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# A Plan to Help Returning Citizens Succeed in Chicago

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In Chicago we disproportionately arrest, punish and incarcerate poor men and women of color. And each year, over 11,000 of these men and women return to Chicago upon their release from prison.<sup>1</sup> They return to places like North and South Lawndale, neighborhoods that have suffered from historic disinvestment and which experience staggering rates of unemployment and poverty.<sup>2</sup> Many of these returning men and women lack an adequate education and job skills, and upon their release are likely to struggle with substance abuse disorders, limited housing options and mental health issues. And because the city and state do not provide these men, women and communities with the support, services and investment they need to succeed, they return to prison at alarmingly high rates. The Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (“SPAC”) estimates that of the people released from Illinois prisons each year, 17% recidivate within one year and 43% recidivate within three years. And those numbers continue to increase with time.

Recidivism has real costs, both financially and socially. SPAC estimates the total financial cost for each recidivism event at \$151,662, with one-third of the costs, or \$50,835, paid by taxpayers for law enforcement, court proceedings, sentencing and incarceration. Recidivism has social costs, too, as young men and women cycle through our neighborhoods. This can lead to constantly fluctuating populations, stress on social service agencies and families, and further victimization of residents.

It is imperative that we reduce recidivism by helping people and communities. This means abandoning failed incarceration and rehabilitation policies and practices, and turning instead to evidence based programs with track records of success and policies that remove barriers to opportunity for people with arrest and conviction records. For instance, we know that among all re-entry programs, employment training/job assistance returns \$20.26 on every dollar invested.<sup>3</sup> We also know that recidivism rates decrease significantly when returning citizens have access to employment and safe, stable, and affordable housing.

Working with the state, community-based providers like Safer Foundation and CARA, local and national businesses, affordable housing providers and philanthropic organizations, we can dramatically reduce recidivism by:

1. Creating the Office of Returning Citizens Affairs and streamline reentry services
2. Supporting community-based social service programs
3. Advancing policies and legislation that remove barriers to obtaining housing
4. Restructuring city spending to address social determinants of health
5. Providing returning citizens access to affordable educational opportunities

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### **1. Create the Office of Returning Citizens Affairs and streamline re-entry services in Chicago**

City hall must play an active role in helping returning citizens successfully transition back into our neighborhoods while also ensuring public safety. Cities like Los Angeles, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. have long realized this, and Chicago must, too.

As mayor, I will create an Office of Returning Citizens Affairs within the Mayor's Office for Public Safety that will be staffed with professionals specializing in all aspects of workforce development, community outreach services, and case management. The office's portfolio of responsibilities will include:

- Streamlining and scaling up re-entry services throughout the city
- Coordinating with city agencies, social service providers and local businesses to assist people with arrest and conviction records in becoming employed and productive citizens
- Advancing legislative, policy, program, spending and investment changes to help returning citizens find housing, obtain education and training, healthcare and treatment

It is so important to our communities that families can be together, and I know that we must do more to keep them together. By employing evidence-based strategies that are shown to work, we can increase the likelihood returning citizens become self-sufficient, tax paying members of our communities while reducing crime, drug abuse and addiction, and the amount spent on incarceration.

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## 2. Support community-based programs that reduce recidivism

Community-based programs run by organizations like the Safer Foundation and CARA play a critical role in reducing recidivism and providing returning citizens opportunities they need to succeed. These programs give returning citizens structured environments and wrap-around services that often are missing from their lives. They also provide job and skills training required to secure a job and succeed in the workforce. Additionally, these programs benefit the larger community because the men and women who complete them are more likely to find work in the legitimate economy and are less likely to engage in risky behavior or associate with people who do.

As mayor, I will commit to supporting programs and organizations that provide returning citizens with business-driven skills training and placement opportunities so they can become credentialed workers in growing sectors such as advanced manufacturing, transportation, construction, healthcare and technology. By training returning citizens in these growing fields, we can create a path out of the cycle of recidivism while also training a valuable labor source at a time when employers are struggling to find qualified workers. Programs that merge the needs of the local, middle-skills employers and persons with arrest and conviction records have proven effective. Locally, the Safer Foundation has shown that when this model is used to train formerly incarcerated persons to fulfill the middle-skills labor gap in high-demand local industries, people with records can secure and keep living wage jobs.

The city will also commit to supporting social enterprises that are designed to achieve a social impact, environmental improvement and a profit. These enterprises generate the majority of their income by selling goods and services made or provided by individuals with arrest and conviction records. Profits are reinvested to advance the social aims of the business, such as training and employing individuals with arrest and conviction records.

As my administration supports and expands access to comprehensive workforce development models, we will also support programs that address the following three elements of workforce development concerning returning citizens:

- **Engage employers.** Mutually beneficial partnerships between the city, employers and agencies working with diverted and returning citizens are integral to reducing recidivism. In addition to helping employers identify qualified candidates for demand-driven career opportunities, many employers require technical assistance to improve their hiring and onboarding processes for new employees.
- **Encourage entrepreneurship.** Diverted and returning citizens need tools and support to become economically self-sufficient, tax paying citizens. One way to help is to provide access to start-up capital. My administration will actively work with and encourage banks, foundations, community development organizations and others with the capacity to grant and lend diverted and returning citizens reasonably priced capital and/or provide business planning resources and entrepreneurial coaching.
- **Support apprenticeships and “earn and learn” credentials.** The Mayor’s Office of Returning Citizens Affairs and City Colleges will support local businesses that provide meaningful apprenticeship opportunities for diverted and returning citizens that lead to a credential and gainful employment. We will target high demand industries to take advantage of “earn and learn” credentials.

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### **3. Advance policies and legislation that help people with records obtain temporary, transitional and permanent housing**

Access to stable housing is critical to reducing recidivism. Nationally, more than 10% of those coming in and out of prisons and jail are homeless in the months before and after their incarceration.<sup>4</sup> The lack of access to reliable housing places huge strains on returning citizens and their families, depriving them of a necessary foundation for a stable life. Moreover, it has significant social and economic costs as returning citizens become homeless, cannot find work, re-offend and/or return to jail or prison.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to increase access to stable housing, my administration will:

- Draft and work to pass a “fair chance” ordinance that prohibits landlords from imposing blanket bans on renting to an individual based on his or her criminal record. Instead, landlords would be required to conduct an individualized analysis of an applicant’s conviction history, including whether the individual poses a threat to the public and the community, the amount of time since the person’s conviction, evidence of rehabilitation and other mitigating circumstances. Policies such as these not only make sense, but they move our policies into alignment with the Fair Housing Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- Reform Chicago Housing Authority (“CHA”) practices by prohibiting CHA from denying housing to individuals based on solely arrest and conviction records, and evicting people from CHA because of their records.
- Increase access to temporary housing so a person’s stay in jail or prison does not exceed his or her sentence. Many people remain incarcerated after their scheduled release dates simply because they have nowhere to go upon release. Rather than spend \$143 per day to incarcerate a person and prolong their separation from friends and family, the city should work with Cook County and the state to invest this money into creating more temporary housing.<sup>6</sup>
- Increase access to transitional housing so returning citizens who are waiting to get into treatment, education and/or job training programs have a stable place to live. The city can work with providers and other units of government to create and expand programs like the University of Illinois Health and Hospital System’s Better Health through Housing Initiative, which places people in “bridge units” until longer term housing arrangements can be secured.<sup>7</sup>
- Improve access to permanent affordable housing. People with arrest and conviction records often face barriers to securing permanent housing, even years after their release. This issue will not be addressed until landlords and property owners are incentivized to lease to people with records, or until incentives are given to prospective property owners to purchase land or property specifically for mixed-use and mixed-income housing that includes slots for people with arrest or criminal records.

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### **4. Restructure city funding in order to address the social determinants of health**

My administration will conduct an audit of all city programs to identify opportunities where Medicaid can be leveraged to free up city funding to address issues that Medicaid does not cover, such as housing, education, and transportation. Over the last several years, justice

system stakeholders throughout the U.S. have shifted their approach to reform away from law and order policies and toward a public health approach. This shift is due in part to Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, which covers (for the first time ever) low-income adults without dependent children. This has led to an unprecedented prioritization of Medicaid funds and policies toward individuals involved in the justice system. Given the fact that people with arrest and conviction records have traditionally gone uninsured and faced disproportionate levels of addiction, mental illness, and chronic conditions, it has been recognized that Medicaid presents an opportunity to reform the justice system by addressing the needs of individuals whose unmet health conditions often drive their criminal behavior.<sup>8</sup> Addressing these health conditions improves both justice outcomes, through lower recidivism rates, and health outcomes through fewer emergency room visits. These lead not only to an improvement in overall outcomes, but also a significant reduction in costs.<sup>9</sup>

While this shift is welcome, there are significant barriers that make it difficult to leverage Medicaid to provide needed extend services this population. These areas impact health outcomes, but have little to do with healthcare on the surface. These social determinants of health are defined by the Center for Disease Control as “conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.”<sup>10</sup> They include, but are not limited to housing, education, transportation and justice system-involvement. Health insurance coverage can be life-changing for some, but far too many never have the opportunity to take advantage of its benefits due to these barriers. What remains to be done, and is certainly possible, is restructuring grant dollars to supplement existing Medicaid-reimbursement streams to address the social determinants of health. This includes a close examination of what the city currently funds today and identifying items that can be shifted towards Medicaid. By doing so, funding can be freed up and applied to other areas, like housing, transportation, education, and other needs.

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### **Provide returning citizens access to affordable adult education.**

Data strongly suggests that returning citizens who have at least a GED are more successful at re-entering society than those without a GED. However, recent data suggest that less than one-third of all prisoners participate in educational programming that leads to a GED.<sup>11</sup> Technology has shifted the education landscape in such a way that adults who have not received either a high school diploma or a GED require more support than those that have a high school diploma or GED. Current state and federal regulations make it difficult for people with arrest and conviction records to access financial aid for higher education. Therefore, my administration will work to establish that makes educational programs at City Colleges affordable and accessible to returning citizens who want to obtain a GED or go to college.

**A final note:** I hope that this initial plan can be an important part of moving our city in the right direction and also that it can spark an ongoing conversation about reducing recidivism and helping people with arrest and conviction records return to Chicago and succeed. Please send your thoughts and ideas to [info@lightfootforchicago.com](mailto:info@lightfootforchicago.com) and we will build on this plan together.

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- 2 In North Lawndale, 47.4% of people live in poverty and the unemployment rate exceeds 23%. In South Lawndale the poverty rate exceeds 36% and the unemployment rate is over 13%. See, e.g., Illinois Department of Corrections, Parole Snapshot (Mar. 12, 2018) available at <https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/reportsandstatistics/Pages/Prison-Population-Data-Sets.aspx>
- 3 State of Illinois, Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council. (2016). *Illinois Results First: A Cost Benefit Tool for Criminal Justice Policymakers*. Retrieved from the Illinois Criminal Justice Authority website: [http://www.icjia.state.il.us/spac/pdf/Illinois\\_Results\\_First\\_Consumer\\_Reports\\_072016.pdf](http://www.icjia.state.il.us/spac/pdf/Illinois_Results_First_Consumer_Reports_072016.pdf).
- 4 Langan, P.A., Levin, D.J. (2002). US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*. (NCJ 193427) Washington, DC.
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- 10 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). *Social Determinants of Health*. Retrieved December 17, 2018, from <http://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/cancer-101/cancer-research/?region=on>
- 11 Middlemass, K.M. (2017). *Convicted and condemned: The politics and policies of prisoner reentry*. New York: New York University Press.