

# Seattle Reentry Workgroup Executive Summary

Prepared in response to City of Seattle Resolution 31637

**Abstract:** The Reentry Workgroup's Final Report fulfills the requirements under Resolution 31637 requesting the Mayor to convene a workgroup to develop policies and strategies that would strengthen the City's efforts to assist with reentry after incarceration. The report includes inventories of the current investments the City makes targeted at those returning from incarceration, an assessment of City levied criminal and infraction fines and fees and their impact on reentry, and seven strategies to strengthen the City's support and reduce barriers for those living with criminal history.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*"If someone enters prison when they are a youth or young adult and leaves prison decades later, there is significant work that needs to be done to help shape a healthy identity, foster a sense of belonging, and develop a connection to a supportive community...You can offer education, a job, a house, but if you aren't fixing what's inside the shell—none of that will matter. Drumming, singing, sweat lodge. Those things give those guys their identity back."* **George Farrell,**

**Reentry Workgroup member, and member of the Standing Rock Lakota Tribe**

In December 2015, Seattle City Council unanimously passed Resolution 31637 with Mayoral support, establishing a workgroup led by the Seattle Office for Civil Rights, to develop policies and strategies that would strengthen the City's efforts to assist with reentry after incarceration. The resolution requested a report to City Council with recommended changes to City policies, ordinances, strategies or programs. The Reentry Workgroup's scope of work consisted of four main tasks that guide the structure of this report.<sup>1</sup> The Workgroup enthusiastically presents these recommendations and the Report's seven strategies.

The Reentry Workgroup (referred to as "The Workgroup" for the remainder of the report) began meeting monthly in November of 2016. The Workgroup is composed of individuals with direct knowledge of the criminal legal system, representatives from King County, social justice organizations, and designees of relevant City departments including: the Office of Housing, the Office for Civil Rights, the Human Services Department, the Seattle Municipal Court, the Legislative Department, and the City Attorney's Office.

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of work includes:

1. Inventory the City's current work to help individuals with criminal history transition into stable housing and employment.
2. Inventory and assess the City's current imposition and collections of fees and fines for criminal violations and infractions and the impact of such on successful reentry.
3. Identify areas where the City's efforts would be strengthened by more effective coordination with other criminal justice agencies, and define steps needed to effectuate those changes.
4. Develop a set of additional policies, ordinances, strategies, or programs the City of Seattle can implement to facilitate re-entry and remove unnecessary barriers to employment, housing, and other benefits.

Though City department staff provided technical support and expertise to the Workgroup, it is the Workgroup's members with lived experience of incarceration who selected and steered the development of these recommendations. Many Workgroup members contributed to the research, writing, and editing of this report. To get here was a truly collaborative process that included almost two years of meetings and capacity building, Indigenous drumming circles, a community report back event, and many hours sharing and listening to stories of incarceration and the transition after release.

This report represents the voices and priorities of those who are impacted by the criminal legal system but who are often not sitting at the institution's table developing strategies for system reform. Thus, the real value in this report is the illumination of perspectives and ideas that are not traditionally elevated by the government.

**To help prioritize, select, and develop the Workgroup's recommendations and strategies, the Workgroup developed the principles below.**

### **The Reentry Workgroup's Principles:**

**Center race:** The existence of racial disproportionality, connections between mass incarceration and institutional racism, and racialized collateral consequences demand that we center Black, Indigenous, Latinx communities, and communities of color who have been most impacted by racism and incarceration.

**Address structural barriers and support individual determination:** Poverty, institutional racism, and systemic oppression are root causes that lead to mass incarceration. Reentry work must be individually tailored but cannot, at its foundation, assign blame or failure based on morality or merit at the individual level. The recommendations acknowledge and attempt to address the institutional racism that creates and fuels systemic issues feeding oppression.

**Decriminalize poverty and/or health needs:** Punishment and incarceration are harmful and ineffective tools to address behaviors triggered by poverty and illness. The Workgroup imagines and supports a framework that shifts from punitive to restorative responses that lead to healthy and thriving individuals and communities.

**Prioritize issues the City controls and/or influences:** The City is responsible for incarceration and thus the reentry of thousands of individuals every year through the adjudication of those at Seattle Municipal Court. The Workgroup also recognizes the City's responsibility to individuals in prisons throughout

our state who call Seattle home and hope to return upon release. The City must be accountable to these residents and invest in their success before their release and upon their return home.

### **Summary of the Workgroup’s Recommendations and Strategies:**

**Coordination:** The Workgroup supports increased coordination between systems and communities so long as coordination is driven by a set of values that align with the principles set forth above.

**Repurpose Current City Investments:** The City currently invests \$2,787,123 in “reentry” support. The City also spends approximately \$20,000,000 to incarcerate misdemeanant defendants of Seattle Municipal Court (SMC).<sup>2</sup> The Workgroup urges the City to move its investments away from something we know to cause significant harm, to more restorative and effective responses that build stable and safe communities.

### **These include strategies that facilitate reentry while removing barriers to employment, housing, and other life sustaining resources:**

#### Strategy 1 | Indigenous Healing

Invest in specific strategies that center and support the reentering Indigenous community members.

#### Strategy 2 | Reentry Healing & Navigation

Support development and growth of community-rooted programs and networks owned and/or led by formerly incarcerated individuals to guide successful reentry and support the healing process.

#### Strategy 3 | Economic Opportunities

Develop strategies around small business support, City workforce development, and technology-based opportunities that lead to economic opportunity for those living with criminal history.

#### Strategy 4 | Housing

Commit to providing housing for people living with criminal history and make targeted and diverse investments to ensure permanent housing is available for people living with criminal history.

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<sup>2</sup> See City Budget Office: Online Budget, <http://www.seattle.gov/city-budget/2017-18-adopted-budget/criminal-justice-contracted-services> (last visited Aug. 31, 2018).

## **Strategies to reduce incarceration costs and system involvement include:**

### Strategy 5 | City's Use of Jails

To reimagine the City's use of incarceration by reducing reliance on jail for misdemeanors except as required by law; providing outcome-oriented oversight for the City's contract with county jails that is informed by those who have experience of incarceration; and that supports decarceration and the City's goal to reach zero use of youth detention.

### Strategy 6 | Decriminalization

Move away from relying on the criminal legal system to address poverty and health inequities and instead develop responses that do not burden individuals with criminal history or the trauma of incarceration. Recommended decriminalization strategies which include:

- The City Attorney's Office should exercise prosecutorial discretion to decline cases disproportionately impacting poor people, limit requests for jail sentences, and instead develop and rely on more effective solutions.
- City Council should remove drug traffic loitering and prostitution loitering from the City's criminal code.
- The Seattle Police Department should develop guidelines to limit arrests for misdemeanor offenses.
- The City should establish supervised drug consumption facilities, also commonly called "safe consumption spaces" or "Community Health Engagement Locations."
- The City should update race data collection practices to accurately capture Latinx communities and other communities of color.

### Strategy 7 | Reentry Workgroup Next Phase

To fully reach the goal of Resolution 31637, we recommend the establishment of a criminal legal system advisory board that (1) informs the City's policies that impact the criminal legal system and/or reentry support; (2) monitors the implementation of any recommendation from this report; and (3) is led by those with lived experience and who are equipped with a strong analysis of systemic racism and the criminal legal system

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This report is just a first step. What follows the report presents the City with an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to reaching the laudable goals of Resolution 31637 and the City's intent to support those reentering from incarceration and living with criminal history. A City committed to racial equity and ending

institutional racism must invest more in supporting individuals and communities who have been targeted and entangled by the criminal legal system than it does in financing mass incarceration. The Workgroup hopes this report encourages the City to eliminate the unnecessary use of jail and harmful criminal legal system entanglement and shift funding to culturally focused holistic reentry healing and support, effective and restorative responses to unwanted behaviors, and investments that create pathways to housing stability and true economic opportunity.