service.** Smart policy and programming for reentry requires investment in three elements: **(a)** address critical need through reentry-focused support services and case management; **(b)** reduce the prejudice against hiring reentry by establishing partnerships with industry-leaders and employers to who commit to hire reentry, and encouraging culture and policy change so companies become more reentry-friendly; and **(c)** targeted job training and workforce development for in-demand jobs and industries to fill skill gaps.
- **Federal and/or State Role.** Overview of what government can do – invest in reentry service providers; incentivize reentry hiring; and better prepare inmates prior to release.



Rob Asaro-Angelo • Commissioner, NJ Department of Labor & Workforce Development

This report highlights **(1)** the challenges and opportunities, **(2)** a model that supports employment and strategies that build and coarsen the employment pipeline, as well as **(3)** how the criticality of getting this right at this juncture will shape the future of reentry and how low-income communities of color rebound from the pandemic. These efforts can be used to kick off a national partnership or national network of partnerships between and among government, industry leaders and the criminal justice/reentry sector to promote cultural change and policy shifts among employers. It can also prompt a convening to



identify how federal dollars in upcoming relief and investment packages can be targeted to support the model outlined here, and to promote a series of regulatory changes.

## DETAILED NARRATIVE



*NJRC's Governor's Reentry Training & Employment Center*

### I. OVERVIEW

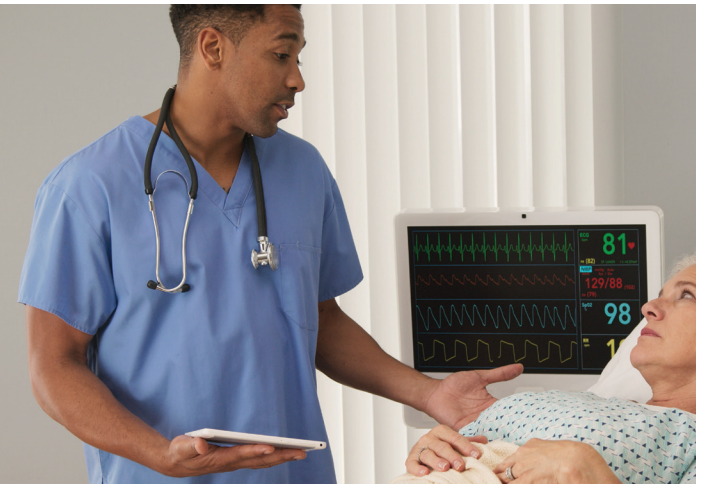
#### Problem and Opportunity

The Biden Administration's plans to invest in infrastructure and green jobs will bring opportunities to target workforce, training and employment funding to underserved and hard-hit communities, particularly low-income communities of color. It is imperative that the reentry community benefit from this investment. Helping court-involved individuals

achieve healthy self-sufficiency requires targeted efforts and investments in employment. Such efforts should follow a blueprint for success, a three-fold approach that **(1)** bridges individuals to supportive wraparound services, **(2)** develops customized training and workforce development opportunities in in-demand industries, and **(3)** works closely with employers to find quality job placements. With smart, coordinated investment, we can help these individuals stabilize their lives so they may achieve healthy self-sufficiency, largely through employment opportunities that bring prosperity to them, their families, and communities.

#### High Stakes and the Need for Redress

The pandemic has raised the stakes for connecting court-involved individuals to federal stimulus for several reasons: First, the pandemic has expedited the release of at-risk inmates in many states in order to decompress prisons and alleviate the public health emergency. Under its groundbreaking Pandemic Credit Relief law, New Jersey, for example, has released over 2,000 individuals. However, the struggling state of the economy has made linking this population to employment more difficult. NJRC, for example, has seen a 10% drop in its employment rate since the onset of the pandemic. Additionally, for many of those who were already released—and employed—when the pandemic hit, they were among the first ones to be laid off. Many of these clients have had to come back to NJRC for help. For some, like those employed in the hospitality



*The Governor's Reentry Training & Employment Center provides an extensive list of courses including EKG Technician Certification, Clinical Medical Assistant Certification, Plumbing Assistant & Building Maintenance, Electrical Assistant & HVAC, General Construction, CISCO Certification, Solar Panel Installation, Phlebotomy Technician Certification, Telemedicine & Addiction Treatment, General Education Development (GED), Mechanics Training, Veterans Services, and more.*



industry, opportunities have dried up. We need training for careers in new industries that have staying power.

Unemployment magnifies the impact on the reentry population, which is highly vulnerable across multiple systems: the formerly incarcerated are 13 times more likely to become homeless; between 60 and 75% of individuals are unemployed in the year following their release; and they are at high risk for hospitalization including through emergency departments visits (one in twelve individuals end up hospitalized within 90 days of release). Moreover, they suffer disproportionately from substance use disorders (SUDs) at a rate of nearly 70%, the consequences of which are staggering: studies have found that the risk of opioid overdose death for an individual with OUD during the first two weeks following release is 129 times greater than that of the general population. With opioid deaths on the rise—New Jersey, for example, saw a 20% increase in opioid-related deaths in the first five months of 2020—connecting this population to employment is a critical strategy for securing their health, preventing overdose, and keeping them stably housed.

We need to think of the reentry population as an economic asset to their larger communities—helping them gain employment adds to their communities' economic growth and cultivates the pool of human talent. A path towards inclusion and investment is really an investment in low-income communities of color overall. The interventions needed to address the reentry population are known and achievable; the challenge we face is to accompany the supportive response with smart and targeted employment training and workforce development opportunities.

### **Ripe Opportunity for Investment**

With a shift to investment in green jobs and infrastructure thanks to the Biden Administration, there is even more of a premium on training and workforce development. This is an opportunity to train and prepare court-involved individuals for well-paying jobs with ladders for growth. This is a population that is not only deserving of such investment, but who have significant strengths to offer the workforce.

Getting this right is a matter of justice and fairness: court-involved individuals are doubly impacted by Covid-19, with inmate populations being among the hardest hit by infections



*NJRC PACE Grant Recipients, New Community Corporation & Sansone Auto*

and deaths in the country, and the formerly incarcerated drawing disproportionately from communities of color which have borne the brunt of the virus due to social determinants of health.

New Jersey's experience demonstrates that industry leaders are ready, willing and engaged partners in these efforts. Through a confluence of events—the havoc that the pandemic has wreaked on communities of color, the national reckoning on racial justice, and the desire to address mass incarceration—the private sector is looking for ways it can direct its Diversity and Inclusion efforts towards meaningful action. Through NJRC's partnership with the NJ Business Industry Association, we are developing an approach that promises to make good on this possibility. To that end, reentry service providers need to be funded, and need to be positioned to work with state and local partners—local workforce development and one-stops, public and private employers, and service providers—to leverage these opportunities. We need to make prioritization of the reentry population as part of federal, state and local investment an immediate focus.

## II. THREE-PRONGED REENTRY-FOCUSED APPROACH:

- (1) Support Services
- (2) Targeted Training
- (3) Job Placements Through Partnerships

Reentry service providers are already providing the key ingredient to success through a wraparound service approach that provides stability and support to a complex set of problems. For many, the key next step is investing resources directly into creating training opportunities for their clients. Providers don't have to become trainers themselves. Rather, in partnership with industry leaders and government, they should target industries and trainings that will help their clients, and then coordinate the key pieces: providing the foundation of key support services, identifying and arranging for the best industries and training opportunities, enlisting expert trainers to customize and conduct trainings, and designing a comprehensive strategy to enlist employers who are committed to hiring among reentry.



Reverend Steffie Bartley • National Board, National Action Network & Michele Siekerka • President & CEO, NJBIA

# 1. Build on What Reentry Service Providers are Doing and Doing Well - Providing Integrated Wraparound Services as the Foundation for Success

Organizations like NJRC empower court-involved individuals to achieve healthy self-sufficiency by providing employment training and helping secure job opportunities, helping individuals obtain medical, mental and behavioral health services (including addiction treatment), providing legal services (e.g., expungement, license restoration), and connecting individuals to housing. Addressing the needs of the whole person and providing ongoing case management and services ensures success and continued stability. These services work to provide the backbone of healthy and lasting reentry.

There are several additional areas where service providers can fashion their services in a way that advances the goals of employment:

- **Addiction Treatment & Mental Health.** Industry leaders have identified SUD and mental health treatment as perhaps the most critical among these services; through a trauma-informed and therapeutic approach, reentry service providers can link their clients to medical, mental and behavioral healthcare services that for many are a precondition to successful reentry and future employment. Evidence that such treatment is in place can be determinative for a tentative employer.
- **Soft Skills.** Organizations can also fold the development of soft skills into their services to best position clients—this includes both life skills work (conflict resolution, stress management, and time management) but also lessons from experienced human resources experts on interviewing skills and how to market yourself.
- **Mentorship – “Adopt a Returning Citizen.”** Additionally, through a new initiative, Adopt a Returning Citizen, NJRC is working with employers and industry leaders across the state to link clients to employment-focused mentors. These mentors are there as a resource for clients as they launch (and re-launch) their careers, providing mental and emotional support, career advice, and, above all, to be there as a positive source of fellowship.

# 8 REENTRY SITES

## CENTRAL & NORTHERN JERSEY



### STAFF @ EACH SITE

Case Manager  
Social Worker  
Employment Specialist  
Peer Recovery Specialist/Patient Navigator



## 2. Targeting Industries and Appropriate Trainings and Conducting Trainings Directly

The host of challenges facing the reentry population requires a tailored approach that is smart about directing clients to career opportunities with ladders for growth and in industries with staying power.

- **Three Key Criteria: In-Demand Jobs, Growth Industries, Achievable Skill-Gap.** The key first step is to identify industries that meet three criteria:

- (1) they have in-demand jobs
- (2) there is an easily closeable skill gap for entry-level jobs
- (3) the industries are both well-positioned to thrive in our economy and present ladders for growth that are achievable for the formerly incarcerated.

These industries include construction, green jobs and smart buildings (e.g., electrical, carpentry), food services, healthcare and IT training. It is incumbent on us to take an expansive view of the Biden Administration's plans to invest in green jobs and infrastructure; these investments extend beyond just construction jobs, but also draw on skilled labor needed in the knowledge economy. For example, green jobs increasingly include investments in revolutionizing our grid which will draw on IT training and a labor force skilled in computer systems and the Internet of Things.

- **Tailored Trainings – Built Around Requirements of Hiring Commitments and Reasonable Duration.** Training for the reentry population should be customized. Linking training to supportive services discussed above is key. But so are other elements: formerly incarcerated individuals face a slew of financial and housing challenges that intensify the need to find job placement as quickly as possible following release. (This challenge is magnified for individuals who have convictions for the sale of controlled dangerous substances (CDS) due to their ineligibility for Work First NJ and Temporary Rental Assistance—they can ill afford months-long, full-time training without access to dependable financial supports.) This militates



*Veteran leadership, particularly Bob Looby, Rich Leibler, VA, and DMAVA have supported identifying veterans behind the wall and linking them to specialized reentry training for career opportunities.*



*Senate President Sweeney and State Senators have strongly supported reentry, workforce development training, and job placement.*

for creating trainings that can close a skill-gap through an efficient and relatively short training program, using pre-apprenticeships, and designing the curriculum around the specific needs of committed employers.

### 3. Quality Placement and Partnership Approach

Securing hiring commitments from employers to hire graduates of training programs is perhaps more important than the training itself. For some employers, this may mean expanding their existing commitment to the reentry population by helping to place them in new job categories; for others, it means bringing them into the fold, pre-apprenticeship training, and apprenticeship training in private, public, and union employment. For both, a variety of strategies are needed:

- **Build the Case for Success Through Partnerships and Promoting Reentry via Established Industry Networks.** When reentry service providers and criminal justice advocates partner with leading business associations, they can use these relationships as a platform to elevate successes and enlist the involvement of other industry leaders. NJRC has partnered with the New Jersey Business Industry Association (NJBIA) on a workgroup that enlists industry leaders to commit to hiring court-involved individuals. Some strategies include “Hire One,” where employers can get involved by committing to hiring one formerly incarcerated person. The idea is that a successful experience will lead to more hires. Workgroups like these create platforms for marketing the advantages of hiring reentry (see below).
- **Marketing the Advantages of Hiring Reentry – Retention, Hard Work and Savings.** Employers who have a history of reentry-friendly hiring practices have one thing in common: experience employing formerly incarcerated individuals demonstrates that they are worth the investment. NJRC is working with new partners including private, public, and union employment across industries—construction, the energy sector, and tech companies—to market the advantages of hiring reentry. These advantages include retention/decrease in turnover, the value of the worker, and savings: Higher Retention: Studies indicate that employers who hire individuals with criminal records have higher

retention rates: At Total Wine & More, a reentry-friendly company, human resources managers found that turnover was 12.2% lower annually for employees with criminal records.

1. **Higher retention rates** translates to savings to companies: according to the Center for American Progress, the cost of employer turnover is between 16% and 20% of the employee's salary.
2. **Hard Work:** Individuals with criminal backgrounds tend to work harder: a USA Army study demonstrates that individuals with criminal histories were 33% more likely to be promoted to sergeant, a product of hard work.
3. **Savings via Formal Partnership.** By creating a pipeline between training, pre-apprenticeship and employment opportunities, NJRC will help reduce employers' costs by, effectively, acting as a recruiter for employers. Savings to companies will accrue through reduced aggregated cost factor, including through human resources and training costs. Other Benefits: Employers hiring the formerly incarcerated can take advantage of federal Work Opportunity Tax Credits and federal bonding program.



*International Union of Operating Engineers represents a "best practice" of excellence in employment training.*

## Address Concerns Regarding Risk and Recidivism

Employers are increasingly interested in hiring reentry clients—especially in light of criminal justice reform and the desire to ensure training and employment opportunities for court-involved persons. Despite this desire, many employers have an aversion to

hiring individuals with criminal backgrounds—whether due to policy or concerns about risk. NJRC’s approach of providing on-going case management can be a critical tool in overcoming this barrier: it provides employers and hiring managers with a rational basis to waive or grant exceptions to policy. For example, where a candidate participates in certain prescribed case management services (e.g., counseling, treatment, job readiness, and where there is accountability to a third party, in this case, NJRC), it gives employers the confidence to adjust their risk assessment in favor of the candidate. The existence of ongoing case management services by service providers who are known quantities could give employers the comfort and sense of accountability to change their policies and hire individuals who participate in such a process. Reentry service providers like NJRC can also assist these employers in navigating internal issues with HR hiring practices and

policies and risk management, by helping them identify model hiring practices and “exceptions to policy” where appropriate.



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Veteran's Services

### III. POTENTIAL ASKS

In addition to advocating for the promotion of this strategy, there are key investments and actions that can be taken to support and advance these efforts:

#### 1. Invest in Reentry-Specific Workforce Development Programs/ Employment Aspects of Reentry Services.

While many reentry service providers are using the

1. [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field\\_document/060917-trone-reportweb\\_0.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/060917-trone-reportweb_0.pdf)
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Reverend Al Sharpton • Founder, National Action Network

wraparound services model that NJRC advocates for here, government can provide additional support by targeting funding to the types of staffing and operations that are needed to provide customized and ongoing employment services. For example, each of NJRC's eight reentry sites has a minimum of one employment specialist—in addition to a social worker, case manager and intake specialist. This person's job is to establish relationships with and recruit employers, feed listings and job opportunities to clients, make a match and help support the client in the process. These relationships are essential in persuading employers there is accountability and that the risk is worth taking. Employment operations need to be amply staffed. Additionally, reentry service providers need to have the leadership support to operate strategically: to develop relationships with employers, identify industries and jobs that are in-demand and have growth opportunity, and link to and customize training opportunities.

**2. National Public-Private Partnership to Encourage Policy Shifts and Culture Change Among Employers.** Organizations like Dave's Killer Bread Foundation and efforts like the Open Hiring Initiative have focused on shifting the culture among employers. Federal support to nationalize these efforts and invest in resources—technical assistance, workshops, leadership councils, toolkits and other practical assistance and cheerleading—can both shine a light on this need, and support on the ground efforts towards culture and policy change. It can also spotlight efforts like an "exceptions to policy" approach. Government can convene industry leaders and councils to promote these efforts.

**3. Increase and Expand Incentives for Employers.** While reentry service providers can, with the help of industry and government supporters, work to change the hearts and minds of employers to increase the hiring of court-involved persons, businesses also need financial incentives. Existing incentives include Work Opportunity Tax Credits for employers who hire reentry as well as federal bonding. But, more can be done. Other tools include increasing the amount of tax credits, and other successful programs like New Jersey LWD's Growing Apprenticeships in Nontraditional Sectors (GAINS) program which subsidizes up to 50% of a qualifying new hire for up to a year.

## 4. Providing an Adequate Stipend for Trainees During Training.

Training is a double-edged sword for court-involved persons: with historically and grossly disproportionately low rates of educational attainment, these individuals are in dire need of training, but can ill afford to support themselves during long training courses. This means reentry service providers have to target them to short training courses which—while certainly beneficial—are limited in how much they can advance any one individual. Moreover, with states like New Jersey which prohibit individuals with histories of drug charges from accessing temporary rental assistance, there is even greater pressure to take whatever work opportunity arises, even if it means passing on an opportunity that will provide long-term sustainability and prosperity. NJRC, for example, has had to pass up training programs for its clients that were in excess of three months because clients would not be able to afford supporting themselves through completion. Government needs to ensure that reentry-focused training provides sufficient stipends and cost of living expenses to support individuals through a course of study and training.



*Speaker Coughlin, Assemblywoman Lopez, and Senator Vitale have eliminated barriers to healthcare services and food access during reentry employment training.*

## 5. Investment Behind the Wall.

It is axiomatic that successful reentry begins behind the wall. Ensuring released persons are able to hit the ground running is critical from an employment perspective; it's also a matter of life and death. Once inmates are released, it is a race against time for them – many are battling addiction—during the first two weeks after release they are 129 times more likely to overdose. But failing to adequately prepare individuals for post-release is also a waste of resources. For better or worse, inmates have room and board covered – this is a resource that the formerly incarcerated, often homeless or insecurely housed, lack. If we looked upon incarceration as a resource to do the critical work of job training that leading practitioners are doing beyond the wall, we will set them up for success, mitigating the heightened risk of the post-release period, and using our dollars more wisely. Government can spur success by incentivizing prisons and jails to change how they do business: rewarding prisons and jails that adapt training programs that are best practice and making a job readiness checklist—access to vital records, preparation for expungement and driver's license restoration, and access to public benefits—a prerequisite to release. Using prison effectively to prepare individuals for

the workforce is a smart use of time and money. One specific strategy could be a new federal law that requires jails and prisons ensure that released individuals have an ID in hand, a Medicaid/Medicare card, and applications filed for food stamps/SNAP, public assistance and housing benefits.

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