



Community Prosperity Initiative

What is the Community Prosperity Initiative?

The Community Prosperity Initiative is a national social justice strategy aimed at supporting the human dignity and full reintegration of people who were initially sentenced as children to life in prison and who are now returning to their communities. This initiative is a partnership between the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY), the Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network (ICAN), which is a project of the CFSY, and diverse partners to provide the resources and services necessary for people who are returning home, and their families and neighborhoods, to thrive. This Initiative is part of a larger national movement in the U.S. to remedy the structural racism and oppression that leads to mass incarceration of people of color, and extreme sentences for children in particular. By creating increased access to a range of relevant supports, this Initiative will help restore communities that have been adversely impacted by the practice of extreme prison sentencing of our most vulnerable youth.

The Community Prosperity Initiative (CPI) provides its many partners meaningful opportunities to reinvest in individuals and communities who experience disproportionate rates of racism, poverty and other forms of marginalization. Engagement in the CPI creates social impact and shared value; addresses economic instability by removing barriers to employment; and strengthens systems through enhanced relationships and co-learning across diverse stakeholder groups.

Let Us Tell You More

Background

The U.S. leads the world in extreme sentencing for children. More than 2,500 U.S. children have been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, and more than 1000 of them are still serving that sentence. As young people, many of these individuals experienced marginalization, poverty, community violence, abuse and neglect. Further, extensive research documents that children's brains are actively developing until 25 years of age, and that children lack the ability to effectively engage in long-term planning, regulate emotions, control impulses, and evaluate risk and reward¹. However, when these children caused harm to others, instead of using age-appropriate accountability measures that consider background and context, and importantly, children's capacity for growth, change, and redemption, our country's systems failed them by imposing extreme and unjust penalties.

Due to recent reforms the CFSY has helped enact, many of these individuals are now coming home. These returning individuals have grown up, and spent decades, in prison and are now faced with the opportunity and challenge of living as adults in free society. They must navigate daily living in the 21st century without the benefit of experience that comes from growing through adolescence and into adulthood outside of confinement.

¹ Steinberg L. and Scott, E. (2003). Less Guilty by Reason of Adolescence: Developmental Immaturity, Diminished Responsibility, and the Juvenile Death Penalty. *American Psychologist*, 58(12), 1009-1018.

Focus Population

The Community Prosperity Initiative is designed to support people who are being released from prison after being sentenced as children to life without parole and other extreme sentences, most of whom have been imprisoned for decades. This is a unique subpopulation of formerly incarcerated individuals. Like many people who have been imprisoned, these individuals are often highly resilient, have significant talents and skills, and many have completed educational and skill development programs, including earning college degrees, in prison. However, this particular group faces specific challenges because they were locked away as children, some as young as 13 or 14 years. Many do not have work histories, references or contacts for hiring; they face racism and other forms of discrimination, and are re-orienting to personal and family life after decades with very limited social connection.

The vast majority of children sentenced to extreme prison terms are youth of color. Black youth receive life without parole at a per capita rate that is ten times that of white youth², and 70 percent of people serving juvenile life without parole are people of color.³ In addition, most come from backgrounds and communities experiencing high rates of poverty and violence, and many personally experienced abuse and neglect in their own homes⁴.

Yet these challenges do not translate into violence or criminal behavior upon release. These individuals are immensely grateful for the opportunity to live in free society and focus on taking full advantage of their second chances. The recidivism rate for this subpopulation is less than 2 percent.⁵ These individuals are highly motivated to succeed and are committed to reaching their goals and contributing to their families, neighborhoods, and the country.

The Need

It is critical to point out that desire to transform their lives, and far lower than national average recidivism rates, do not translate into stability and thriving. Formerly incarcerated individuals in general, and people sentenced to life without parole as children in particular, struggle greatly with reintegration. They face stigma and discrimination, and numerous challenges securing and sustaining basic resources such as jobs, housing, and transportation. And the trauma of living in prison for decades, and often solitary confinement for weeks or months, can translate to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety. Interviews conducted by the CFSY and colleagues⁶ with 47 individuals formerly sentenced as youth to life without parole reveal that their most significant barriers to reintegration and thriving are

² See *Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*. (Human Rights Watch, February 2008). www.hrw.org/report/2008/02/06/submission-committee-elimination-racial-discrimination/during-its-consideration.

³ See *Interview with Clint Smith: Racial Justice and Youth Sentencing*. (Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, 2018). www.fairsentencingofyouth.org/interview-clint-smith/.

⁴ Ashley Nellis. *The Lives of Juvenile Lifers: Findings from a national study*. (The Sentencing Project, 2012). <https://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/The-Lives-of-Juvenile-Lifers.pdf>.

⁵ Peter Cove and Lee Bowes. *Immediate Access to Employment Reduces Recidivism*. (Real Clear Politics, 2015). www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/06/11/immediate_access_to_employment_reduces_recidivism_126939.

⁶ Interviews conducted by Abd'Allah Lateef, CFSY Pennsylvania ICAN Coordinator, in collaboration with Ruth Shefner, MPH, MSW, and Sarah Shor, MSW Candidate, M.S. Criminology, at the University of Pennsylvania. Fall 2018.

lack of access to financial assistance, livable wage employment, housing, transportation, trauma counseling, and opportunities to give back to community in ways that foster self-worth.

Inaugural Communities

The CPI will launch in a few key cities based in part upon the numbers of people being released after decades in prison. For the first year or two we will target developing partnerships and supports in Philadelphia, Washington DC, and greater metropolitan Detroit. Since 2016, Pennsylvania has released over 189 individuals originally sentenced to life as children, the most in the country; nearly 100 of whom have returned to Philadelphia county. In that same time period over 85 people have been released in Michigan, including over 50 from Wayne County. In the last year, 12 people have been released in Washington, DC and current legislative amendments mean that hundreds more are now eligible for resentencing hearings.

What We'll Achieve Together

Through the Community Prosperity Initiative, the CFSY will develop diverse partnerships to provide opportunities for full reintegration into life outside of prison, while strengthening our collective economy and communities. The focus is to increase racial equity and overall equality; reduce poverty by creating access to livable wage jobs and economic stability; and provide meaningful opportunities for diverse stakeholders to increase their social impact and meet their social responsibility goals.

Specifically, through a growing network of private and public collaborations, this initiative will:

- Provide opportunities for businesses and corporations to help mitigate critical social issues in ways that enhance their business value, align with their own stakeholders' goals, and meet their expressed social responsibility outcomes;
- Increase access to job training, livable wage employment, mentoring and range of other services and resources to advance the success and wellbeing for people returning home;
- Connect businesses and private sector partners with formerly incarcerated individuals to support education, co-learning, and equip partners to be champions of the Community Prosperity Initiative within their workplace and larger network and field;
- Co-collect, share, and distribute partnership activities, lessons learned, and best practices;
- Develop an advisory council and other opportunities to provide training and technical assistance for partners, particularly those new to second chance hiring and the goals of this Initiative.

How You Can Partner with Us

The Community Prosperity Initiative understands that each partner has their own mission, business goals and desires to affect social change. We seek diverse partnerships that together will allow this Initiative to meet the stated goals above, and provide formerly incarcerated individuals access to a wide range of services and resources. We support partners in doing the very most they can; no more, no less.

There are many ways to be an active partner in the Community Prosperity Initiative, and we are always open to other creative ideas we may not have thought of!

In-Kind Contributions

- Welcome Home “Baskets” - Free and discounted material goods for returning individuals. Partners donate gift cards or credit for items and stores such as groceries, coffee shops, restaurants, clothing, ride sharing services, discounts for online purchases, and more.
- Skill Development - Donated time to assist returning individuals in developing a range of 21st century skills including financial literacy, technological literacy (banking, shopping, job searching in the digital age), job readiness, and more.
- Donated Services - Free or discounted services such as car repair or oil changes; haircuts and other personal grooming; therapeutic services; recreational activities (tickets for shows, games, local events), and more.

Economic Opportunity

- Fair Chance Hiring of formerly incarcerated individuals (CFSY can provide extensive support for implementation.)
- Donations of tools and uniforms for specific jobs or trades.
- Access to credit and capital through low-interest loans, incentive based banking, and more.

Employee Volunteerism and Engagement

The CFSY creates opportunities for direct community engagement and impact, via a variety of volunteer opportunities including days of service and individual coaching and mentorship. We also support partners to educate and advocate within their professional and social circles to advance the goals of this Initiative.

Philanthropy and Corporate Giving and Sponsorship

Financial contributions and grants to sustain the CFSY’s Community Prosperity Initiative and our work to support reentry and integration efforts are always welcome. Partners may also sponsor any of the CFSY’s yearly events, including our Healing & Hope event, self-care convenings, or our national Convening that takes place each fall.

Get Involved

To learn more about the Community Prosperity Initiative and get involved, please contact the CFSY’s Director of Strategic Partnerships, Anna Melbin at amelbin@fairsentencingofyouth.org or 202-505-3104.

About the CFSY

The CFSY is a national organization working to end the practice of sentencing children to life in prison without the possibility of parole and other extreme penalties. ICAN is a national network comprised of and led by people who grew up in prison. ICAN members engage in public policy advocacy, help change the narrative about children convicted of serious crimes, and support a larger network of directly impacted individuals, families and communities. The first local chapter of ICAN was launched in Pennsylvania, and is now active in 26 states and Washington, DC with more than 100 members.