

# WORK AND GAIN EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT SKILLS

## COMMUNITY IMPACT REPORT



## Introduction

The Latino Coalition for Community Leadership (LCCL) acts as the community oriented intermediary for the Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills (WAGEES) program. The General Assembly created WAGEES in 2014 through House Bill 14-1355, which created a community reentry grant within the Department of Corrections (CDOC) to fund community-based organizations serving people returning from incarceration. In 2018, the WAGEES reentry grant program underwent its first sunset review and, pursuant to HB18-1176, was reauthorized with strong bipartisan support and increased funding to allow for expansion.

Through a competitive request for proposal process, CDOC selected LCCL to serve as the community oriented intermediary for WAGEES. Among its many responsibilities, LCCL is tasked with grant making to community- and faith-based organizations (herein referred to as Community Partners), providing capacity building, administering data collection systems, monitoring fiscal stewardship, and tracking program performance.

## WAGEES Program Overview

This report highlights WAGEES' achievements since the program's inception in 2014 and subsequent expansion in 2018. In addition to featuring program data, service model innovations, and Community Partner voices, this report seeks to illustrate the instrumental role that community-informed reentry models play in enhancing public safety, reducing recidivism, increasing economic mobility, and improving the health of Colorado communities.

The WAGEES program is intended to act as a mechanism to facilitate a strong partnership between CDOC and Community Partners. The primary focus of the program is to provide employment skills, education, and supportive services to participants under correctional supervision that are assessed and referred by CDOC. To encourage successful reentry within this population, the WAGEES program seeks to demonstrate participant outcomes in the following areas:

- ❖ Program enrollment
- ❖ Employment placement & retention
- ❖ Educational placement & retention
- ❖ Industry-recognized credential attainment
- ❖ Reduction in recidivism/new charges

Each outcome area is designed to increase participant stability and promote self-efficacy post release. All program referrals are coordinated through and approved by CDOC, but program enrollment is entirely voluntary. WAGEES case managers support participant success through the completion of Individual Needs and Strengths Identification Tool (INSIT) assessments, Individualized Service Plans (ISPs), and activities documentation. The provision of robust supportive services and incentives is central to the WAGEES service model and helps participants get on their feet. Support delivered through WAGEES allows participants to establish a modicum of stability and meaningfully work towards personal and professional goals. Examples of supportive services provided to participants include:

- ❖ Employment clothes and tools
- ❖ Transportation assistance
- ❖ Enrollment fees for industry-recognized credentials
- ❖ Housing assistance (both transitional and stable)
- ❖ Utility assistance

Supportive services are provided intentionally and in alignment with participant goals set in the ISP. To promote responsiveness to local contexts and needs, each WAGEES Partner is responsible for developing an organizational policy that stipulates how supportive services will be delivered in their respective programs and communities.

*“The old school parolees that come in...are absolutely blown away by the amount of help that is now available to them.”*

- Micah Espinoza, CEO of The Freedom Institute

*“[WAGEES] had strong things to offer me and my family. It offered a light at the end of the tunnel. I really think I would have ended up going back to prison [without it].”*

– Former participant, Loaves and Fishes, Cañon City

### Who is the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership (LCCL)?

LCCL was formed in 2004 to bridge the gap between funding sources, government systems and nonprofits serving historically under-resourced communities of color and rural communities. Since its inception, the LCCL has functioned as a community oriented intermediary. LCCL should not be mistaken for a pass-through entity; through intentional funding, immersive capacity building, and intensive relationship building, LCCL drives resources deeply into community- and faith-based organizations (CBFOs) to promote long-term, community-led impact.

The LCCL’s method is described by **Find, Fund, Form** and **Feature**:



#### **Find**

The LCCL seeks to Find grassroots CFBOs serving low-income youth and families in historically under-resourced communities.



#### **Fund**

The LCCL seeks to Fund CFBOs by competing for federal and state grants to drive resources deeply into communities.



#### **Form**

The LCCL seeks to Form CFBOs by providing technical assistance, training, and capacity building. CFBOs work closely with LCCL staff to develop long-term sustainability, performance, and accountability.



#### **Feature**

The LCCL seeks to Feature CFBOs by elevating community voices through storytelling.

### What is the Impact of the LCCL as a Community Oriented Intermediary?

The LCCL's contribution as a community oriented intermediary is pivotal to Colorado's community reinvestment initiatives. By leveraging funding to generate and sustain community-led solutions to public health and safety, prison reentry, victims services, and mass incarceration, the LCCL is reducing racial disparities and co-elevating the power of grassroots leadership. Guided by the belief that historically under-resourced communities have innate wisdom and deserve to be equitably resourced and included to take a bold and influential role in shaping the future of their respective communities, the LCCL works to channel public investments from policy reforms into high-impact community settings. The LCCL's unique model has demonstrated exceptional success in fostering community-based and systemic innovations as well as cultivating responsive service delivery paradigms while providing a high level of value, partnership, performance, and accountability to funders and the public.

Specifically, the LCCL supports community- and faith-based organizations working in marginalized communities of color and rural communities. While deeply connected to local issues and solutions, these organizations are often overlooked and under-resourced due to a lack of infrastructure and organizational capacity. The LCCL provides hands-on support, administrative oversight and technical assistance to build community capacity, ensure compliance to contractual obligations, and promote performance achievement. The support of the LCCL can be the difference between sustainable community-based programs and those that struggle to survive. An overall goal of this model is coordinating relationships between community and government agencies that encourage mutual accountability and advance cross sector engagement in community reinvestment initiatives.

### Framing the Issue: Barriers in Community Reentry

Reentering society after incarceration presents substantial barriers and far-reaching collateral consequences for individuals, family systems, and communities more broadly. Previously incarcerated people often confront significant challenges obtaining employment, procuring housing, repairing interpersonal relationships, and establishing overall stability upon release. Without sufficient support for rehabilitation, employment placement, and social reintegration, many formerly incarcerated people end up engaging in risky behavior and returning to correctional settings.<sup>1</sup> Prominent barriers to reentry include:

#### Employment & Education

The stigma associated with previous incarceration complicates entry into the labor market. Due to this stigma, as well as gaps in work history, people returning from prison often struggle to obtain jobs with advancement potential, benefits, and other markers of long-term stability. Having a history of criminal conviction leaves many unable



<sup>1</sup> Worthington-Hartnack J, Zukiewicz M, and Thornton R. (2018). *Colorado Department of Corrections Reentry Systems Mapping Project: Policy Landscape Summary* (Report No 1010). University of Denver Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab.

to pursue certain educational pathways or technical licenses, further limiting professional and economic mobility. Socioeconomic factors play an important role in determining successful reentry outcomes—without pre-existing financial resources, people leaving prison often struggle to establish self-sufficiency and economic security.

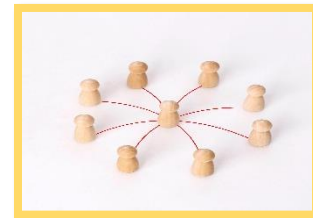
### Housing

Many individuals released from prison either have no prearranged housing or are discharged to undesirable or very temporary living arrangements where they resided prior to incarceration. In Colorado, most people on parole return to communities with inadequate affordable housing inventory and highly competitive private market conditions. State data shows that Colorado is losing existing affordable housing at an alarming rate, with dire implications for middle and low income groups.<sup>2</sup> In addition to untenable private rental prices, people with certain drug or felony convictions can be ineligible for public housing.



### Social Connectivity

A large body of research suggests that establishing healthy social connections with peers and family members is paramount to the reentry process.<sup>3</sup> After extended periods of time removed from the community, cultivating safe and supportive connections can be challenging for people returning from prison. Upon release, many people must re-learn social skills, find new peer groups, and repair relationships. Falling back into abusive relational dynamics, unhealthy social networks, or harmful family structures can be psychologically damaging and significantly raise the risk for recidivism.<sup>4</sup>



The biggest drivers of recidivism aren't necessarily what happens inside prison, but rather what happens when individuals are readjusting to life in the community. While need remains high, supportive and responsive service provision has been shown to positively impact the reentry process. For example, research has shown that people are less likely to recommit crimes when stably employed on a full time basis.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, housing programs have yielded impressive outcomes in lowering rearrests and improving reentry outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Community-driven reforms such as the WAGEES program offer critical opportunities for economic mobility and social reintegration that are otherwise out of reach for people returning from incarceration. With its focus on employment and education placements, occupational skills training, housing assistance, and healthy socioemotional development, WAGEES facilitates successful community transitions and encourages positive reentry outcomes statewide.

<sup>2</sup> Colorado Affordable Housing Transformational Task Force and Subpanel. (2022). *Affordable Housing Transformational Task Force Recommendation Report*. Prepared by Wellstone Collaborative Strategies

<sup>3</sup> Berg, M and Hubner, B. (2011). Reentry and the Ties that Bind: An Examination of Social Ties, Employment, and Recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, Volume 28 (2), 382-410.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 3

<sup>5</sup> Crutchfield, R.D., & Pitchford, S.R. (1997). Work and crime: The effects of labor stratification. *Social Forces*, 76, 93–118; Uggen, C. (1999). Ex-offenders and the conformist alternative: A job quality model of work and crime. *Social Problems*, 46, 127–151.

<sup>6</sup> US Housing and Urban Development. (2016). *Reducing Offender Recidivism and Reconnecting Opportunity Youth*.



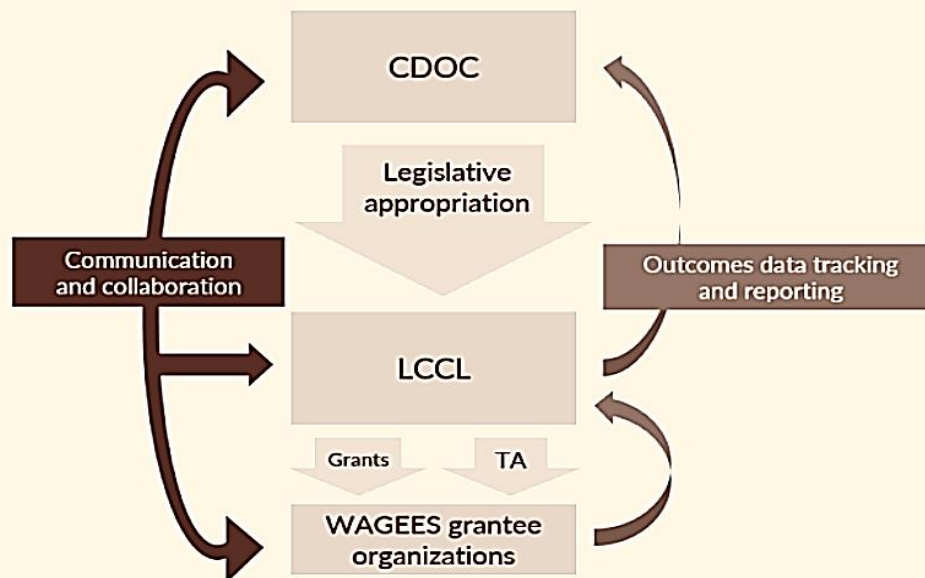
## Colorado's Collaborative Reentry Model

The creation and subsequent expansion of the WAGEES program in Colorado has drawn national recognition for its pioneering and highly collaborative approach. A paper published by The Urban Institute in 2018 described WAGEES as an “innovative justice reinvestment strategy [that sets] a leading example of state department of corrections directly investing in and partnering with community providers.”<sup>7</sup> Among key achievements outlined, the paper highlighted the ways in which the LCCL’s role as an experienced third-party administrator strengthens partnership and trust between state agencies and community-based organizations.

Colorado’s community reinvestment model is certainly notable in its degree of coordination and collaboration. The WAGEES program is predicated on a strong alliance between CDOC, LCCL, and Community Partners engaged in direct service. This partnership can be envisioned as a “three legged stool” in which each stakeholder’s role is distinct, but success is interdependent and goals are shared. Through fostering and prioritizing ongoing collaboration between these entities, the WAGEES program has been able to nimbly iterate and deploy innovative community reinvestment strategies to improve reentry outcomes.

FIGURE 1

### Understanding the WAGEES Model



Source: Urban developed this model based on a concept provided by the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition and our conversations with state partners.

<sup>7</sup> Thomson C, Sakala L, King R, & Harvell S. (2018). *Investing Justice Resources to Address Community Needs: Lessons Learned from Colorado’s Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills (WAGEES) Program*. Research Report by The Urban Institute.

## Community Partners

In alignment with its mission to bring equity to grantmaking, the LCCL consciously and deliberately sub-grants WAGEES funding to Community Partners with demonstrated histories of competence, trust, and service to their communities. Guided by the belief that communities are best positioned to inform and facilitate change, WAGEES prioritizes evidence-based peer-to-peer practices that elevate the leadership of people with lived experience. As of 2021, several Executive Directors and roughly 60% of WAGEES case managers reported having lived experience with the criminal legal system.<sup>8</sup> By hiring staff with lived experience, WAGEES Community Partners are uniquely positioned to forge strong connections, increase program buy-in, and model the results of successful reentry for participants.

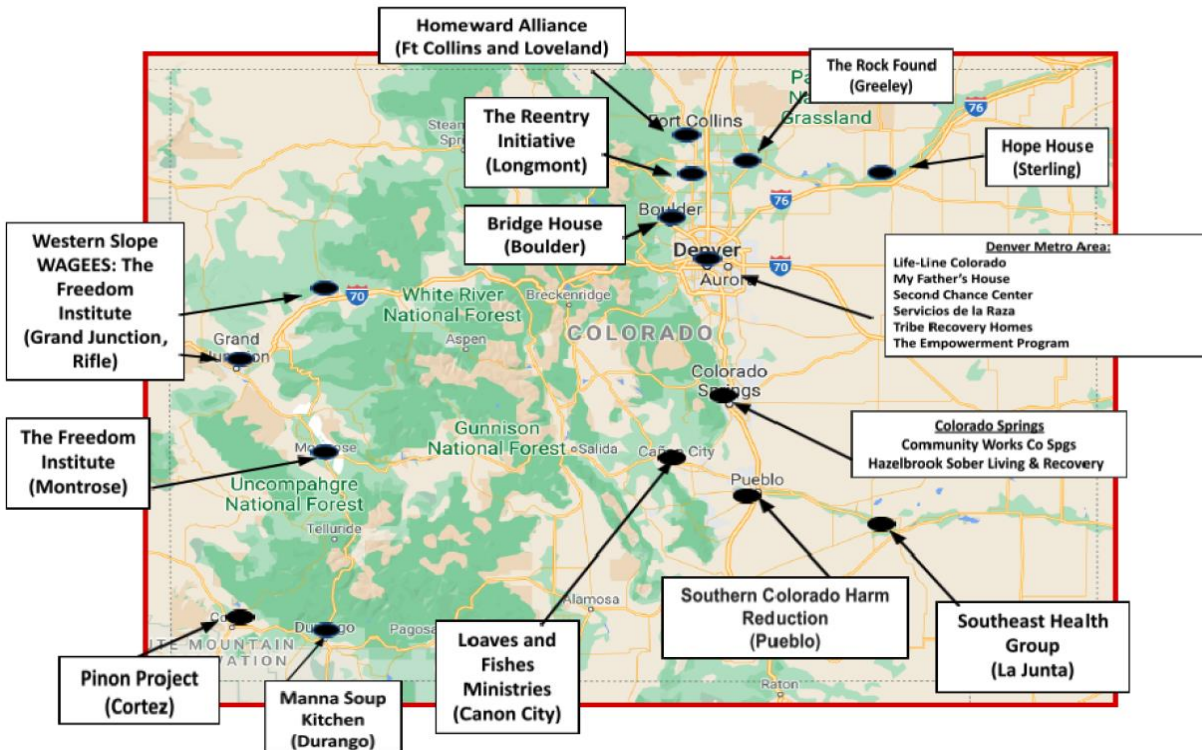
Geographically, the WAGEES program spans both urban and rural areas. Acknowledging that each community has different needs, strengths, and resources, the LCCL shies away from imposing a prescriptive “one-size-fits-all” service model. For example, there is recognition and awareness that service delivery in a rural environment like La Junta looks much different than in the Denver Metro area. Within the parameters of WAGEES performance expectations, requirements, and core services, Community Partners are granted autonomy to design program models, practices, and policies that are best suited to meet the needs of their local parole population. This unique degree of latitude and close partnership with regionally co-located LCCL staff allows for highly responsive service delivery, improved participant outcomes, localized collaboration with Parole offices, and community-led innovation in the reentry field.

While WAGEES Community Partner organizations have distinctive skill sets and program models, they do not work in isolation. To cultivate a community of practice and encourage ongoing collaboration across the state, the LCCL organizes Quarterly Meetings, trainings, and regional convenings in which Community Partners are invited to connect, exchange information, disseminate best practices, and co-navigate challenges. CDOC is an ever-present partner and collaborator in these settings, providing an essential opportunity for bi-directional learning and open communication between systems stakeholders and community-based reentry programs.

***“I was once someone...living in addiction and sentenced to the Department of Corrections. I never thought I could be someone again. WAGEES entered my life and helped put me back together, one piece at a time... [it helped bring] my entire family together under one roof. I completed my terms of parole successfully, and with a giant leap of faith applied to become a WAGEES case manager. To my surprise, I was hired and I cried. Through the last three years, it has been an honor to serve my community by giving back to those who are on parole, just as I once was, and remove the stigma [and] shame of being a felon. Our work as WAGEES case managers is more than a paycheck...we are rebuilding lives and the community.”***

– Kerri Beattie, WAGEES Case Manager, The Piñon Project, Cortez

<sup>8</sup> Colorado Criminal Justice Coalition. (2021). *Community Reinvestment in Colorado*.



**Colorado WAGEES Community Partners**  
As of November 2022

## Program Data

The WAGEES program has maintained strong performance since its inception. Along with consistently exceeding cumulative performance measures established by LCCL and CDOC (enrollment, placement, retention, credential attainment, and recidivism rates), the program has distributed supportive services, assisted in participant goal attainment, and helped thousands of people acquire stable housing.

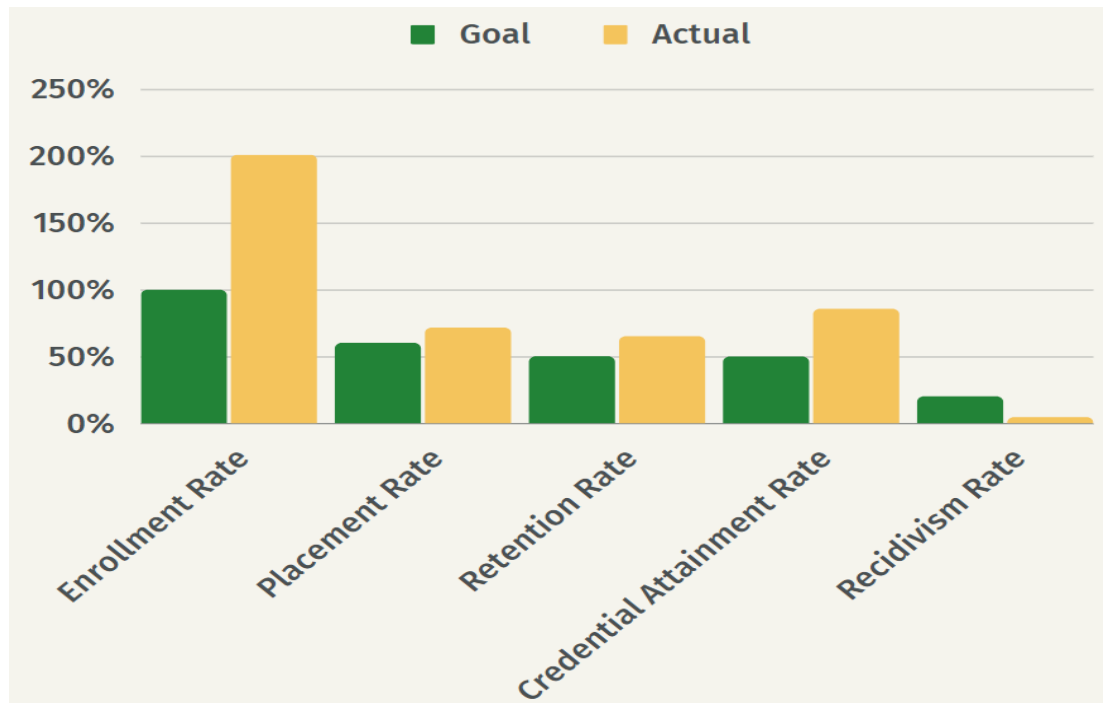
❖ From program inception - October 2022:

- WAGEES community partners have distributed 28,018 supportive services totaling \$2,752,590 to 6,853 participants.
- 1,516 participants have been placed in stable housing
- WAGEES participants have worked alongside their case managers to set 24,018 personal goals via their Individualized Service Plans (ISPs).

Of these goals:

- 40% relate to employment or education/training
- 23% relate to basic needs, including healthcare, literacy, ID procurement
- 22% relate to intrinsic needs, such as improving motivation, cultivating positive relationships, and maintaining sobriety
- 15% relate to housing acquisition





*\*“Actual” is the cumulative Year-to-Date Performance Measures (contract year 1/1/15-9/30/22). This measure is non-duplicative. However, a participant may be duplicated if they achieve an outcome in more than one measure (i.e. a person completes credential attainment and obtains employment).*

*\*\*Note: Recidivism is only tracked while a participant is active in the program and comparisons to CDOC’s recidivism rate should not be made.*

- 91% of total goals set by participants in the WAGEES program have either been progressed towards or completed.

WAGEES participants have found placement in a wide variety of jobs, ranging from transportation to food service, as well as skilled jobs such as electrical, construction, and welding.

### Community is the First Responder: Lessons from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the vital importance of having a collaborative, community-centered reentry model. When the public health crisis took hold in March 2020, WAGEES Community Partners mobilized as first responders by shifting services, enabling virtual case management, and continuing the provision of critical stabilizing services to participants. In a time of unprecedented uncertainty, vulnerability, and disruption, WAGEES providers rallied partnerships, summoned community resources, and worked closely with local Parole offices to ensure continuity of service to those most in need.

The solid collaborative foundation formed between CDOC, LCCL, and Community Partners proved to be indispensable to confronting and navigating the challenges of COVID. The urgency of need imposed by the pandemic necessitated an extremely high level of coordination and communication between state agencies and community-based providers. The LCCL acted as a conduit for rapid resource mobilization, quickly driving investments into communities as additional CDOC funds became available.

As a result of COVID and the need to quickly release eligible facility residents, CDOC made an additional investment to WAGEES to expand post-release housing opportunities. In the 2019-2020 Fiscal Year, an investment of \$201,450 supported the acquisition of additional reentry housing, primarily through master leasing. LCCL worked with Community Partners to adapt the WAGEES housing placement system and expand rapid housing solutions within public health guidelines. By June 30th, 2020, Community Partners expanded the number of total Housing Supplemental Program (HSP) beds from 70 to 179. This increase of 109 beds included both major metro areas and rural communities, such as Cortez, Grand Junction, Montrose, Canon City, Greeley, and Longmont.

During the pandemic, the LCCL secured \$375,000 from private philanthropy and allocated \$265,000 to maintain housing stability for people under parole supervision who may or may not have been enrolled in the WAGEES program. This was a close collaborative effort where CDOC staff identified people who were previously making good progress but due to pandemic related issues were at risk of becoming homeless. The LCCL directly paid CDOC approved housing vendors resulting in greater housing stability for 338 individuals. Another \$10,000 was allocated for ARC gift cards to provide access to clothes and basic needs items. The cards were distributed by CDOC staff. Additionally, the LCCL worked with WAGEES Community Partners to identify service delivery gaps and invested the remaining \$100,000 split between four rural and metro serving organizations; Greeley (\$40,000), Denver (\$25,000), Aurora (\$20,000) and Grand Junction (\$15,000). Community Partners used these additional funds for housing, food, basic needs and stipends.

Housing is only one example of the swift and courageous actions taken by WAGEES partners during the COVID crisis. Throughout the pandemic, CDOC, LCCL, and Community Partners remained in close contact to address reentry needs, brainstorm solutions, deploy targeted funding, and protect the health and wellbeing of participants. Ultimately, such an immediate, intensive, and comprehensive response would not have been possible without the strong foundation of partnership seeded by the WAGEES community reinvestment model.

### Breaking Cycles of Multi-generational Incarceration and Poverty

Research has found that children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to be incarcerated in adulthood than those with community-based caregivers.<sup>9</sup> Poverty, interpersonal disconnection, and family system displacement caused by incarceration serve to erode critical social supports, deteriorate community health, and compromise public safety. The WAGEES program strives to break these cycles by fostering self-efficacy, economic mobility, social connectivity, and personal growth for participants. Many WAGEES Community Partners have

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<sup>9</sup> Martin, M. (2017). *Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children*. National Institute of Justice Report.

conceived innovative program models that support employment readiness, psychological wellbeing, substance use recovery, and the development of other socioemotional skills needed for long-term success in the community.

### Program Highlights

- ❖ In Mesa County, The Freedom Institute created a successful 8-week construction apprenticeship program to provide on-the-job training, work readiness, and stable housing to eligible WAGEES participants. In addition to receiving a weekly stipend and housing allowance, apprentices complete a 16-part career development class. Since most participants live in program housing during the duration of their apprenticeships, they are able to build personal savings while developing marketable trade skills for future job prospects.
- ❖ Southeast Health Group's WAGEES program in La Junta provides vocational training in two different social enterprises: one for small engine repair and the other for marketing, sign making, and T-shirt embroidery. The social enterprise structure allows participants to develop on-the-job skills, build confidence, and gain experience in local industries.
- ❖ After recognizing the struggles of family reunification post-release, The Piñon Project in Cortez introduced a fatherhood program curriculum into their WAGEES service model. The Fatherhood Initiative is a 13-week evidence-based curriculum designed to help fathers develop the socioemotional skills needed to be successful parents. The Piñon Project incentivizes attendance at Fatherhood Initiative classes and has seen positive outcomes for WAGEES participants who choose to engage.
- ❖ In El Paso County, Hazelbrook Recovery noticed that WAGEES participants with substance use disorders were struggling to meet eligibility criteria for sober living arrangements. Despite needing and desiring treatment, many participants were unable to access detox services required to obtain placement into sober living. To reduce these barriers to care, Hazelbrook created "Transitional Safety Zones", in which eligible participants receive a bed for 2-3 weeks to engage in safe detox and recovery services prior to placement in sober living homes. Under clinical oversight and within a peer recovery model, the program has seen great success helping participants transition from active addiction to recovery. Hazelbrook reports that participants who complete the Transitional Safety Zone program achieve stability and report positive outcomes in their subsequent sober living environments.

***"Hope House has developed relationships with a few different larger companies [in Sterling]...if we have an individual who doesn't really have any job experience because they've been incarcerated, we'll reach out to [employers and ask] 'would you be willing to employ this person up to 90 days so that they can develop a skill and get some training?'...it can turn into a position or a wonderful reference for them."***

- Shaun Wilson, Hope House Executive Director, Sterling

### The Future of Community-Informed Reentry

Reducing recidivism through community-based interventions both impacts individual outcomes and supports improved economic health and public safety for all Coloradans. The cost of recidivism is too high to ignore—cycles of incarceration and poverty compromise public safety and introduce tremendous drawbacks for individuals, families, communities, and taxpayers alike. People released from prison are often disadvantaged educationally, economically, and socially; without responsive community-based programming to provide support and reduce barriers to reintegration, the reentry process is daunting, difficult, and unsuccessful for many.

The WAGEES program exemplifies what is possible when public safety investments include and prioritize community voices. The unprecedented degree of collaboration and coordination between CDOC, LCCL, and Community Partners has facilitated a cohesive community reinvestment strategy that has yielded immense success adaptively meeting the needs of people returning from incarceration. Through an intermediary model, WAGEES Community Partners are empowered to leverage their lived expertise and deep wisdom of local needs to generate innovative solutions to complex reentry challenges.

WAGEES has demonstrated a high return on investment. Through its emphasis on economic mobility, self-efficacy, socioemotional wellbeing, and overall positive community reintegration for formerly incarcerated people, the WAGEES program is not only transforming individual lives, but is also breaking cycles of poverty, advancing public safety, and promoting improved community health across Coloradans.

***“Successful transitioning is a matter of community health...98% of people currently incarcerated will one day return to the community. It only behooves us to be concerned about what they have to endure while they’re incarcerated, as well as what kind of assistance is available to them when they come out. And so we think [WAGEES is] a really big part of that community safety equation. I mean, we’ve tried arresting and incarcerating our way out of these societal issues, and it hasn’t worked. This approach is something new, something different...from the results, I think more people are buying into the fact that it’s a better way to go about it. We know lives are changing.”***

- Hassan Latif, Founder of Second Chance Center