

Public Safety Committee Testimony

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify in favor of the Governor's Budget proposal on Reentry, Housing and Supportive Services.

My name is Mike Jones, I am formerly incarcerated having served 4 ½ years in prison. I have a state prison number and a federal prison number. I have been home, since 2003. I see in the budget there is currently \$77 million allocated for Reentry Housing and Support Services, yet in my community I do not see results in my community by the agency that get the big funding dollars. I see many grass roots organizations that serve the community with little to no money serve the community with greater passion, insight and positive results.

At the time of my release, I was unaware of a reentry model. I have always viewed myself as a fixer and as I watched other formerly incarcerated individuals struggle with employment, I felt a need to start a job-readiness/workforce development program called Breaking The Cycle Inc. (referred to as BTC) (founded in 2008). As BTC began to teach people unconventional ways to acquire employment, we noticed that many employers did not have relationships within communities where people needed jobs. There were many levels of discrimination to include zip code discrimination and discrimination when it came to the use of technology to fill out online applications, so we began to fight against these discriminations. From 2009 – 2015, BTC hosted 3 Ex-Offender Career and Resource Fairs in Cleveland, 1 in Detroit and 1 in Atlanta. BTC also hosted a Business Education Seminar (Negligent Hiring) for local businesses and Children of Incarcerated Parents Resource Fair so that children wouldn't have to follow the paths of their parents.

In 2008 and 2012 BTC hosted several Voting Education and Registration Seminars because many people with felony convictions didn't realize that they could vote and didn't understand that the judges that do the sentencing are elected officials, and here in Cleveland, Ohio there are many men and women that have been incarcerated for crimes that they didn't commit. All of these things were done without funding dollars and while working a job supporting a family, yet we were able to positively serve 2,374 formerly incarcerated men and women.

In 2021 I personally became a Qualified Mental Health Specialist to assist formerly incarcerated individuals navigate issues of anxiety, depression and the feeling of being overwhelmed when reentering society. In 2022 I personally helped to write the Justice Housing 8-point plan because as a formerly incarcerated man there is no Justice when it comes to housing as it seems to be a Never-Ending Sentence given to me, because there is no look back period or source of income protections in place to assist someone like me. At NEOCH we are currently fighting for a Fair Chance housing Ordinance.

I feel there needs to be better services provided for formerly incarcerated people, mostly by staff with lived experiences that can help newly released people navigate their personal reentry process without the threat of recidivism, and also changing some of these Collateral Sanctions would open doors for felony convicted individuals to obtain licenses in Real Estate, Life Accidental Health Insurance, Car insurance to name a few. Project Lift is one of these such agencies.

I live every day to keep Matthew 25 (verses 35-36) Alive, meaning when I see someone hungry, I feed them, when they are naked, I clothed them, when they need shelter, I house them and when they are in prison I visit them.