

Written Testimony**Submitted by Melinda Swan, Executive Director, Greater Common Good****To the Ohio Senate Finance Committee May 27, 2025****In Re: SCO361**

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chaves and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written comments in support of SCO361, an amendment submitted by several members of the Senate.

We ask you to again support this innovative pilot for two key reasons:

- ensure that we capitalize and build upon the lessons learned and successes achieved using technology, including Virtual Reality, to reduce recidivism and promote recovery among justice-involved people
- create new options to increase lasting employment among this population as well.

Background and Outcomes

Briefly, the Ohio General Assembly dedicated \$500,000 in funding to this work in the 2023 Biennium budget. This funding allowed us to support and execute a statewide pilot, and upgrade and add key components to Anchor4Me, our wellness and recovery support platform designed for justice-involved people, including curricula from the University of Cincinnati's Correctional Institute.

Anchor4Me's pilot, guided by nonprofit Greater Common Good, initially aimed to enroll 250 people at five sites, three Community-Based Correctional Facilities (CBCFs) and two halfway houses. We are meeting and exceeding expectations as demonstrated by:

- enrolling more than 600 people from the original five sites and two additional CBCFs.
- confirming that all of our current CBCF partners, MonDay, Oriana, Alvis, West Central and EOCC, seek to continue working with us.
- fielding requests to expand our partnership with Alvis and add the Franklin County CBCF.
- generating levels of engagement at this time that are five to six times higher than other similar mental health platforms (4% norm versus 24% for Anchor4Me).
- negotiating new relationships that will deepen the value of the platform, most notably adding VR experiences for job exploration, soft skill training and even hard skill training for in-demand jobs in fields such as health care, logistics, manufacturing and customer support.

We encountered – and overcame - barriers that research tells us are common impediments, most specifically about training and empowering staff to integrate the tool into their regular curriculum and ensuring Internet access in these settings. These factors delayed, but did not deter implementation.

A sampling of our feedback from focus groups and conversations with CBCF staff include:

"I was feeling down after failing my GED and I used the platform to get to a better place. I just passed my GED, and the inspirational stories helped." Anchor4Me platform user, West Central Correctional Facility

“By regularly using the tools, residents seem more likely to prioritize treatment once back into the community, working with the project’s team has been an incredible opportunity that we hope can be sustained.”
Clinical Manager and project partner, MonDay Community Correctional Facility

Future Potential

The cost-efficiency and scalability of digital apps is well documented. In our second round, we intend to enroll at least 1,000 potential users and actively engage a minimum of 15% or 150 people. The average cost to incarcerate an Ohio adult in FY 2023 was \$37,624 per year. The Bureau of Community Sanctions report for FY2022 pegs the average cost for a residential diversion at \$7,898. Contributing to keeping at least 150 more people from cycling back through prison or a CBCF could save from \$1,184,700 to as much as \$5,643,600 annually.

As noted by the Council of State Governments Justice Center for Corrections and Reentry Division, reducing recidivism calls for systems that scale up programming and expand participation. Long term, this platform could continue growing in numbers and potentially become available to any person incarcerated in a state facility at far less cost than adding staff or building additional facilities.

Further, research has found that even an occasional user can benefit from a technology platform by “getting what they need” at the time to prevent relapse. Whether VR, journaling, or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-derived tools – all can contribute to mental wellbeing. VR specifically has been proven effective for anxiety, depression, phobias, PTSD, eating disorders, psychosis, and addiction.

Finally, because securing employment is a critical anchor that helps people successfully return to community and because Ohio’s economy depends upon integrating more people into the workforce, we intend to add prepackaged VR employment training courses to the platform. VR training courses work. A 2020 study by PwC found that people completed VR coursework four times faster than in-person training and that use of VR improves recall accuracy and retention. The US Department of Education found that every dollar invested in prison education efforts saves \$5.

We also hope to link our platform to the ReLink community resource database created by the ODRC and connect users to Ohio BMV to facilitate securing an ID (following the spirit of SB288).

Budget Request

To allow us to expand our participants, increase the number of partner sites, possibly including Ohio Women’s Reformatory, and add additional content including employment skills, we would ask for an increase to \$600,000 over the next biennium.