

Rosenberg Foundation

Closing the Revolving Door of California's Prisons

STATEWIDE



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EVERYDAY, THOUSANDS OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS return to communities throughout California. Unfortunately, two-thirds of them end up back behind bars within three years. The state's 70 percent recidivism rate—one of the highest in the country—jeopardizes public safety and denies formerly incarcerated people a second chance.

Breaking this cycle of incarceration is a key component of the Rosenberg Foundation's Justice and Public Safety program. The Foundation, a private foundation with a 75 year history of supporting social and economic justice in California, launched the initiative in 2007 to help reform the state's criminal justice system. A core part of the project's vision is to partner with an inspiring group of advocates and organizations to help close the revolving doors of California prisons.

The Foundation found inspiration in research that points to one major solution to putting formerly incarcerated individuals on a path to leading productive lives—access to jobs. With this focus, the organizations supported by the Justice and Public Safety initiative are using a variety of tools—like direct service, research, impact litigation and policy advocacy—to advance employment as a powerful preventive strategy to reduce the recidivism rate, and as a result increasing public safety in communities most impacted by crime.

Considered one of the key partners, the Justice and Public Safety program has supported the work of the National Employment Law Project (NELP), a national organization dedicated to promoting policies and programs to create jobs, strengthen mobility and support workers rights. In 2008 NELP launched an initiative in the San Francisco Bay Area to enforce the Title VII rights of people with criminal records. Their initiative facilitates the broad enforcement of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) policies, which are the strongest handles in federal or state law to limit such discrimination, through a combination of administrative complaints, high-impact



“The Rosenberg Foundation has been a true leader in California and nationally promoting the employment rights of people with criminal records. In addition to their strong commitment of funding, they have provided a critical source of wisdom and strategic direction at every stage of the work.”

—MAURICE EMSELLEM,
POLICY CO-DIRECTOR, NELP

legal action, employer education, and community outreach. NELP set up a Title VII hotline to field calls from workers, and has generated over 200 referrals, leading to more than a dozen charges filed with the EEOC, including charges against the largest chain stores, public utilities, telecommunications agencies, and transit services in the state.

Another partner in the Justice and Public Safety initiative, the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice (BCCJ), has pulled together a high-profile advisory board comprised of a diverse group of representatives from law enforcement, advocacy groups, employers, and other statewide stakeholders to create a series of timely policy recommendations to decrease recidivism. Their recommendations, compiled in a report released by BCCJ, include such low-cost solutions as providing a California ID card to everyone leaving prison—a prerequisite for applying for most jobs; providing vocational education programs in prison; and the development of reentry councils in various California counties, another initiative supported by the Foundation.

A third partner in the initiative is Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC), an organization that advocates for the civil and human rights of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. LSPC is helping to expand their employment opportunities through its successful “Ban the Box” campaign, which calls for the elimination of questions about past convictions from initial employment applications.

LSPC’s advocacy has inspired policy change in six states and more than 25 cities and counties nationwide. In California, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors voted to move the conviction history question to a confidential section of the county employment application. Similar campaigns have been launched in Sacramento and Compton, and LSPC is working to advance an employment rights alliance that can win “Ban the Box” hiring reforms in Los Angeles.

The Foundation also has invested in the NAACP’s Smart and Safe strategy, an innovative initiative that advocates for and advances a better public safety system that aims to reduce a reliance on prisons to solve social justice issues. Among their major victories in California is securing an administrative order from the Governor’s office to remove the question of criminal history from employment applications for state positions.

Through these strategic partnerships, the Rosenberg Foundation is making real and measurable changes in ensuring employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated Californians. By moving the needle in employment, the Justice and Public Safety initiative partners are collectively working to reduce recidivism and advance criminal justice reform.

ROSENBERG FOUNDATION: *Created in 1935 through the bequest of California business leader Max L. Rosenberg, the Rosenberg Foundation has provided 2,800 grants totaling nearly \$80 million to regional, statewide and national organizations advocating for social and economic justice throughout California.*

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National Employment Law
Project
www.nelp.org

Legal Services for Prisoners
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NAACP’s Smart & Safe
Strategy
www.naacp.org/pages/smart-and-safe