

A Parallel Path

In 2016, Illinois saw 71,551 new convictions; of those, 70,610, or 89 percent, were reoffenders headed back to prison. It is anticipated that 96 percent of Illinois prisoners will eventually be released. **Seventeen percent** will reoffend within a year, while **43 percent** will reoffend within three years. (Lyon, E., February 5, 2019)

Principal Causes of Recidivism

I understand recidivism because I have witnessed it firsthand. So many times, I saw men say their goodbyes to the friends they made in prison, only to return a few months later. I am ashamed to say when I first experienced this, I would be angry with them for coming back. I thought they had their chance and wasted it. Meanwhile I had all this time left in my sentence, praying every day for my chance. But then I came to understand, these men did not really stand a chance. No job, no housing, inadequate support, outdated skills, limited exposure to technology, returning to the same neighborhoods and same people with whom they previously conducted their criminal activity.

The high cost to society of recidivism is staggering.

SPAC's new report finds the average cost for one incidence of recidivism in Illinois is nearly \$151,700. Taxpayers, who fund law enforcement, courts, and incarcerations, shoulder about one-third, or nearly \$51,000 of the cost. The report estimating these instances of recidivism **will cost the state a total of \$13 billion over the next five years.**

Reducing the overall recidivism rate by just one percentage point means Illinois would see nearly 600 fewer convictions, and save more than \$90 million over nine years, SPAC estimates. Those savings would recover \$30 million in taxpayer dollars, \$45 million in costs to victims and \$15 million in foregone economic activity. (Caruso, V., August 3, 2018)

A Job by Itself Isn't Enough

Certainly, employment is a major factor in allowing individuals to successfully reintegrate into society and not be a part of the revolving door back into prison. However, a job by itself is not enough. Individuals need a place to live, people to associate with, and they need purpose in their life in pursuit of happiness, the same as everyone else.

Unexpectedly my career has become helping the currently and formerly incarcerated population of which I am a member. Our organization 2nd Opportunity L3C provides programs inside jails and prisons as well as for those on the outside who are formerly incarcerated and struggling to get traction in their lives. We participate in creating a referral network of support services including employment, housing, substance abuse counseling, and other essential services for those seeking to return to society and rebuild their lives and relationships.

Skill Set

Reentrance into the workforce after a prolonged absence presents a series of challenges. An outdated skill set, emergence of new industries, and technologies render much of what we previously knew obsolete. In addition to a conviction in our background we simply don't have the current skills for which the market is willing to pay. I know firsthand how overwhelming technology is considering the years of iterations and upgrades; I never participated in the evolution. I first used a smartphone July 6, 2017, I was handed an iPhone with FaceTime on display in the palm in my hand. I felt like I had landed in episode of the Jetsons. I am still challenged with things like Google Docs, Netflix, the TV remote, and a host of other things. Reading about technology hardly prepares us to use technology.

I am empathetic to those coming to the workforce with a limited or outdated skill set; I am also realistic. I work every day speaking with employers to build a network that will hire from the populations we serve. I routinely say if you are ready, willing, and able to work we can refer you to an employer that will hire you.

However, entry level positions pay \$13.00 an hour give or take \$0.50. While this may be a good starting point, it is not likely that this wage will provide, over the long term, for the needs of housing, clothing, transportation, insurance, medication, and so on. The only way to change the trajectory is to improve the skill set. This is done through training and education.

Our process starts by having our program participants utilize the O*Net Profiler, the tool provided by the United States Department of Labor. This helps an individual to identify the type of career that they would find interesting enough to dedicate their time and energy. We administer the O*Net profile and provide our participants the report generated based upon the profile. We help them establish a Department of Labor "My Next Move" account. We know that finding a career which we enjoy is paramount in professional fulfillment. (See attached Venn Diagram, Attachment A). Pursuing a career that we desire provides a challenge and enjoyment, which is a major differentiator in one's long term professional success.

The Parallel Path

The Parallel Path is a plan to accomplish two noteworthy objectives at the same time. There are two components to this model:

- A. Securing a position to provide a steady paycheck, build the "work muscle", become used to working with others, improving our communication abilities, demonstrating responsibility, and taking pride in doing things the right way. These attributes are especially meaningful for someone who is formerly incarcerated desiring to get on the right path.
- B. Enrolling and completing a training program or educational pursuit. These are programs that build a marketable skill set in turn providing a better wage, benefits, and mobility.

The Parallel Path has been able to place individuals into a morning training program and combine this with a 2nd shift job. Yes, it is a lot of work and yes it will require some sacrifices. However, the outcome is a career path that opens doors and leads individuals away from the cycle of recidivism.

Types of Programs

There is a litany of federal and state funded programs that are available to provide high quality training and assistance with job placement upon completion. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is designed to strengthen and improve our nation's public workforce system and help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers. It includes high demand skills such as welding, logistics, health care billing, CDL, and varied other fields of interest.

There are also programs available under the Workforce Equity Initiative.

This initiative focuses on developing our area's workforce by providing participants with a credential and a living wage. It addresses high demand-careers and targets low-income individuals, those living in high crime and high poverty areas, unemployed individuals, and minorities. The WEI is generally run through Community Colleges.

Some popular programs included in WIOA and WEI:

- Automotive technology
- Building Trades
- Cyber security
- Diesel technology
- Forklift operator training
- Supply chain management

Most programs are designed to provide certification in three to four months. Exhibit B, Attached, illustrates the impact on income over a 10-year period, not adjusted for inflation.

Opportunities while Incarcerated

The United States Department of Labor provides apprenticeship programs inside many prisons. I encourage people to take advantage of these opportunities if possible. It is a wonderful opportunity to There are benefits during incarceration of self-respect, mental challenges, and hope for the future. I attained and apprenticeship in Quality Assurance while working in a Unicorn glove manufacturing facility during the time I was away. I elaborate how apprenticeships can be a significant tool in the reduction of recidivism. (Please see my essay *The Hidden Value of Apprenticeships*)

A Parallel Path and its Role in Society

There is and has been a severe shortage of entry level employment candidates in large sectors of the economy. Fully implemented our model creates pipelines of employees to solve the very real problem of a of quality employees. The Parallel Path creates not only a flow of candidates seeking to prove themselves, which according to a recent study by the ACLU, have a lower turnover rate than those without a conviction in their background. It also allows companies to support ongoing training and the development of additional skills to benefit both the employee and the company. (Please read my essay *Collaboration for Social Benefit* for an explanation of the multitude of stakeholders who are favorably impacted by the Parallel Path).

A Parallel Path Summary

This model provides both obvious and unapparent benefits through a multitude of levels within society. First, the taxpayers, victims, and institutions that shoulder the load, and the cost of recidivism. Having spent a lot of time on the inside, and now working in this field on the outside, I can categorically say there are many things that can be done to reduce recidivism both pre and post release from prison. Second, statistically 96% of those who are incarcerated will one day re-enter society. We are your neighbors, we see you at the grocery store, we sit next to you in church, we cheer along side of you at our children's sporting events. When we are released, we don't wear a sign around our necks advising "Formerly Incarcerated." We should accept as a starting point that everyone benefits if we return as a motivated and determined group seeking to fit into society and provide for our families. Third, we can fill a role solving the lack of entry level employees as we use training programs to improve our skill set enabling us to contribute to companies at a higher level. Fourth, it is advantageous to begin reentry work during incarceration with a focus on life skills, employment readiness, and developing a plan to move forward. Finally, it is important to have pure support groups and mentoring programs to assist those who are reentering society. We coordinate and conduct these support groups utilizing those with lived experience of re-entry and have demonstrated their ability to succeed in returning to society. These are the programs and support 2nd Opportunity specifically addresses in working with the currently and formally incarcerated population.

Citations

Caruso, V, August 3, 2018, *Report: Recidivism to Cost Illinois Over \$13B Over the Next 5 years*, Illinois Policy, [http s://www.illinoispolicy.org/report-recidivism-to-cost-illinois-more-than-13b-over-next-5-years/](http://www.illinoispolicy.org/report-recidivism-to-cost-illinois-more-than-13b-over-next-5-years/)

Lyon, E., February 5, 2019, *Illinois Calculates the High Costs of Recidivism*, Prison Legal News, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2019/feb/5/illinois-calculates-high-costs-recidivism/#:~:text=It%20is%20anticipated%20that%2096,reeffenders%20headed%20back%20to%20prison.>

Exhibit B

Wage Comparison

Occupation	Hourly Rate	1-year income	10-year total income
Entry Level Job	\$13.00	\$27,040.00	\$270,400.00
Welder	\$19.00	\$39,520.00	\$395,200.00
Plumber	\$19.58	\$40,726.40	\$407,264.00
CDL Driver	\$20.97	\$43,617.60	\$436,176.00
Health Care Biller	\$21.28	\$44,262.40	\$442,624.00
Computer Coder	\$22.68	\$47,174.40	\$471,744.00
HVAC	\$21.00	\$43,680.00	\$436,800.00
Deisel Mechanic	\$24.00	\$49,920.00	\$499,200.00
Carpenter	\$25.13	\$52,270.40	\$522,704.00
Average Annual Wage v. Entry Level Wage		\$18,106.40	
Average 10 year earnings v. Entry Level 10 year earnings			\$181,064.00
<i>This is a representation not adjusted for wage increases, promotions or acquisition of additional skills or degrees</i>			