



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Reauthorization: Examining Successful Models of Employment for Justice-Involved Individuals

Tuesday, June 15, 2021 | 10:15 a.m.

Today, we meet for our third bipartisan hearing on reauthorizing the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*, or WIOA. This hearing will address key priorities to help people impacted by the criminal justice system reenter their communities and obtain rewarding careers.

Each year, roughly 640,000 people are released from our nation's state and federal prisons.

What happens after their return determines whether or not these justice-involved individuals successfully re-enter society. Unfortunately, far too many are unable to take a critical step in their transition: finding and keeping a good-paying job.

According to one study, just over half of those released from prison reported **any** earnings within the first year after release.

The stigma surrounding the employment of justice-impacted individuals is one of the forces limiting their opportunities.

Making matters worse, people who have been incarcerated often must take additional steps to gain the education, skills, or work experience that employers are looking for. And they face an array of additional challenges, from mental health needs to difficulty obtaining housing or transportation.

These barriers have a significant impact on justice-impacted people. Without access to high-quality jobs, they are more likely to be rearrested and could fall into an endless cycle of reincarceration.

High recidivism doesn't just hurt these individuals, it also hurts the nation as a whole. Research indicates that 83 percent of people released from prison are rearrested within 9 years. This is a contributing factor to our nation's high rate of incarceration, along with mandatory minimum sentences, long sentences for non-violent crimes, and a lack of investment in prison programs and reentry services.

Today, the United States continues to have the highest incarceration rate in the world with more than 2 million people behind bars in 2019, according to the Vera Institute of Justice. This level of incarceration costs our country as much as \$80 billion every year, accounting for costs to our communities and the next generation.

By comparison, funding for title I of WIOA stands at about \$3.7 billion annually. If we really want to break the cycle of costly incarceration, we need to reject dehumanizing policies in favor of investing in opportunities for these individuals to succeed.

To help combat recidivism, the Department of Labor currently supports the Reentry Employment Opportunities Program, or REO, program. This program provides community groups, faith-based organizations, and state and local agencies with grants to offer reentry employment services, including skills training and mentoring.

These services reach thousands of people each year. Yet, we know WIOA could do so much more for justice-impacted individuals. In fact, WIOA has no provisions *specifically* authorizing reentry programs.

As we reauthorize WIOA, we can make smart investments in promising approaches to reduce recidivism and expand employment opportunities for justice-impacted people.

For example, we can ensure that reentry programs offer the full range of services that are needed to help justice-impacted people avoid rearrest.

Behavioral health treatment—when paired with employment services, including subsidized employment—is an effective strategy to reduce recidivism. Mentorship, career navigation, and job coaching are also critical to helping individuals build professional relationships and look for jobs in in-demand industries.

Finally, we must capitalize on the rising interest in hiring justice-impacted workers among employers. This includes helping people not only find jobs, but also build towards lasting careers.

Bolstering subsidized employment and vocational training can help justice-impacted individuals earn short-term income and initial employment experience. It can also help employers overcome harmful misperceptions about justice-impacted workers. Subsidized employment can be the first step to helping individuals move on to more rewarding careers.

Empowering justice-involved individuals to find high-quality careers should be a bipartisan issue. It's not only the right thing to do—it's also the smart thing to do. Businesses benefit when there is a robust, skilled workforce ready to compete for jobs. With so many justice-impacted individuals looking to reenter the labor force every year, we can make progress towards addressing the worker shortage that so many employers are concerned about.

Today, with the help of our witnesses, we will discuss how codifying reentry employment opportunities in the reauthorization of WIOA would help improve the lives of people across the country and reduce prison populations.

We spend so much money on incarcerating hundreds of thousands of Americans each year. It's time that we invest in the training and support services to help individuals find sustainable, high-quality careers that will reduce recidivism and strengthen our communities.

Thank you, again, to our witnesses for being with us. I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member for his opening statement.