

Community Reintegration and Employment in Contra Costa County



About the **Safe Return Project**

The Safe Return Project is a participatory research and action initiative led by a group of formerly incarcerated Richmond residents carrying out research, community organizing, and policy advocacy to improve community reintegration after incarceration. The Safe Return Team advances community health and safety by engaging formerly incarcerated and other community members in developing solutions to address the challenges facing residents coming home. The Safe Return Project ensures that critical information and voices from the people with direct experience of what it takes to successfully reintegrate will inform policies and programs supporting this community. The Safe Return Project was launched in 2010 through a partnership of the Pacific Institute, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), and the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety.

About This **Report**

This report was co-authored by Andres Abarra, Clarence Ford, Charles Newsom, Eyal Matalon, Eli Moore, Jonathan Perez, LaVern Vaughn, Johnny Valdepena, and Tamisha Walker. The report is part of a series that shares the research and recommendations arising from Safe Return's data collection and engagement with thousands of community members, service providers, elected officials, technical experts, and others. Each report focuses on a critical aspect of community reintegration in Contra Costa County. In addition to this report, the other topics in the series are:

- Rebuilding Family and Community Ties
- Housing and Community Reintegration
- Public Benefits and Essential Reentry Services
- Access to Quality Health Services after Incarceration
- Mass Incarceration and Community Reintegration
- Community Reintegration and AB109 Realignment

About the **Safe Return Survey**

In 2011 the Pacific Institute and the Safe Return Team designed and conducted an extensive survey of formerly incarcerated residents of West Contra Costa County. The survey instrument included 144 questions that were created by the Safe Return Team or adapted from the Returning Home survey instrument developed by the Urban Institute.¹ We surveyed 101 individuals over age 18 who were on parole or felony probation. All had been released from incarceration within the previous 3-18 months. Interviews were conducted outside the parole and probation offices in Richmond, CA, and on-site at a transitional housing facility. Respondents signed informed consent forms and were provided with a gift card as a thank you.

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the insight of thousands of people affected by and involved in the issues. All those who have participated in Safe Return leadership meetings, public forums, focus groups, campaigns, and one to one interviews have shaped our views and made this work possible. We are also thankful for the specific input on this report provided by Michelle Rodriguez, Rhody McCoy, Catalina Garzón, Linda Evans, Willie Hicks, Devone Bogan, Sam Vaughn, Adam Kruggel and Sal Vaca.

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NEED TO KNOW



COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

About three months after my release, I got work with a temp agency that placed me with a major parcel company working the night shift. I felt relieved that I would be able to pay some of my expenses and start a new life. But 30 days after I started, a manager approached me and said they had received my background check and this would be my last night. My conviction was several years old and had no relevance to my job duties, but that didn't matter to them. I got one other job but was then laid off and from 2008 to 2010 I could not get work. I wondered how I could get employment when I kept being disqualified because of my past.

In 2011 I was hired as a community researcher with the Safe Return Project, and in 2012 I was hired by a local health clinic. With my position as a Community Health Worker, I have health and dental coverage, and income sufficient to pay rent, cover gas, eat, and help out my adult daughter when she needs it. This allowed me to get my self-respect and self-esteem, my sense that I can make it in life. I don't mind telling my story because the whole reason why I am able to keep my job is because of my work – not because of my past. -Andres Abarra

WHAT IS AT STAKE: EMPLOYMENT AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION

For both practical and psychological reasons, gainful and steady employment after incarceration is a critical pathway toward community reintegration. Most immediately, a job provides formerly incarcerated people with much needed money.¹ Without a source of income, they must rely on others for shelter, food, and other basic needs; those without family or friends to rely on may not have these needs met at all. Under dire economic circumstances, individuals have a very real incentive to turn to the illegal activities that may have landed them in prison or jail in the first place. But a job presents formerly incarcerated persons with more than just financial means.

On a symbolic level, finding and holding a job sends a strong signal to one's family and community that you are working toward a productive life outside of prison. Steady employment may also present meaningful responsibilities, a set daily structure, and a new network of peers, which can all ease the difficulties of adjusting to life after incarceration.² Beyond meeting the need for money, steady and gainful employment offers new roles, new routines, and new social supports.

¹ Individuals leaving California prisons receive little more than \$200 in "gate money" and a bus ticket home. Those returning from jail do not receive any money at all for the transition.

Not having employment following incarceration can have devastating impacts on health and well-being and on the likelihood of a successful transition. Prolonged periods of unemployment contribute to anxiety, depression, and stress-related illnesses. Studies have also shown that coping with unemployment leads to higher rates of unhealthy behaviors, such as problematic alcohol and tobacco consumption, poor diet, and lack of exercise.³ Just as important as *securing* employment are the wages, benefits, and work conditions that accompany it. Low-wage workers frequently work in unsafe and unhealthy conditions and experience higher rates of workplace injury. They also receive little-to-no health benefits, meaning that doctor appointments and medical procedures must be paid from an already low income.⁴ Employment obtained after incarceration must therefore be both steady *and* support a healthy standard of living.

When employers overlook these skills and abilities of formerly incarcerated people because of past convictions, they bypass valuable community assets.

Studies have shown that increases in individuals being employed and increases in wages contribute to reductions in illegal activity and, as such, are key predictors of reduced rates of recidivism.⁵ Given the numerous barriers to employment faced by formerly incarcerated persons, participation in corrections-based and post-release job training and placement programs may be especially beneficial. Analyses of such programs show that participants are more likely to be employed and less likely to commit a crime than nonparticipants.⁶

The broader community stands to benefit as well when formerly incarcerated people obtain steady, gainful employment. First, there is a clear public safety benefit, as formerly incarcerated residents who are employed are far less likely to commit a crime. Additionally, individuals who pass through the criminal justice system, like any individual, have a myriad of skills and talents—as well as taxes deducted from wages—to contribute to the local economy. In Philadelphia, for example, each of the 40,000 individuals released from prison or jail annually could potentially contribute \$13-55 thousand dollars in wage taxes over the course of their lifetimes, depending on their level of educational attainment.⁷

Many individuals accumulate work experience prior to their incarceration and, upon admission, are often required by the correctional institution to work. Although in most cases they are not fairly compensated, inmates often do develop job-specific skills and workplace habits while incarcerated.⁸ Finally, the unique life experiences of formerly incarcerated persons often prepare them to be especially effective as community organizers, healers, and entrepreneurs.⁹ When employers overlook these skills and abilities of formerly incarcerated people because of past convictions, they bypass valuable community assets.

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

It is well known that the socio-economic conditions in the communities that people come home to shape the likelihood that they will find a job. In the City of Richmond, where economic opportunities are limited and the unemployment rate is nearly 17%, the odds are stacked against securing a well-paying job upon release. Even so, our finding that only 1-in-3 respondents had worked since their release was a stark indication that Richmond's formerly incarcerated residents face unfairly excessive barriers to steady and gainful employment.^b At the time of the survey, 78% of the respondents were unemployed, an unemployment rate that is nearly seven times that of the state of California.

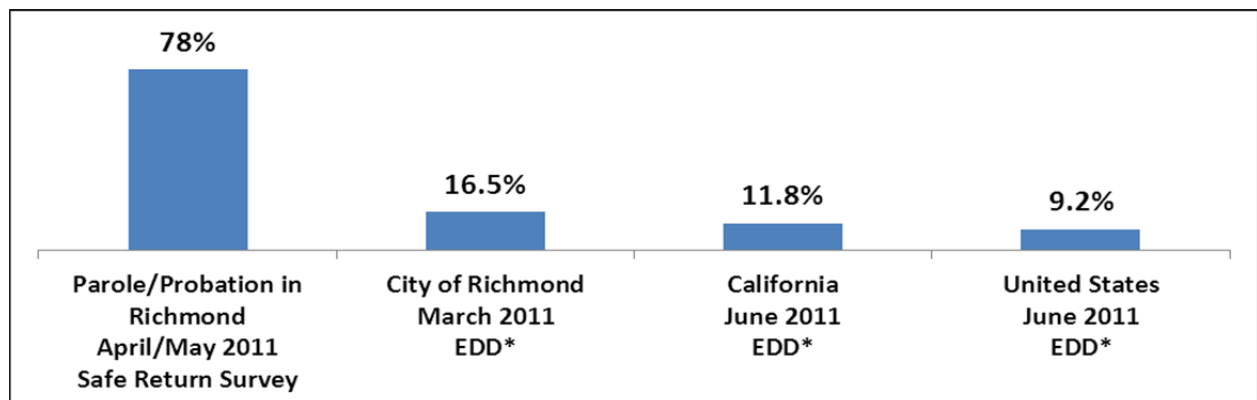


Figure 1. Unemployment Rates among Formerly Incarcerated Richmond Residents, Compared to the General Unemployment in the City of Richmond, California, and the United States.

High unemployment among the formerly incarcerated can be partly explained by gaps in formal education, work experience, and employment readiness. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that nearly 70% of state prison inmates did not finish high school.¹⁰ Many have limited work experience prior to their incarceration, which places limits on their employability and earning potential.¹¹ But survey responses indicate that there are very few opportunities to bridge these gaps throughout the reentry process. Less than 1-in-4 respondents had participated in any educational programs or vocational training during their incarceration, and even fewer had received any helpful information about how to continue their education or find a job upon release. Before their release, 69% of those

Key Findings of Safe Return 2011 Survey

- 78% of respondents were unemployed at the time of the survey.**
 - Nearly all respondents who were employed were working part-time in construction, auto repair, or other forms of manual labor.
- Two-out-of-three respondents had not held a single job since their release.**
- 92% of respondents reported they barely had any money to get by and 89% worried about their long-term financial situation.**

^b Safe Return Survey 2011. A confidential survey conducted with informed consent in person with adult West Contra Costa County residents on felony probation or parole who had been released from incarceration within the previous 3-to-18 months.

surveyed did not receive information on job training and adult education programs available in the community.

Only 30% of respondents said they had participated in a trade or job training program after their release, but of those who did not participate, more than 3 in 4 were interested in such a program (see Figure 2). In addition to gaps in educational and vocational experience, many formerly incarcerated persons have medical problems that impair their ability to work or even find employment. Of those who have not looked for work since their release, 1 in 5 cited a physical disability or chronic health problem.

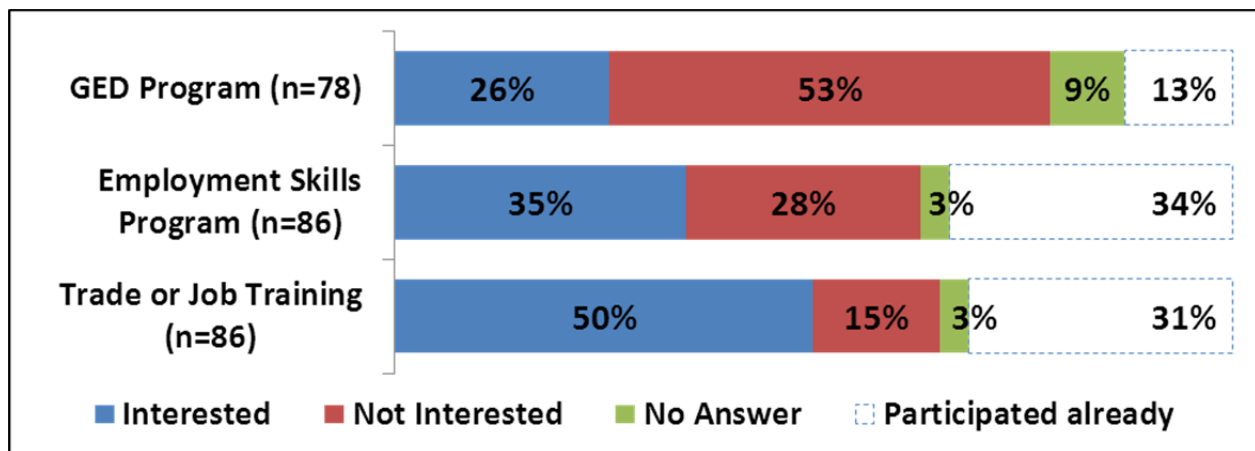


Figure 2. Level of Participation and Interest among Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Post-release Educational and Vocational Programs

Respondents also reported that their pursuit of employment was hindered by past convictions. Job seekers are often required to disclose any past convictions on job applications. Research on employer discrimination has consistently demonstrated a bias against hiring individuals with a criminal conviction.¹² In one study that sent pairs of equally qualified individuals to apply for the same job, applications with criminal records got 50% fewer jobs than those without, with the disparity being more pronounced among African-Americans.¹³

Indeed, nearly all of the City of Richmond's top employers, including Contra Costa County, ask applicants on the initial application whether they have been convicted of a felony.¹⁴ Although employers in California cannot legally ask about arrests that did not lead to a conviction, such information may be erroneously reported through for-profit, third-party providers.¹⁵ As access to criminal record information has increased, so has the likelihood that employers bypass qualified candidates due to their criminal history. In California, more than 1,000 laws and statutes restrict employment opportunities for people with past convictions, yet still employers commonly go above and beyond these measures and reject applicants with convictions entirely unrelated to the position.¹⁶

In addition to facing discrimination through employer bias, in California formerly incarcerated individuals with certain convictions are legally barred from obtaining a job in law, real estate, private security, nursing, physical therapy, and education.¹⁷ It is therefore no surprise that 3-in-5 respondents said their criminal record has had an effect on their job search.

Lack of employment presents a host of challenges, particularly for individuals released from incarceration. Without income from employment, reentering persons may not qualify for housing, make regular payments, access medical services, or even put food on the table. In fact, nearly all respondents said they barely had any money to get by and worried about their long-term financial situation. More than half stated they had often or sometimes skipped a meal due to difficulties getting food. The majority also reported they had wanted to see a doctor, but did not because of the cost.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT DURING INCARCERATION AND REENTRY

To address challenges in obtaining stable and gainful employment we must look at the process of incarceration and reintegration in its entirety (see Figure 3). It is increasingly understood that policies and practices as early as during arrest and adjudication have a significant effect on employment opportunities after an individual returns home. Table 1 highlights some of the practices and policies during each phase of reentry that can result in restricted employment opportunities.

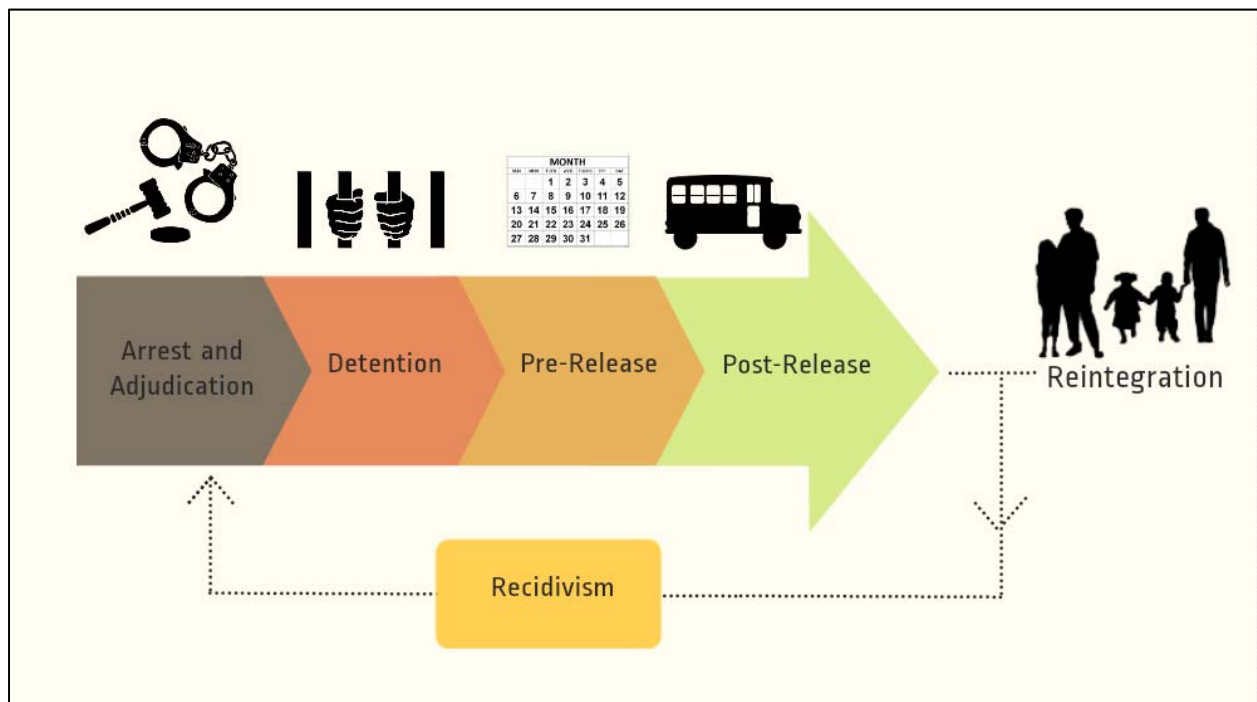






Figure 3. Phases in the Reentry Process

Table 1. Barriers to Employment during the Phases in the Reentry

Phase of Reentry	Barriers to Employment
<p>Arrest and Adjudication</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-trial detention of individuals who are awaiting trial but cannot post bail can disrupt employment. • Individuals in court are not routinely informed of the implications of a conviction on their employment opportunities. • Third-party online providers give potential employers easy access to any individual's criminal background, are plagued by inaccuracies, and often release records older than the seven-year limit.
<p>Detention</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While many individuals are given work assignments during their incarceration,^c this work often has little relevance to the actual jobs in growing sectors that individuals could be preparing for. • Few people participated in educational programming while incarcerated. Only 1-in-4 respondents participated in a GED program during their detention.^d • While Contra Costa County jails and California state prisons offer some vocational training, classes have limited capacity and many inmates are not allowed to participate. Only 1-in-4 respondents participated in trade or job training during their detention. • Inmates with limited work experience may not know how to create a resume, fill out a job application, or prepare for interview. Only 1 in 5 participated in employment readiness classes during their detention.
<p>Pre-Release</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited pre-release counseling or planning means that very few inmates are aware of employment or vocational services available post-release. Only 1-in-3 respondents received any information during their incarceration about how to find a job or continue their education upon release.
<p>Post-Release</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formerly incarcerated individuals are often required to disclose their criminal history on job applications. Nearly all of the City of Richmond's top employers, including Contra Costa County, ask applicants whether they've been convicted of a felony. • Formerly incarcerated residents have limited social capital upon release. Of those not employed at the time of the survey, 45% did not feel that someone in their family could help them find a job. Conversely, more than half of the 20 respondents who were employed found their job through a family or friend. • High rates of housing insecurity, substance abuse, and health problems undermine the ability of many formerly incarcerated to look for work. 45% of respondents had not looked for work since their release. • While several organizations in Richmond offer vocational training and educational programs, many formerly incarcerated residents are not aware of these opportunities. For example, only 30% of respondents participated in a job training program since their release, but of those who did not participate, more than 3 out of 4 said they were interested in such a program.

^c According to Atkinson and Rostad (2006), an estimated 44% of state inmates work during their incarceration.

^d A greater proportion of individuals released from county jail participated in GED programs (34%) than of those released from state prison (21%).

WHAT WORKS: COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Best practices that have been grounded in community experience of what it takes to improve employment opportunities for returning residents involve multiple related strategies, including:

- skills-building and job-readiness training during and following incarceration;
- inside/outside integration of services to have continuity during and after incarceration;
- job placement and on-the-job training;
- integrated support services to ensure retention; and
- preventing employer discrimination and removing unnecessary barriers to employment.

The Contra Costa County Reentry Strategic Plan and the AB109 Realignment Community Advisory Board (CAB) recommended several such strategies for the county.^e Although there are community-based and county efforts that currently offer some of these programs, the extreme rate of unemployment and high numbers of individuals who are interested but have not participated in such programs point to a major gap between what is needed and what is currently offered.

In its second year, the county's AB109 Realignment Executive Committee adopted a community recommendation to invest \$2.4 million of AB109 funds toward job training and transitional employment services. This amount was sufficient for a program serving 300 individuals, which is slightly less than the number of unemployed people annually under AB109 in the county (80% according to Probation and other sources). The remaining gap for addressing re-entry employment is the population that is not under AB109, both probation and parolees. The AB109 employment program is an historic innovation and can be expanded based on its success to serve all returning residents in need of assistance with obtaining employment.

EMPLOYMENT TRAINING AND TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT

In 2012, Chris returned home to Richmond, rejoined his wife and family, and began to rebuild his life. He was grateful to get a job as a laborer working construction.

Recognizing that the laborer job was not a long-term solution because of its wage and the work being so physically grueling, he joined a training course to compete for a union apprenticeship to become an Operating Engineer. He drove over an hour each way to Sacramento each day to participate. As an occupation that experts predict will grow, and one with union representation and a median wage of \$40,000 annually, this was a smart career to aim for. Chris scored high on his entrance exam, exceeded in the training course, and was recruited by a firm to begin work immediately.

^e AB109 Realignment legislation took effect in California in 2011, shifting responsibility from the state to counties for people serving sentences or on parole for non-violent, non-sexual, non-serious crimes. A related forthcoming report examines AB109 implementation in Contra Costa County.

Programs that begin inside jails and prisons and continue outside avoid the challenge of post-release providers having to initiate and build trusting relationships when individuals are in the unstable and vulnerable phase immediately following release. This integration can also ensure that pre-release preparation is grounded in and prepares for specific post-release work opportunities, such as a conducting a vocational skills assessment that is later used to identify which training, education, or employment opportunities are the best fit. When employment programs are combined with substance recovery, cognitive change and therapeutic counseling, and other supportive services as needed, the chances of employment success are much greater. These approaches are being explored in Contra Costa County and remain to be widely adopted.

Meeting the challenge of matching a person's skills with actual career opportunities and becoming qualified for jobs with stability and wages that can sustain a decent livelihood must involve using data on labor markets, career pathways, and vocational skills. Too often reentry job programs give little hard skills that are relevant to occupations that are growing and have the potential to become dignified careers. Databases like the Bureau of Labor Statistics ONET (<http://www.onetonline.org>) provide detailed information on occupational growth, wages, and skills needed. Best practices use these sources and engage in local development projects and policy to create pathways to emerging opportunities.¹⁸

Preventing employer discrimination against job seekers with past convictions is also critical and is a work in progress in Contra Costa County. More than fifty cities and counties, and now ten states, have modified their hiring procedures to level the playing field for applicants with a conviction history.¹⁹ The new hiring procedures typically include a review of an applicant's past convictions when mandated by the state, such as with positions in law enforcement or unsupervised contact with children. Questions regarding past convictions are removed from the standard employment application. Despite a recommendation by its Reentry Strategic Plan to "ban the box," the county board of supervisors has not taken action to adjust its hiring practices to bring it in line with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidelines. The City of Richmond passed a resolution reforming its hiring practices to reflect EEOC guidelines, and is currently considering an ordinance that would require companies contracting with the city to do the same. The cost of implementing this recommendation can be very low as it only requires a slight change to administrative process. Because the county government is one of the top employers in Contra Costa County, employing approximately 1,700 people, improved access to employment with the county could contribute to a substantial county-wide impact to expanding job opportunities for formerly incarcerated job seekers.



Figure 4. Los Angeles-based Homeboy Industries is a promising model for employing and training formerly incarcerated men and women through social enterprises supported by a continuum of free services and programs.

Providing comprehensive employment training and transitional employment with supportive services is far less expensive than incarceration. In a review of five programs with track records of reducing recidivism, we found the per-client annual cost to be around \$7,500. The annual cost to incarcerate someone in Contra Costa County and California is nearly \$50,000.

PATHWAYS FORWARD TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

Based on extensive research and community engagement, the following actions are recommended for improving employment opportunities necessary for making community reintegration possible in Contra Costa County:

Adopt City and County Fairness-in-Hiring Policies: Contra Costa County and cities must demonstrate that they are model employers by adopting the hiring practices recommended by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the county's own Reentry Strategic Plan, and numerous community leaders. The current practice of asking about past convictions on the initial application is out of line with best practices for ensuring fair treatment of all applicants.

Expand Private Sector Commitments to Fair Hiring: It is still standard practice for employers to ask about past convictions on the initial employment application—a practice that has been shown to increase discrimination against qualified applicants. However, many businesses are willing to change: during recent visits to small businesses in Richmond by the Safe Return Project, 44 managers and owners signed a pledge to only consider the applicant's job-related qualifications and not their past convictions. We call on all employers in Contra Costa County to remove questions about past convictions from their applications and only make such inquiries if necessary after a qualified finalist has been found.

Engage Major Employers and Project Developers in Expanding Employment Opportunities: The hiring practices of major employers and new development projects can substantially improve successful reintegration. Recent agreements between community groups in Oakland and San Francisco and developers have included specific commitments to “hard-to-employ” individuals including formerly incarcerated workers. Agreements like this for major projects in Contra Costa County are much needed to ensure that the opportunities they create are distributed among all workers, not just those without a past conviction.

Expand AB109 Transitional Employment Programs to Fully Meet: More than 3,000 people on probation in Contra Costa County, and nearly 900 parolees, are not classified as part of the AB109 population, so they will not benefit from the transitional employment programs funded through this legislation. The AB109 programs are an excellent pilot and should be brought to scale to serve the estimated 3,060 unemployed people on probation and parole in the county.

Strengthen Education and Training during Incarceration: Currently, the county jail in Martinez, which is the highest security of the county's three facilities, does not offer education or job training, or any other programs. Little information has been made public on the programs available at the other two facilities, but community experience suggests they are limited to basic education and lack preparation specific to potential career tracks. Filling these gaps in pre-release programs and ensuring intensive involvement of post-release providers would greatly enhance the chances of success after release.

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- ¹⁹ National Employment Law Project (2013). *Resource Guide*. http://nelp.3cdn.net/495bf1d813caddb030d_qxm6b9zbt.pdf. As explained in a recent NELP Press Release, "Since 2010, eight states—Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico and Rhode Island—have enacted legislation to ban the box . . . and [t]wo states—California and Illinois—have adopted the policy via administrative directives, bringing the total to 10 states . . . " http://nelp.3cdn.net/cf0c8044e212765482_hum6iy3kj.pdf