

Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry
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Ashley Davis, Community Coordinator Team Lead, LMM Men's Emergency Shelter
Ohio Senate Finance Committee
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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry (LMM) and the individuals we serve throughout Ohio. My name is Maria Foschia, President and CEO of LMM and I am joined by my colleague Ashley Davis.

Throughout our 56-year history, LMM has assisted individuals transitioning from incarceration back into the community. I am here to advocate for funding to sustain our workforce development reentry programs. They have a transformative effect on the lives of justice-impacted individuals from across the State of Ohio, offering them a second chance and the opportunity to achieve a stable, self-sufficient life.

One of our most impactful programs is called *Chopping for Change*. In partnership with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC), this innovative program provides vocational training in culinary arts, while incorporating trauma education and case management.

What distinguishes the program is that it is an upstream solution, available to currently incarcerated individuals at reintegration centers. Individuals are equipped with industry-recognized credentials, job placement, and personal development tools that help establish a foundation for success. Placements are provided in various businesses – from small restaurants to fine dining establishments such as the Marble Room in Cleveland – setting graduates on a path to living wage employment, economic independence, and family reunification.

The results are undeniable: 438 students served since program inception, with graduation rates averaging 80%, and job retention at 80%. Over 8 years operating, recidivism rates of participants enrolled in the program after reentry have consistently been under 3%. This is in stark contrast to the state average which ranges between 28-35%. The return on investment is evident: lower recidivism rates lead to reduced correctional expenses and a more robust workforce in Ohio.

ODRC has recognized *Chopping for Change* as a model program, showcasing the program to peers from other state correctional departments. Despite this recognition, LMM does not currently receive state funding for this crucial reentry work. Since 2016, LMM has secured more than \$4 million to fund the program, from local and federal government, philanthropy, and earned income. LMM's request for \$250,000 per year over the biennium will allow this program to continue.

At LMM, we know that second chances require interventions that tackle the real barriers individuals encounter when reentering society. As a second chance employer, more than one-third of our staff have experienced the criminal legal system. Ashley Davis, here with me today, is one of those individuals, who I am proud to call my staff partner. I would like to invite her to share her story of how LMM impacted her reentry journey.

Thank you, Maria. My name is Ashley Davis, Community Coordinator Team Lead at LMM. I am here to share my story of how LMM's *Chopping for Change* program changed my life.

I grew up in Painesville, Ohio with my family. Life was good until about seventeen years ago, when I experienced a difficult period in my life and the end of my marriage. I was accused of endangering my child and was sentenced to six consecutive years in prison. Being separated from my children was paralyzing. While in prison I felt like the wind blew out of my soul due to isolation and depression. I lost all hope and fully had to lean on God.

Then, four years into my sentence, the *Chopping for Change* program came into my life. The program provided me with employable job skills to prepare for my future career. It was the therapeutic aspect of the program that was most crucial for my growth. In therapy, I learned coping skills such as mindful meditation, breathing exercises, and positive affirmations to help me heal. I bonded with other women who understood my life experiences as we healed together, and they became like my family.

LMM and the *Chopping for Change* program truly changed my life. It gave me a place to call home. It became my bridge back into society, and a safe haven that I did not know I needed. LMM's welcoming environment, compassionate staff, and supportive resources relieved the anxieties of reentering into a changing world. The job readiness and interview training I received allowed me to obtain employment shortly after release, helping me successfully reunite with my family, and provide financial stability for my children. Eventually, I returned home to LMM, this time as a staff partner. I have grown from a part-time worker to a Community Coordinator Team Lead at LMM's Men's Emergency Shelter. Every day, I change lives by empowering others to find their way back to stability. Today, I am an advocate for change and have found my purpose in life, all thanks to LMM and their belief in me.

I ask you to consider this funding request to support LMM's workforce development program. Justice-impacted individuals, like me, deserve the opportunity for a second chance to become who they truly want to be. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I welcome any questions you may have.