

SECOND CHANCE MONTH 2018: AN OPPORTUNITY TO CALL FOR ADEQUATE FUNDING



Both houses of Congress, six states and the District of Columbia, and President Trump have declared April “Second Chance Month.” The impetus behind what may well become an annual commemoration is [Prison Fellowship](#), the largest faith-based advocate for returning citizens. Events are planned around the country. More than 140 organizations including the Center for Community Alternatives and Project New Opportunity [endorse](#) this bi-partisan, national effort to promote fair treatment, assistance with reentry and an end to needless barriers to employment, housing and education for returning citizens.

In support of Second Chance Month, politicians on both sides of the aisle and many organizations unite around common goals: affording people who have been convicted of crimes, including particularly those who are returning to the free world from jail or prison opportunities to become contributing members of society, reducing crime and prison populations, decreasing costs to the public, and making the nation even safer.

The detailed [Senate Resolution](#) introduced by Senator Rob Portman (R-OH), acknowledges that “hundreds of thousands of individuals return to their communities from Federal and State prisons every year” only to be confronted by the burden of collateral consequences to criminal convictions and obstacles to full reentry, and that 2018 marks the 10 year anniversary of the federal Second Chance Act which “has provided reentry services to over 166,000 individuals in 49 States and the District of Columbia.” The Resolution “honors the work of communities, governmental institutions, nonprofit organizations, congregations, employers, and individuals to remove unnecessary legal and societal barriers that prevent an individual with a criminal record from becoming a productive member of society.”

We hope that Second Chance Month will also provide an opportunity for leaders to address the lack of public funding for reentry services and programs that assist citizens returning from prison, not only in overcoming external and legal barriers, but also in “regaining their balance,” as Project New Opportunity’s Deputy Project Director Norman Brown describes it. Incarceration damages a person’s ability to think and act independently. It isolates men and women from families, friends and technological development in a changing world. People returning from lengthy incarceration find that their neighborhoods are often transformed beyond recognition.

The Second Chance Act brought federal funding to bear on this situation, introducing various reentry program models. Some of the largest national and many local foundations and private donors supported innovative programs including hospitable residential programs that aid women and men in need as they relearn how to live in the free world. A few leading examples include the Center for Community Alternatives in New York, Fortune Society in New York, The First 72+ in New Orleans, and A New Way of Life in Los Angeles.

Lacking in all but a few jurisdictions, however, is a dependable public funding stream for on-the-ground reentry services. Outside of New York State, which has built on a decades-old tradition of funding scores of alternatives to incarceration like CCA, exceptional locations such as the San Francisco Bay area, and most recently Colorado under an initiative sponsored in part by the Public Welfare foundation, reentry programming is not a line item in the local or state budget; or, it is insufficiently funded, often through a year-to-year grant process that puts programs in competition for extremely limited funds and services dependent upon volunteers and charities. Compared to the importance attached to successful reentry, public resources devoted to reentry falls short.

The District of Columbia is no exception. On 29 March 2018 Tara Liebert of Free Minds Book Club and Paula Thompson Felder of Voices for a Second Chance testified before the Judiciary Committee of the D. C. Council, on behalf of the Reentry Action Network (RAN), a coalition of reentry service providers. Their description of funding for community-based reentry services would be accurate in many locations in the country:

Only nine of [the 24 community-based organizations providing reentry services who are] our 24 RAN members currently receive funding [from the District government]. * * * From our experience, they are ...much more likely to receive funding from foundations, many of which do not offer funding for re-entry services whatsoever. Often, the government is the only funding source for returning citizens. However, despite the serious and growing dialogue surrounding re-entry work, there continues to be a lack of funding from the District to support it. Instead, CBOs spend considerable time and resources begging for grants from foundations all over the country, the overwhelmingly majority of which do not fund re-entry services, especially services that include work with jails and prisons to prepare individuals for release.

Removing institutional and legal barriers to jobs, professional licensing, housing and education is critically important. But for reentry to work it is also important that returning citizens be provided hands-on guidance to access housing and jobs, skills development, peer counseling and moral support necessary to repair damage, build confidence and reestablish relationships.

Second Chance Month provides a tremendous opportunity for leaders to highlight the importance of reentry in the American scheme of justice. It's also an opportunity to promote an adequate level of public funding for needed reentry services. We encourage everyone to do so.

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The opinions expressed are those of the author and are not meant to represent the opinion or position of any other individuals or organization involved in Second Chance Month or identified herein.