



SAFE RETURN OFFICE

Insights About the Future Green-Blue Economy from Justice-Involved Richmond Residents

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Insights About the Future Green-Blue Economy

from Justice-Involved Richmond Residents

Executive Summary

In a competitive labor market, we cannot afford to exclude people who are willing and able to work. Many formerly incarcerated individuals who have served their debt to society would like to work to support themselves and their families. Local non-profits like Safe Return Project understand the challenges they face as they seek to secure employment.

At the same time, the work of designing and building a just, equitable, resilient, and sustainable future needs people. Transforming our energy systems, buildings, transportation systems, materials economy, and food system as well as restoring nature and redeveloping brownfields will require a variety of skills and talents.

Anticipating these current and upcoming projects, Safe Return Project led three workshops with thirty (30) justice-involved individuals in fall 2022 to understand the skills they offer, their interests, the challenges they face, and gather their insights about the future green-blue economy. Facilitators heard about participants' skills in management, entrepreneurship, administration, communications, construction, and the arts. Attendees shared information about their interests in projects such as all-electric building retrofits, rescuing surplus prepared food, solar panel manufacturing, battery manufacturing, and upcycling thrift store donations. The findings in this report shine a spotlight on the resources needed to help justice-involved individuals reintegrate into the economy and reduce the number of people caught in the cycle of recidivism and reincarceration.

Introduction

Building the green-blue economy of the future will require battalions of new workers. With California's low unemployment rate, 4.4% in March 2023, we cannot afford to pass over anyone who is ready and willing to work.

Annually, about 35,000 people are released from the state's prisons and of the 350,000 people booked into jails each year, most are released within a few months.¹ They face numerous barriers to reintegrate into society and the work world: fulfilling court obligations; satisfying probation/parole officer meetings; opening a bank account; applying for social services; securing housing; finding transportation; obtaining a driver's license with the Department of Motor Vehicles; passing a General Educational Development (GED) test; obtaining services for physical and mental health; and finding and keeping employment. Even obtaining Social Security cards, birth certificates, and training and education certifications—all of which are vital building blocks to stabilization— often prove difficult. Fortunately, there are non-profit organizations working on their behalf.

¹ California Health Care Foundation. "From Corrections to Community: Reentry Health Care." July 1, 2022, <https://www.chcf.org/project/corrections-community-reentry-health-care>, Date of Access May 18, 2023.

What is Safe Return?

Safe Return Project lifts up those who have been negatively impacted by criminalization and inequity. With the goal of developing the capacity for the formerly incarcerated to take the lead on issues that impact them, Safe Return instills a sense of agency. Since its inception, Safe Return has focused on hiring formerly incarcerated people to engage in participatory action research, community organizing, and policy advocacy on issues impacting individuals returning from jail and prison.

People with past convictions who have served their sentences face 4,800 restrictions on participating fully in society.² These collateral consequences are imposed long after completion of a sentence, reinforcing the idea that individuals with past convictions have forfeited their rights to equity, equal opportunity, and full citizenship.

Safe Return Project plays a key role in the community by advocating for policy changes that will ensure that people who have been criminalized do not face roadblocks to employment and success.

Some of the barriers and challenges the justice-involved community faces are internal. Safe Return Project's peer support environment holds space for people processing the aftermath of incarceration and helps navigate shared challenges. The non-profit understands how to hold this community with compassion and care in a culturally competent way that helps them move forward.

Since Safe Return Project prioritizes the internal hiring of formerly incarcerated and systems-impacted individuals, the non-profit serves as a model for employment.

When staff hear of vacancies outside of the organization, they reach into their network

of partners to find qualified candidates. This is how Safe Return Project has become a pipeline of talent and grown the number of formerly incarcerated workers with strong skill sets in supervisory roles, office management, communications, organizational development and more.

Looking externally, Safe Return Project also provides consulting services to employers who see the value of second chance hiring. The set of challenges facing justice-involved individuals can be great but the rewards to employers more than make up for the challenges. Safe Return Project serves as a partner and consultant to help second chance employers support the success of their employees in the workplace.



Workshop #1 – Sept. 26, 2022

² Californians for Safety and Justice. "Repairing the Road to Redemption in California." September 2018, <https://safeandjust.org/interactivereport/repairing-the-road-to-redemption-in-california>, accessed May 12, 2023.

Workshop Goal

The goal of Safe Return Project's portion of the Richmond Green-Blue New Deal project was to conduct workshops with a network of formerly incarcerated and convicted individuals and their families to better understand the community's potential interest in green-blue jobs, their skill sets, and resources needed. Information gathered will guide the development of the three main reports for the Richmond Green-Blue New Deal: the Green-Blue New Deal Opportunities Report, Implementation Plan, and the Community Toolkit.

Methodology

To encourage participation in one of the three workshops, in fall 2022, Safe Return Project staff spent eight weeks conducting outreach within their network of formerly incarcerated and convicted individuals and their families. The project goal of engaging with and learning from 30 attendees was fulfilled:

- 11 attendees at workshop #1 on Sept. 26, 2022
- 13 attendees at workshop #2 on Oct. 3, 2022
- 6 attendees at workshop #3 on Oct. 10, 2022

These 2½ hour workshops introduced the federal Green New Deal, shared several case studies, polled the level of interest in 15 green-blue job projects, and led a discussion about economic opportunities, upward mobility, skills, needs, and challenges.

Evaluations were completed after each workshop by soliciting feedback on content and desired engagement in the project moving forward. Each of the 30 attendees received a \$50 gift card for their time.

Findings

Participants generously shared their stories and insights. Besides learning about attendees' skill sets and green-blue job preferences, workshop facilitators also heard about what participants consider a "good job" and a "living wage," and the support they need to reintegrate into the working world.



Workshop #2 – Oct. 3, 2022

Skills

When asked about their skill sets, the top 10 skills or trades participants identified over the course of the three workshops included:

1. Management
2. Entrepreneurial
3. Electrical
4. Carpentry

5. Painting
6. Hospitality
7. Research
8. Customer service
9. Artistic
10. Healing

All 10 of these skills or trades would be useful in some capacity for the green-blue projects that were described in the workshop. The more detailed list of skills or trades attendees identified included:

1. Driving
2. Teaching/educating
3. Marketing
4. Entrepreneurial
5. Healing
6. Cooking /cooking instructor
7. Cosmetology
8. Patience
9. Facility maintenance
10. Electrical
11. Carpentry
12. Creation of beauty products
13. Health worker
14. Mental health services
15. Yoga, Zumba, body work instructor
16. Communications
17. Active listening
18. Fast learner
19. Home improvement
20. Caregiving
21. Networking
22. Horticulture
23. Problem solving
24. Motivational speaking
25. Mentoring
26. Gardening
27. Critical thinking skills
28. Community advocacy
29. Community engagement
30. Jewelry making
31. Writing and editing
32. Fundraising
33. Accounting
34. Hospitality
35. E-commerce
36. Crafting



Workshop #3 – Oct. 10, 2022

37. Fitness and nutrition
38. Organizing
39. Conservation
40. Frontline work
41. Coordination
42. Motivation
43. Leadership
44. Self-discipline
45. Research
46. Empathy
47. Creative thinking
48. Managing people

This wide variety of skills and trades could be applied to future work building a just, equitable, resilient, and sustainable future.

Preferred Green-Blue Projects

To understand which green-blue jobs projects participants were most interested in, workshop facilitators presented an overview of the following 15 projects.

1. Battery manufacturing
2. Solar panel manufacturing
3. Wind turbine manufacturing
4. All-electric building retrofits
5. Green accessory dwelling units construction
6. Building deconstruction
7. Redesigning public spaces
8. Protected bike lanes
9. Upcycling dead and diseased trees
10. Upcycling thrift store donations
11. Refillable bottles
12. Vertical farming
13. Rescuing surplus prepared food
14. Shoreline restoration
15. Wildlife restoration

Participants were asked to vote for their top three areas of interest. The following five projects received 10 or more votes.

- All-electric building retrofits (21)
- Rescuing surplus prepared food (19)
- Solar panel manufacturing (13)
- Battery manufacturing (10)
- Upcycling thrift store donations (10)

When asked what skills employers were looking for in the current job market, participants highlighted:

- Construction
- Administration
- Hospitality

Participants shared the qualities they believe employers are looking for: reliability, honesty, sociability, and professional people with good attitudes toward training. While most workshop attendees were curious about which green-blue employers were hiring, a few members of each group expressed their entrepreneurial spirit and professed to wanting to start their own business.

Defining a good job and a living wage

When asked to describe a “good job,” participants stated that good jobs shouldn’t be stressful, should provide a living wage, come with benefits like retirement and quality healthcare, and offer opportunities for advancement. Across all three workshops, participants expressed that they felt good jobs should be available in the communities where they live.

These workshops helped us learn what the term “living wage” meant to participants and how earning a living wage would affect them. A living wage means “being able to pay bills and have something leftover.” This would allow them “to live their lives the way they want instead of paycheck-to-paycheck.”

Participants felt that a living wage meant making enough to cover their current costs of living. Earning more would afford them financial security to stop worrying about getting old; reduce stress about bills; care for their families; and give back to their communities.

One person specifically stated that they thought a living wage would be greater than \$25/hour. The general sentiment was that securing employment with a living wage post-incarceration clearly would be life changing but that they face many barriers before they can secure stable employment.

Reintegration challenges

During the workshops, several different challenges to reintegration were identified including housing, transportation, conviction history, lack of resources, and family reunification. Specifically, participants could be facing challenges such as:

- court obligations,
- probation/parole officer meetings,
- securing a driver’s license
- opening a bank account,
- applying for social services,
- housing/landlords,
- securing reliable transportation,
- completing a GED,
- securing documentation needed to apply for a job,
- identifying services for physical and mental health, and

- finding and keeping employment.

Support to navigate these obstacles would help justice-involved individuals succeed.

Employer concerns about hiring justice-involved individuals

Workshop attendees shared that in addition to the challenges listed above, they also face employers' opinions and fears. These often-unspoken concerns can block individuals from joining the workforce, regardless of their qualifications. Furthermore, insurance liabilities and background checks can exclude individuals from jobs that match their skills and experience.

In light of these factors, workshop facilitators asked participants why they think employers are afraid to hire them and what they can do to de-stigmatize employers' minds. Participants believe that employers are misinformed and base many of their decisions on stereotypes that paint formerly convicted individuals as dangerous, untrustworthy, a threat to society, and not worth the risk.

Despite these challenges, participants felt that they could change minds and practices by:

- showcasing their skills and positive attributes,
- showing hiring managers studies and data explaining justice-involved individuals are more of a perceived liability than an actual risk,
- educating them on the excessive economic impacts of having a conviction, and
- eliminating background checks for most professions.

Support requested

During each of the workshops, participants identified the types of support that would help them prepare to enter the job market, ranging from opportunities to further their education, more skilled labor training in schools, jails, and prisons, as well as access to technology, reliable transportation, and soft skill development.

When asked what kind of assistance was needed for participants to overcome these challenges, 16 sources of support were identified. Participants stated that job training, pre- and post-release job placement programs, policies that reduce barriers to housing and jobs, trauma-informed services, and community support would be helpful.

Recommendations

As a result of information collected at the Safe Return Project workshops, organizers offer a set of recommendations for integrating justice-involved people into the green-blue economy. To support justice-involved individuals, the following would be valuable:

- Job training - pre-release
- Paid job training – post-release
- Work readiness support
- Trauma-informed services

- Creation of job centers
- Post-incarceration job placement assistance
- Employment education fairs
- Green-blue jobs notification system
- Re-entry retention services

For aspiring entrepreneurs:

- Cohorts of entrepreneurs to support each other while developing business plans, identifying funding, and working on other aspects of launching a business

For employers:

- Training that guides recruitment and screening conversations with formerly incarcerated individuals who have hard and soft skills that match employers' hiring needs. (See the Fair Chance Corporate Cohort case study in the sidebar.)

For government:

- Create a Fair Chance Advisory Committee

Evaluation comments

At the end of each workshop, attendees filled out an evaluation form. A sample of the overwhelmingly positive comments received include:

- "Overall, it was very informative and provided a lot of info that will be positive for the future."
- "I'm an introvert. These ladies made it easy to speak out and engage. Thank you."
- "Finally found an organization that cares about the community I want to be a part of."
- "Very informative, super kind and know their topics."
- "Hearing how important a Green New Deal is and the numerous types of jobs available."
- "Amazing, inspiring, exciting conversation."
- "Everything was presented clearly."
- "I felt a really good vibe. I didn't feel shy."

Conclusion

To reduce the number of people stuck in the cycle of recidivism and reincarceration, jobs are the offramp from the justice system. Given the workshop participants' interest in the Green New Deal, green-blue jobs could provide them with not just a way to support themselves but also work that is meaningful to them.

Thirty workshop participants shared information about their skill and talents, preferences, the barriers they face, and the resources they need to reintegrate into society. The green-blue projects that

Fair Chance Corporate Cohort Training

Jobs for the Future hosts the Fair Chance Corporate Cohort which was designed for Human Resource and Operations professionals within companies looking to build inclusive, competitive, and thriving workplaces. The cohort model guides a small group of companies through a several week training and coaching process that prepares participants to actively embrace and adopt a Fair Chance Employment program. Participants learn how to assess their company's current state of employment practices, debunk common myths about fair chance employment and create a customized implementation plan for their companies.

The group gathers virtually to participate in lessons with experts in employment law, Human Resources, change management, those with lived experience and more.

intrigued attendees most included building electrification, manufacturing of batteries and solar panels, rescuing surplus prepared food, and freshening up donated thrift store clothing, furniture, and housewares into valuable new items.

Workshop facilitators appreciated attendees sharing their stories and insights. Information gleaned during the three workshops will inform the Richmond Green-Blue New Deal Opportunities Report recommendations.