



State Recovery Now

a project of America Achieves

"East New York Community Workshop, hosted by NYC Dept of Planning" by NYCDOT is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

State Recovery Now

Policy Playbook

Employing Residents in High-Demand Careers: Supporting Returning Citizens

A guide to reducing recidivism through community-driven employment initiatives

Executive Summary

As formerly incarcerated individuals re-enter society, the ability to obtain and retain stable and well-paying employment is a crucial component of successful reintegration. The typical barriers to accessing good jobs — difficulty accessing skills development, job placement, or wraparound support like childcare and transportation — can be particularly impenetrable for returning citizens. With the largest correctional population in the world, the United States is in critical need of strategies to end mass incarceration. Progress will require states and local jurisdictions to redesign meaningful rehabilitation and reentry programs to reduce high rates of recidivism and improve employment outcomes. If successful, these jurisdictions will increase the likelihood of returning citizens receiving the support they need as they become valuable contributors to their communities and local economies.

The purpose of this playbook is to provide government policymakers and planners with effective programs that can help redesign the reentry process for returning citizens to emphasize access to good jobs — leading to safer communities and more inclusive economies. As state and local governments consider their options for spending [American Rescue Plan \(ARP\) funds](#), they should consider “community-driven public safety investments.” These investments direct public resources to organizations serving the community to support initiatives focused on helping returning citizens reintegrate into society through job training and employment support.

The policy outlined in this playbook is modeled off of [Colorado’s Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills \(WAGEES\) program](#). This initiative sets aside resources for grants to organizations that work in the community providing direct support services to formerly incarcerated people navigating the reentry process, boosting their job placement, wages, and retention rates and reducing recidivism.

Policymakers can implement similar programs in two steps:

1. Select and fund a community-based organization that serves as an intermediary between the government and community partners that provide direct delivery of services to returning citizens.
2. Set up a formal system for designing, approving, and evaluating selected workforce development programs based on outcomes that demonstrate returning citizens have both increased employment options and reduced recidivism rates.

Investing in community-driven public safety initiatives can break the cyclical nature of incarceration and increase economic productivity overall. In Oregon¹, successful community-driven programs have helped decrease the number of inmates by over 1,000 men

¹ Estimates based on [Oregon’ Statistical Analysis Center Prison Forecast dashboard](#)

and 300 women from previous projections of incarcerated populations. In New York City,² community-based public safety strategies led to a decline in arrests by over 70 percent by School Safety Officers between 2012 and 2017. In San Jose,³ similar strategies have helped participating youth increase their prosocial skills and improve school engagement, while reducing drug use. In Oakland,⁴ individuals who participated in high-quality community-based public safety initiatives have had progressively lower arrest and conviction rates.

Colorado's WAGEES program has demonstrated similarly successful results toward achieving stated goals. The program has seen over-enrollment in every reported quarter (an important metric, considering that participation is strictly voluntary), high employment placement and retention rates, a substantial reduction in recidivism rates for participants, and savings to the state budget from avoided re-incarceration costs. The recidivism rate of participants in the WAGEES program has been around 10 percent,⁵ compared to the statewide rate of roughly 30 percent. The annual cost per participant in the WAGEES program compared to the cost of an additional inmate has resulted in savings to the state of between *\$6.9 to 10 million per year*.

ARP funds are well-suited for community-driven safety strategies, as these flexible federal dollars can allow state and local governments to test different initiatives, evaluate them, and, based on their performance, select and scale those that are most effective in reducing crime, incarceration, recidivism, improving economic outcomes, or any other desired policy goal. States and cities can then build on momentum from investments in such programs to continue creating new revenue sources, as these interventions can reduce the costs of other safety strategies and appropriations can be reinvested to maintain the new initiative.

Background

This nation was built on the ideal that people from any background should be able to get ahead through hard work. However, many populations face structural barriers that prevent them from achieving this ideal and fulfilling their potential. By leaving those groups behind, the nation as a whole loses out.

These barriers are particularly persistent for citizens returning to their communities from incarceration. Each year, around 600,000 individuals are released from our nation's jails and prisons.⁶ According to a study by the Department of Justice,⁷ around 76.6 percent of these individuals will be rearrested within 5 years of release — much higher than other advanced

²New York Civil Liberties Union (2017), [Student Safety Act Reporting: 2017 in Review](#)

³ Social Policy Research Associates (2020), [2018–2019 Program Year Annual Report Evaluation of the San José Bringing Everyone's Strengths Together \(BEST\) Program](#)

⁴ Resource Development Associates (2014), [Oakland Unite Violence Prevention Programs Retrospective Evaluation: 2005-2013](#)

⁵Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (2017), [Sunset Review: Offender Re-Entry Grant Program](#).

⁶ MDRC (2021) "[Paving the way home: an evaluation of the returning citizens program](#)"

⁷ Department of Justice (2017), ["Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010"](#)

economies such as Norway, where the recidivism rate is around 20 percent,⁸ Israel which boasts a 41% rate,⁹ or even France with one of the highest in advanced economies with 58%.¹⁰

This high rate of recidivism is due in large part to the discrimination returning citizens face when trying to reintegrate themselves into society. It is compounded by being barred from access to social services due to criminal records. For example, returning citizens are 10 times more likely than the general population to experience homelessness,¹¹ partly because they are barred from access to government programs that assist with housing. Furthermore, landlords are often reluctant to rent to them. Critically, they also face a harder time obtaining employment in most industries,¹² which exacerbates barriers to effective reentry. Employers are often reluctant to hire individuals with criminal convictions — a practice that is allowed in most states — while a lack of education, skills training, or employment history often leave returning citizens with fewer opportunities to obtain employment.¹³ This often leads returning citizens to low-skill jobs with low wages, inadequate benefits, and few paths to upward mobility. These problems are systemic, with barriers to reentry and employment deeply entrenched in our systems. High rates of recidivism have mounting costs — not only to returning citizens themselves, their families, and their communities, but also in terms of additional pressures on our economic and justice systems.

The United States already has the largest correctional population in the world, with 2.1 million people behind bars and 6.3 million people under correctional control as of 2019.¹⁴ It is estimated that the system of mass incarceration costs over \$182 billion a year, with \$81 billion being spent in public correction agencies and the remaining \$101 billion funding the rest of the system.¹⁵ Promoting policies that can help returning citizens get good jobs and retain them are important for two reasons: 1) they help these individuals get back on their feet and benefit communities and local economies, and 2) they are cost-effective measures that reduce the burden on the justice system by reducing recidivism.

Evidence-based policies can help returning citizens get good jobs faster while reducing recidivism. For example, correctional education in incarcerated adults increases the odds of obtaining employment post release by around 13 percent, while reducing recidivism by 43 percent.¹⁶ In fact, it is estimated that every dollar invested in correctional education saves between four and five dollars in reincarceration costs over three years.

These policies, known as “community driven public safety investments,” direct public resources to safety strategies that are led by organizations serving the community that have a proven track

⁸ Pell Center (2014) [“Incarceration and Recidivism: Lessons from Abroad”](#)

⁹ Washington Institute (2020) [“Israeli Recidivism Rates are High; More Resources for Arab Israeli Prisoners Could Help”](#)

¹⁰ Ministère de la Justice (2013) [“Mesurer la récidive”](#)

¹¹ Prison Policy Initiative (2018) [“Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people”](#)

¹² NYTimes (2016) [“In Search of the Felon-Friendly Workplace”](#)

¹³ American Psychological Association (2018) [“From prisons to communities: Confronting re-entry challenges and social inequality”](#)

¹⁴ US Department of Justice, [“Correctional Populations in the United States, 2019 – Statistical Tables”](#)

¹⁵ Prison Policy Initiative (2017), [“Following the Money of Mass Incarceration”](#)

¹⁶ RAND Corporation (2014), [“How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here?”](#)

record of advancing public safety goals, and that extend beyond traditional law enforcement approaches. Pursuing these policies requires a paradigm shift in which prisons are considered to be primarily rehabilitation institutions — as opposed to purely punitive ones — which would greatly benefit former inmates by increasing their employability and wages, while benefiting the rest of society with lower crime rates and saving taxpayers dollars by keeping returning citizens out of prison in the future.

Policy Overview

To overcome challenges associated with the reentry process of formerly incarcerated people, state and local governments should consider allocating a portion of American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) funds to a program designed to promote workforce development skills for returning citizens, while helping them gain sufficient support, in order to reduce recidivism.

Policymakers can implement this program in two steps:

1. Fund a community-based organization that serves as an intermediary between the government and community partners and is responsible for the direct delivery of services to returning citizens.
2. Set up a formal system for designing, approving, and evaluating the workforce development programs that will be provided to returning citizens — with the intended outcomes of increasing employment and wages and reducing recidivism.

This policy can be modeled off of [Colorado's Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills \(WAGEES\) program](#), which supports returning citizens through employment measures. In the WAGEES program, Colorado's legislature sets aside resources for grants to organizations that work in the community providing direct services to local formerly incarcerated people navigating the reentry process, boosting their job placement and retention rates, and thereby reducing recidivism. Initiatives such as Colorado's WAGEES program can create a virtuous cycle of support and reduce recidivism rates, saving money that can then be invested back into the community.

Finding sufficient funding for this type of community-driven public safety initiative is often a challenge for state and local governments, as public safety funds are usually appropriated to traditional strategies. However, many states and local governments have already found strategies to fund these initiatives in sustainable ways.

One way to fund community-driven public safety initiatives is through what is called “up-front investments”. These refer to community-driven public safety investments that use new capital and revenue streams to support alternatives to incarceration or other public safety priorities to

fund implementation of reforms, expand or launch new programs, create new incentive grants, and/or support other reform priorities.

Program Design

The Colorado's WAGEES program was created by the state's legislature in 2014, as a reentry grant program within the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC). The program serves people on parole who have been assessed as medium- to high-risk to recidivate based on the CDOC assessment tool. Formerly incarcerated people can join the program through a referral by CDOC or their parole officer or by opting into the program by reaching out to a community partner directly. For those who reach out independently, the CDOC is in charge of determining if the person is eligible for participation according to their assessment tool.

The Department awarded a contract to a community-based organization (currently the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership) to serve as an intermediary between the Department and the Community Partners that provide support services to returning citizens. The intermediary oversees the Community Partners, which involves ensuring they update and maintain records; reviewing expenditures; providing technical support, financial, and budgeting guidance; and, providing administrative resources that allow the community partners to focus on the direct delivery of services. In Colorado, the role of the intermediary was particularly important as the CDOC was not in a position to provide the level of support that Community Partners would require, so it was important to look for a community organization that had experience in reentry programs and providing assistance and oversight to multiple partners.

WAGEES Community Partners are a group of community and faith-based organizations funded in part by the WAGEES program that provide services to community members, including people returning from incarceration. Community Partners have leadership and staff with lived experience — meaning many of them have served time in prison and now have the expertise and passion to help others successfully transition back to their community. It is within the discretion of these Community Partners how much assistance can be provided and for how long, so that services can be flexible and tailored to each participant's needs. Community Partners reflect the specific communities they serve, preserving local autonomy, as they are best suited to develop responses to reentry needs within the unique context of the communities in which they work.

Each of the WAGEES Community Partners offers a unique program that provides services designed to help people on their reentry journey to successfully connect with their communities and families. People who choose to enroll and actively participate in the WAGEES program are eligible to receive services such as:

- Employment preparation and placement
- Work clothing and equipment assistance (pay for clothing/boots/shoes required by

employer or clothing for interviews; small tools required by the employers)

- Group and individual mentoring
- Identification acquisition (fees for Driver's License, Birth Certificate, etc.)
- Vocational training cost assistance
- Transportation assistance (bus passes or tickets to help attend work and WAGEES activities)
- Medical benefits acquisition (medical and mental health services)
- Housing assistance (shelter fees, limited housing or hotel, rent assistance)
- Family reunification and/or parenting support
- Education assistance (fee for classes and books)
- Substance abuse support groups
- Group and individual therapy

Outcomes

Policymakers can use the blueprint of Colorado's WAGEES program and adapt it to the unique context of their state or locality. Funding should be tied to results that emphasize increased employability in the short term, while making job retention, wage growth, and reduced recidivism the long-term goals.

In the short-term, states and cities should emphasize participation rates and job placement as key metrics for tracking progress. In Colorado's WAGEES program participation is strictly voluntary, therefore enrollment rates are part of their prioritized results. The most important outcome prioritized by the WAGEES program is increased employment placement of participants. According to an independent evaluation of the program by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (2017),¹⁷ as of June 2017, the program had enrolled 136 percent of its initial goal since its inception, and had achieved a 63 percent employment placement rate, surpassing its official placement rate target of 60 percent.

In the long run, success should be measured by job retention rates, wage growth, and recidivism rates among program participants. According to the same 2017 independent evaluation, the official targets for the WAGEES program were a 50 percent job retention rate and a recidivism rate no higher than 20 percent, which would be lower than Colorado's recidivism rate estimate of

¹⁷ Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (2017), [Sunset Review: Offender Re-Entry Grant Program](#).

30 percent. Once again, the WAGEES program achieved a better outcome, with a job retention rate of 57 percent and a recidivism rate ranging between 9 and 10 percent by June 2017. The WAGEES program did not track any wage growth measure, but other jurisdictions implementing similar programs should consider tracking this metric as a measure of program outcomes.

Associated Costs

Due to the success of Colorado's WAGEES program, the state legislature has chosen to expand funding from the pilot program appropriation of \$500,000 per year in 2015 to around \$6.7 million in the 2021-22 fiscal year. Total costs for this policy model will vary by jurisdiction and program design; state and local governments considering implementing similar programs can use Colorado's funding model as a guide, potentially implementing pilot programs first that can be scaled up if successful.

As Colorado's program scaled in size, it demonstrated clear advantages in cost effectiveness, reducing the cost per beneficiary by almost 50 percent between the first and third years. According to an independent evaluation of the program by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (2017), in the 2014-2015 fiscal year there were approximately 213 beneficiaries enrolled in the program, at a total cost of \$500,000, meaning that the average cost per beneficiary enrolled was around \$2,340. As the program expanded, by the 2016-17 fiscal year there were approximately 1,486 people enrolled, with a total cost of \$1.7 million, meaning that the average annual cost per beneficiary enrolled in 2016-17 had reduced to \$1,150.

Assessing the Return on Investment

Policymakers should build rigorous design and evaluation into the program, to assess impact on jobs, wages, recidivism and the return on investment – disaggregated by categories like race and gender – to inform future program design and administration, policy decisions, and funding allocations. Some funding should be allocated for hiring a third-party evaluator to design and run a rigorous impact evaluation of the program.

As for the WAGEES program, there is no official measure of the return on investment. We can assess the efficacy of the program, however, by comparing the average yearly programming cost for the individuals who successfully avoided recidivating, as opposed to the average yearly cost of having someone in prison in Colorado. **In the 2016-2017 year, the WAGEES program resulted in savings between \$6.9 to 10 million.**

The WAGEES program kept an estimated 300 people out of prison in 2016-17, at a cost of \$5,700 per person. The average annual cost of imprisoning each of these individuals in the state of Colorado would be between \$28,870 and \$39,303 per person. This means that for

every dollar that Colorado spends in the WAGEES program, the state saves between 5 to 7 dollars per avoided rearrest. From these calculations, we can estimate that the WAGEES program resulted in savings to the state of Colorado between \$6.9 to 10 million that year.

The estimates from the cost per avoided rearrest for the WAGEES program come from an independent evaluation by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (2017).¹⁸ In 2016-17 the average cost per beneficiary was roughly \$1,150 per year with almost 1,500 people enrolled during that year. This independent evaluation also states that while the general recidivism rate in Colorado was around 30 percent, the WAGEES program recidivism rate was around 10 percent. This 20 percentage point decrease would mean that around 300 people did not go back to prison, which would mean that each avoided rearrest in the WAGEES program costs around \$5,700 per year.

As for the average annual cost of a person in prison, the Vera Institute of Justice estimates that the cost per person in prison in 2015 for Colorado was \$39,303. A similar estimate can be obtained using data from the Sentencing Project,¹⁹ as it indicates there were 31,445 inmates in 2019 in Colorado at a cost of \$908 million, which comes to around \$28,870 per inmate.

This comparison only considers the difference in terms of the state's budget, not accounting for additional economic and social gains of a reduced crime rate and higher employment rate; nor does it account for the myriad impacts of incarceration on life outcomes, including the generational impacts on children of incarcerated parents, in factors such as probability of future delinquency, serious mental disorder, school failure, and underemployment.²⁰

Evidence of Action

Over the past decade, Colorado has been at the forefront of passing legislation to support community-driven safety strategies. Since 2014, Colorado has passed and implemented four initiatives that provide funding for community-based reentry, crime prevention, underserved victim services, and harm reduction. All these bills passed with bipartisan sponsorship and virtually no opposition.

Colorado's WAGEES program is one of these initiatives, with a particular emphasis on employment outcomes. A major success of the WAGEES program has been over-enrollment in every reported quarter. This demonstrates healthy demand, but also puts stress on limited resources. Despite heavy enrollment and a concentrated population of people at high risk of reoffending, the program has also shown strong results in reducing recidivism. In the program's

¹⁸ Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (2017), [Sunset Review: Offender Re-Entry Grant Program](#).

¹⁹ Sentencing Project (2019), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/>

²⁰ T. Clear, "The Effects of High Imprisonment Rates on Communities," *Crime and Justice* 37, no. 1 (2008): 97–132.

first two years, the recidivism rate was only 10 percent (compared to the statewide rate of roughly 30 percent), with only 2.5 percent returning to prison for committing new crimes, while the other 7.5 percent returned to prison for technical parole violations.

These outcomes demonstrate considerable evidence of a program worth replicating in other jurisdictions seeking to reduce recidivism via better employment outcomes for returning citizens. Understanding the challenges and successes of Colorado's WAGEES program can help other jurisdictions learn from the model and use it to inform their own efforts to boost and leverage community capacity to improve returning citizens' employability, enhance public safety and increase community well-being.

How is this a compelling use of one-time funding that can drive long term-impact and avoid unsustainable funding?

The high cost of incarceration on state budgets is squeezing their ability to innovate in public safety strategies. Large portions of their safety budgets go toward housing and feeding inmates. These individuals become a continued cost to the state, without much rehabilitation occurring unless the cycle is broken. Strategies are needed to update rehabilitation practices to ensure that returning citizens are able to reintegrate into and contribute to their communities in meaningful ways. This has the dual benefits of reducing recidivism and the associated burden on public safety budgets, while contributing to economic growth via improved employment and wage outcomes.

The WAGEES program model is well-suited for ARP funds as it meets workforce development goals and public safety goals, while helping to reduce the long-term fiscal burden on the justice system. The ARP bill and additional funding to state and local governments is an opportunity to collectively invest in ensuring higher employability among returning citizens, while also lowering crime and recidivism rates.

ARP funds can be used as an initial one-time transfer of new public dollars to support community-based public safety strategies, which could then become self-sustaining by reducing costs of other programs. As program outcomes will vary in each particular locality and population, state and local governments can use ARP funds to test different strategies, evaluate them, and select those that are most effective in increasing returning citizens' employability and job retention rates, while also reducing crime and recidivism, and meeting other public safety goals. When savings exceed program costs, appropriations can then be reinvested to maintain and scale the new strategy.

Authority for ARP Spending: *States and Local Governments may implement this policy using funds under Negative Economic Impacts (EC2).*

Implementation

Assessing Readiness

Policymakers at all levels are encouraged to use the guiding questions below to reflect on their capacity to implement similar community-driven employment and safety initiatives successfully:

- What initiatives exist that can be adapted to our current communities to enhance returning citizens' employability and job retention rates?
- Which of these initiatives work? What have been their intended outcomes and actual outcomes – including disaggregated by race and gender?
- What challenges do returning citizens face when trying to reintegrate into society? Do existing initiatives help returning citizens overcome these challenges?
- What is the current employment rate of returning citizens in the state and counties/cities? What opportunities do returning citizens have for wage growth and career advancement?
- What is the current recidivism rate in the jurisdiction?
- What is the annual cost of re-imprisoning an individual who recidivates?
- What is the Department of Corrections' capacity to implement new programs such as the WAGEES program to reduce recidivism and improve employment outcomes?
- Who are the potential partners in the state or localities that could serve as intermediaries (such as the role LCCL plays in the WAGEES program)?
- Which government agencies need to be at the table? Which agency needs to lead each initiative? Do they have the capacity to lead it?
- Which community organizations are already active in target communities where increasing employability and/or reducing recidivism is a priority? How can we involve these organizations, and returning citizens themselves, in the design of the program to increase its effectiveness?
- How many formerly incarcerated people can we estimate will be in need of support annually to increase their employability and/or reduce their risk of recidivism?

Essential partners for successful implementation

The primary agency leading an initiative such as the WAGEES program should be the state

Department of Corrections, as it handles prisons and the state's imprisoned population. This agency should be responsible for connecting returning citizens to services in their community that encourage stability and successful outcomes.

Partnerships may include the following critical stakeholders:

- **State commissioner of labor, state executive office of higher education, or state economic development commissioner:** These agencies will be key collaborators in designing and/or approving the job training programs that returning citizens will engage in.
- **Intermediary for providing services:** This partner will be responsible for selecting community-based partners, disbursing funds, developing and administering data collection systems, tracking performance metrics, and coordinating the relationships between the Department of Corrections and the community partners. In Colorado, the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership (LCCL) was selected as the intermediary.

Engaging Stakeholders and Beneficiaries

Any community-driven safety investment requires community input at every stage of planning, operation, and implementation. Affected stakeholders should have an opportunity to provide input to inform program design. Government officials should use any means necessary to engage early on with all members of the community, and returning citizens themselves, and keep open channels of communication that can respond and adapt to the input of community organizations, churches, non-profits, and business leaders. Some key stakeholders that should be actively involved in the planning and implementation process include:

- **Community partners:** Staff at the community partners — many of whom have direct and relevant life experience that informs their service provision — will be the ones providing training and skills development to the program population. Additionally, they leverage partnerships in the community to access goods and services that meet the target population's needs (e.g., jobs, housing, and basic goods). In Colorado, this is a group of several community- and faith-based organizations funded in part by the WAGEES program that provide a wide array of services to community members, including people returning from incarceration.
- **Parole officers and other engagement partners:** As the program is completely voluntary, buy-in from parole officers can help encourage returning citizens to enroll and engage actively in the program, likely increasing its efficiency. Furthermore, parole officers communicate and work with the WAGEES Case Managers to coordinate programs and services.
- **Private sector partners:** Programs that deal with social service delivery can benefit from partnerships with local philanthropy and workforce programs from private-sector partners. Local philanthropy can serve an important role in driving innovation and

bridging fiscal gaps when thinking of how to stretch existing short-term funding, while private-sector partners play a critical role in workforce programs by providing training standards, apprenticeships, and job placements.

Risk Mitigation

What could go wrong?

As with any program, there are risks to take into consideration when designing and implementing a community-driven safety initiative. Some of the most relevant risks a policymaker should bear in mind:

- **Poor intermediary selection process:** The wrong intermediary organization might lead to lack of coordination between the Department of Corrections and the community partners, which could hamper the efficiency of the program.
- **Community partners not engaged with the community:** Selecting inadequate community partners could reduce the program's effectiveness. Community partners must already have established trust within their communities, understand the unique barriers to reentry that returning citizens face in their particular environment, and provide adequate services to help overcome barriers to employment and successful reentry.
- **Low enrollment/high attrition:** The voluntary nature of the program could lead to lower engagement if it is perceived that it is not delivering the intended results.
- **Program not fitted for community partners:** Implementation of the program must be designed to fit within the realities of community partners engagement with the targeted population.

How can we mitigate the biggest risks?

- **Intermediaries and community partners should have built relationships within the community:** Good intermediaries and community partners will be respected in their communities and have a history of successfully engaging within, with most of their staff coming from the same communities they serve.
 - **Maintain feedback channels open and make space for change:** Community partners will want to give feedback on what is working well and things that can be improved. Make sure that those channels remain open and that the program can make adjustments based on community partners' needs.
-

Data and Learning Strategy

Baseline Systems: Necessary inputs to implement the policy effectively

For each community-driven safety strategy, necessary inputs will vary. Most states and cities will likely be able to use many of their existing systems to implement the initiatives, as they will require mostly redirecting current capacity or using community organizations for implementation where capacity in the government is lacking.

As new investments are used to support alternatives to incarceration or other public safety priorities — by creating new incentive grants, launching new programs, or expanding existing ones — the ability to manage and track these investments is critical to ensuring they are impactful and to gain public trust. Hence, to foster accountability and ownership, dedicating resources to data management may be required.

For initiatives similar to Colorado's WAGEES program, most states likely have the necessary data and systems already in place: each state Department of Corrections already has data on current and formerly incarcerated individuals, supplemented by follow-up reporting requirements from parole and probation officers. Selecting appropriate intermediaries and community partners can bridge any capacity gaps that government agencies have to ensure an effective implementation.

Measuring Progress: How can progress toward the desired outcomes be measured — both to assess progress and inform improvement along the way?

The most important program priorities will be increasing employment placement and job retention rates, and decreasing recidivism rates. Community partners should report metrics to track program effectiveness toward these goals, including:

- Enrollment numbers
- Credential attainment
- Employment placement
- Employment retention
- Wages and wage growth
- Recidivism rates

Other metrics that could be tracked include:

- Employment sector

While these metrics may not seem advanced and may already be collected by multiple agencies, tracking them collectively helps ensure that all coalition partners understand how outcomes are developing towards a common goal. Measuring progress along the way allows for adjustments to partner practice, engagement strategies, and operations, in order to better achieve stated goals. Furthermore, tracking and reporting these metrics provides an additional layer of transparency and accountability to the community, by showing what is working well and what needs to be improved.

Additional Resources

[Investing Justice Resources to Address Community Needs: Lessons Learned from Colorado's Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills \(WAGEES\) Program](#): A 2018 study by the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center highlighting Colorado's Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills (WAGEES) program, including insights for future policymakers interested in the program.

Playbook Authors

Cyrus Garrett

America Achieves

wcyrus.garrett@americaachieves.org

Emilio Hungria

Delivery Associates

emiliohungria@deliveryassociates.com