

**Testimony for the House Committee on Appropriations
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Submitted by Kevin Brown,
Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Legislative Affairs,
on behalf of the Safer Foundation**

May 17, 2021

Thank you Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to submit testimony on behalf of the Safer Foundation. My name is Kevin Brown and I serve as the Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Legislative Affairs for the Safer Foundation. For almost 50 years, Safer has provided comprehensive workforce development and reentry services for individuals with criminal legal histories seeking employment. There is dignity in work, and Safer Foundation believes that individuals who have made mistakes should have the opportunity to be self-sufficient and contribute to their families and communities through gainful, living wage employment. Clients come to Safer Foundation because they want and need to work, and Safer helps clients discover career path employment that is personally fulfilling and that pays a living wage. A critical federal program that supports these efforts is the Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) program (also known as the Reintegration of Ex-Offenders (RExO) program) within the Department of Labor's Employment & Training Administration. *I thank the Subcommittee for providing REO with \$100 million in FY21.* Given the need to train people for the jobs our economy requires in industries such as health care, technology, and logistics; the need to help employers identify the qualified workers they need now; and the need to help people with criminal legal histories find living wage employment to support successful, long-term reentry, I urge the Subcommittee to provide **\$125 million for the REO program in FY22.**

Employment Reduces Recidivism and Improve Reentry Outcomes

1 in 3 American adults has a criminal record that interferes with their ability to find a job.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored existing barriers to employment for people with criminal legal histories. Research shows that sustained, living wage employment and life skills are critical components to long-term reentry success. One study found that individuals who were employed and earning higher wages after release were less likely to return to prison within the first year.² The REO program improves reentry success by working with individuals to overcome employment barriers with training for jobs in local high-demand industries through career pathways and industry-recognized credentials and by providing needed reentry supports. Increasing REO funding would expand access to these comprehensive workforce development and reentry services.

Authorized by section 169 of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the REO program provides workforce preparation and reentry services for both adults and young people. REO includes a \$25 million set-aside to provide services to prepare youth who have not completed school or other educational programs for employment. Research has found that ***incarceration reduces a formerly incarcerated person's earning potential by more than 52 percent,***³ making workforce development services essential for long-term employment and reentry success. In light of the costs of the criminal justice system at the state, local, and federal

¹ "Research Supports Fair-Chance Policies" (March 2016), National Employment Law Project, footnote 1 on p. 7. Available at <http://www.nelp.org/publication/researchsupports-fair-chance-policies>

² Visher, C., Debus, S., & Yahner, J. *Employment After Prison: A Longitudinal Study of Releasees in Three States*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute (2008).

³ Craigie Terry-Ann; Grawert, Ames; Kimble, Cameron, Stiglitz, Joseph (2020); *Conviction, Imprisonment, and Lost Earnings: How Involvement with the Criminal Justice System Deepens Inequality*: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/conviction-imprisonment-and-lost-earnings-how-involvement-criminal>

levels, the REO program is crucial to incubating community-based models of successful reentry through employment.

COVID-19 has impacted employment opportunities for people with criminal legal histories. During the last economic downturn in 2008, the unemployment rate for people with criminal legal histories was 27% — 2 points higher than the unemployment rate during the Great Depression. Increasing support for the REO program is an effective way to ensure that individuals with criminal legal histories, who are disproportionately Black people and people of color, are not left out of the nation’s economic recovery.

Safer’s REO Services Increase Employment by Working with Employers and Employees

Safer Foundation offers a full spectrum of workforce development and reentry services that train individuals, address their reentry obstacles and needs, and help them obtain sustained employment. This holistic approach has rendered outstanding results for participants and employers. In 2006, decades of experience and success led Safer to become one of the original REO grantees.

In addition to working with reentering individuals and their communities, Safer also works closely with *employers* to identify what types of trained employees are needed. In November 2020, the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) reported that 53% of businesses overall (and 89% of those hiring or trying to hire) reported few or no *qualified* applicants for available positions. While the demand for qualified workers exists, many newly unemployed individuals may not meet the qualifications for particular industries. Safer can be responsive to employer needs by tailoring its programs to develop skilled, qualified workers for specific employment sectors and has partnered with hundreds of employers to do so.

Safer's Training to Work (T2W) program, that was funded with a REO grant, improved long-term employment prospects for clients at Safer's Adult Transition Centers (ATC). Participants received case management, education, and training that lead to industry-recognized credentials for in-demand employment, such as forklift operation, welding, computer numerically control (CNC), CDL training, and Microsoft technologies. Given the program's strong employer and credentialing components, REO is uniquely positioned to assist local organizations in developing and providing services that *meet the needs of both the local business community and reentering individuals*. **Increasing REO funding in FY22, including funding for earn and learn apprenticeship opportunities for in demand skills development, would expand these efforts and help provide employers with more qualified employees who are trained, talented, motivated to work.**

Safer's REO Grant Produced Outstanding Employment Outcomes and Reduced Recidivism

Safer's REO grant for the Training to Work (T2W) program significantly outperformed employment targets and dramatically reduced recidivism. For the first cohort of REO T2W participants, **69 percent of participants obtained employment – 15 percent higher than the grant's employment target**. Given the success of this first cohort of participants, T2W was extended to a second cohort who did even better with an employment rate of **78 percent – 30 percent higher than the grant's target**. Safer's REO T2W grant also reduced recidivism rates beyond original targets. T2W's first participant cohort had an **11 percent recidivism rate**, and its second participant cohort had a **9 percent recidivism rate –75 percent and 80 percent lower respectively than the national recidivism rate of 44%.**⁴

⁴ Durose, Matthew R., Alexia D. Cooper, and Howard N. Snyder, [Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010 \(pdf, 31 pages\)](#), Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, April 2014, NCJ 244205.

Program evaluation has shown that such success is related to the comprehensive service model that grantees such as Safer provide. Effective, comprehensive services can include interventions such as relationship building between staff and participants, employment verification, trauma informed training, life skills training, employment preparation, mentoring, intensive case management, strong training provider relationships and support, family involvement, and post-release follow-up and support. These comprehensive services are cost-effective - a 2016 Illinois study found that *for every \$1 invested in community-based employment and training programs, tax payers saw a net benefit of \$20.26*, and found that employment and training programs had the highest cost-benefit ratio for reducing recidivism.⁵ By increasing and improving employment outcomes, the REO program invests in formerly incarcerated individuals and their families, provides for a more equitable recovery, and improves public safety.

Conclusion

By making effective workforce development and reentry services a priority, we fulfill labor market demands, contribute to the economy, and build strong and safe communities. Given the extensive employment and reentry needs nationwide, as well as the significant return on investment related to reduced incarceration costs and reduced crime costs borne by victims, families, and communities, **I urge Congress to allocate \$125 million to the REO program in FY22.** Thank you so much for your time and consideration of this important program. If you have questions or need additional information, please don't hesitate to contact me at Kevin.Brown@saferfoundation.org or Jenny Collier at colliercollective.org.

⁵ Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (2016). *A Cost-Benefit Tool for Illinois Criminal Justice Policymakers*, pp. 2-3: http://www.icjia.state.il.us/spac/pdf/Illinois_Results_First_Consumer_Reports_072016.pdf, pp. 2-3.