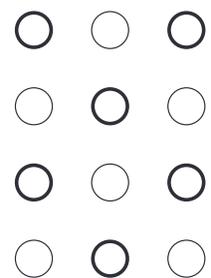


GEORGIA CENTER FOR OPPORTUNITY:

Georgia Prisoner Reentry Initiative: Reaching across the aisle proves to be an effective way to reduce recidivism in Georgia



United States

Overview

The state of Georgia leads the United States in the per capita number of people under correctional supervision – approximately 1 in 13 Georgians are currently incarcerated. In order to tackle this crisis head on, the Georgia Center for Opportunity (GCO), through its Prisoner Reentry Initiative, implemented the following steps to change public policy in Georgia:

1. Interviewed and recruited knowledgeable experts in the field of criminal justice to join the organization's newly developed Working Group.
2. Over the course of a year, met with the Working Group to develop policy solutions that are apolitical, that draw wide support, and that have the greatest chance of creating major changes in criminal reentry.
3. Wrote and distributed two landmark reports.
4. Met with legislators and the Council on Criminal Justice Reform to ensure proposed solutions adopted quickly.

Because of the team's tireless work and the success of this program, GCO was one of the six finalists for the 2017 Templeton Freedom Award.

About Georgia Center For Opportunity (GCO)

GCO is an independent and non-partisan think tank located in Atlanta, Georgia. The organization is dedicated to researching and developing community-based policy solutions that create opportunities for low-income earners who are tethered to government programs that rob them of their humanity and hope. The team at GCO promotes those solutions to policymakers and the public and helps innovative social enterprises deliver results on the ground.

GCO shapes public policy and creates local community efforts that lead to a quality education, stable employment, and a healthy family life for a greater number of people in Georgia. It is focused on breaking the barriers to social mobility in the state by helping individual citizens and their communities flourish.

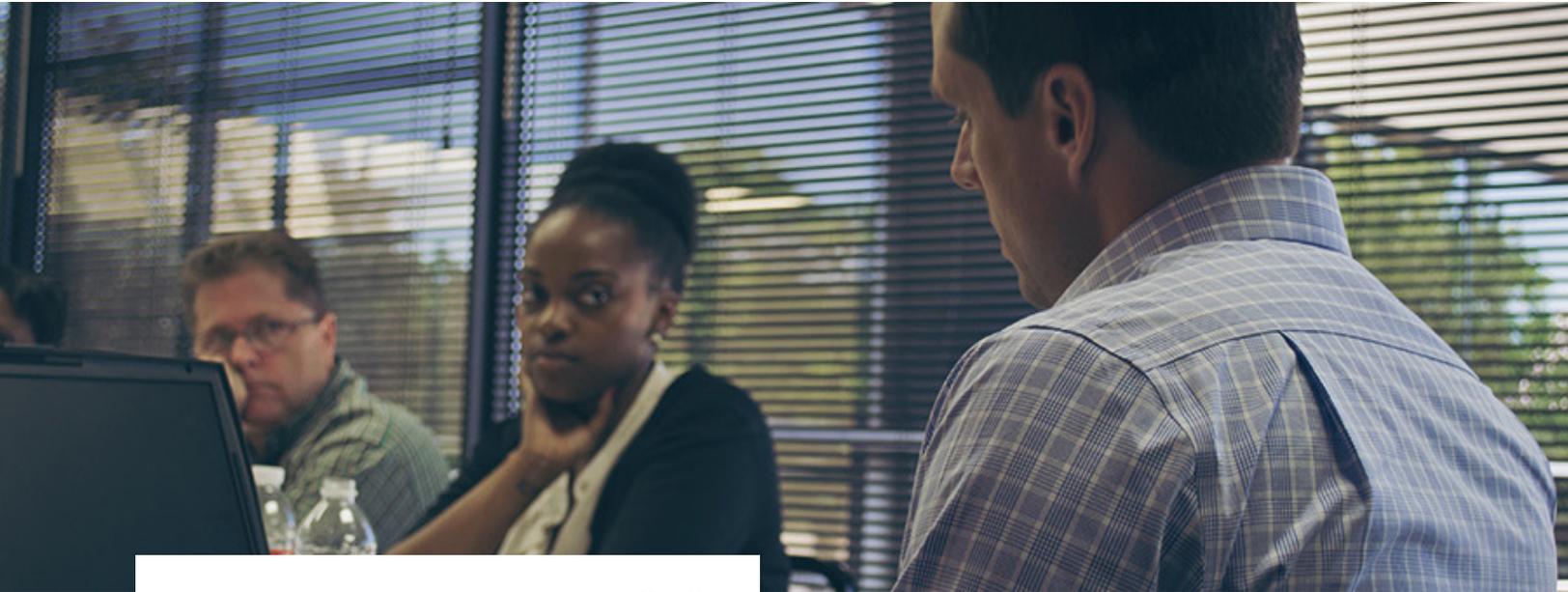


History

Between 1990 and 2011, the state of Georgia's prison population more than doubled to nearly 56,000 inmates. State spending on corrections soared as well, from \$492 million to more than \$1 billion annually. Despite this substantial investment, Georgia's recidivism rate (the number of individuals who return to prison within 3 years of their release) remained virtually unchanged for close to a decade.

In 2009, the Pew Center on the States released a study showing that Georgia led the country with 1 in 13 adults under some form of correctional supervision. Nationwide, that number is 1 in 31. When these individuals are released, most are not prepared for success outside the prison walls. Nationally, nearly 65 percent of former inmates will be re-arrested and, in Georgia, about 30 percent will find themselves back in prison within 3 years.

Studies show that, in order to achieve a successful transition back into society, returning citizens need steady employment, safe and affordable



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housing, and reliable transportation. Ironically, these fundamental needs are the most challenging for them to secure.

Employment, housing, and transportation are largely interrelated, as it is hard to have one without the other. For instance, it is difficult for a person to keep a job without having a place to live relatively nearby; it is doubtful a person can continue to pay rent without having a regular source of income; and it is challenging to find housing or commute to work without a reliable means of transportation. This catch-22 is what makes reentry so intimidating for many of those getting out of prison.

However, if those three major needs are met, the chance that returning citizens will end up back behind bars is greatly reduced.

Understanding these challenges, the Georgia General Assembly created the Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform for Georgians in 2011. Two years later, the Council conducted a review of Georgia's reentry services and found that, while a good deal of work was underway, the statewide effort suffered from balkanization and numerous barriers to success. Because of these findings, the Council developed the Georgia Prisoner Reentry Initiative, which laid the foundation for a 5-year effort expected to make Georgia a leader in recidivism reduction.

Getting To Work

Georgia's high recidivism rate is costly to the state's communities and families, to public safety, and to taxpayers. Knowing the state was committed to improving this area, GCO made it an organizational priority to enhance public safety and control spending by improving the state's correctional system by helping prisoners reintegrate into society.

Following a conversation with a former Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, the team began speaking to prison wardens, prisoners, transition center leaders, and the heads of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles and the Reentry Services Division for the Georgia Department of Corrections.

In July 2013, after many months of research, nearly four dozen interviews, and visits to four of the state's prison facilities, the organization launched its Prisoner Reentry Working Group. The priority when building this group was gathering people with expertise in Georgia's correctional system and a strong interest in improving outcomes for prisoners returning to the community. The nine Working Group members were selected regardless of political affiliation; however, the majority of the group wound up being center-left.

Members agreed to meet at GCO's office in Atlanta once per month for a year while they developed policy and service related solutions to improve prisoner reentry experiences, reduce recidivism, and improve positive outcomes for prisoners (such as job attainment and retention,



Former inmate Tony Kitchens celebrates 30 years of successful reintegration with residents of Walker Faith and Character-Based Prison in Rock Spring, Ga.

housing stability, staying sober and drug-free, and meeting debt obligations). The Working Group would then present their recommendations to legislators, the governor, and the state's Council on Criminal Justice Reform.

During the Group's first meeting, the member's quickly decided upon several broad areas of focus for policy solutions. Those areas included:

- Employment: Removing barriers to entering the workplace, and increasing opportunities for prisoners to obtain and retain employment upon release.
- Reentry Courts: Creating courts that specialize in working with prisoners as they are reentering the community.
- Transitional Centers: Increasing the capacity of Georgia's transitional centers to serve more people and exploring whether centers specialized to work with specific kinds of offenders could be more effective in reducing recidivism.

While the scope of these topics is large, the Working Group zeroed in on specific, common sense solutions that offered the greatest potential for measurable improvement.

With the guidance of the Working Group, GCO authored two reports: "Increasing Employment Opportunities for Ex-Offenders," published in December 2013 and "A High Price to Pay," released in December 2014. These reports focused on ways to improve workforce reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals as well as

exploring solutions to minimize the role debt has in driving recidivism. The policy solutions in each report were promoted to policymakers, the media, and the general public and presented to the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform in 2014.

Outcomes

GCO's Prisoner Reentry Initiative focuses on the rehabilitation and restoration of former offenders with their family and community. This program, which aims to help newly-released individuals gain employment and reconnect with their loved ones, has been credited with positively impacting the state's justice system.

POLITICAL

The Working Group's recommendations, which were compiled into two reports and presented to the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform, were incorporated in the Council's final report to the governor. Over the past several years, nearly all of the recommendations were passed into law and policy changes were implemented. These legislative and policy changes include:

Recommendations Implemented from the Report "Increasing Employment Opportunities for Ex-Offenders":

- Passed SB 365 in April 2014.
 - Gives judges discretion to not automatically suspend driver's licenses for drug offenders who committed a non-driving-related offense, as well as protects employers from liability in hiring a person with a criminal record.
- Banned the Box in February 2015.
 - Georgia became the first state in the South to officially "ban the box" through an executive order issued by Governor Nathan Deal. This effort removed the checkbox located on applications for state employment that compels the applicant to divulge any criminal record.
- HB 328 in 2015.
 - Allows offenders who have completed a drug court program to be eligible for obtaining professional licensing.

The reforms spearheaded by GCO are driving positive trends like a 6 percent drop in Georgia’s prison population since 2012 – a \$264 million saving for taxpayers – and a predicted 11 percent drop in recidivism.



Recommendations Implemented from the Report “A High Price to Pay”:

- The Division of Child Support Services, superior court judges, probation, and parole now communicate on how to best ensure people involved in the criminal justice system pay child support while receiving the necessary supervision and assistance they need to find a job and make consistent payments once in the community.
- SB 367 in 2016.
 - › Made it easier for recently incarcerated individuals to obtain employment through:
 - Greater access to occupational licensing.
 - Reinstated driver’s licenses for those convicted of drug-related offenses that did not involve a motor vehicle.
 - Expanded funding for Parental Accountability Courts (see more information below) that reduce incarceration and encourage parents to support their children.
 - Added liability protection for employers.
- March 2015.
 - › The Division of Child Support Services revised its policy concerning releasing suspended driver’s licenses to those who are behind in child support payments in order to remove a barrier to work.
- Expansion of Parental Accountability Courts.
 - › Based in part on research conducted by GCO, Georgia expanded the state’s system of Parental Accountability Courts from 10 to more than 30, with an additional 19 coming. This one reform will go a long way to helping get people to work who would otherwise be caught up in the justice system, while also helping more parents be a part of their children’s lives.

SOCIAL

The reforms recommended by GCO that are now state law and administrative policy will help tens of thousands of Georgians annually who are impacted by the correctional system to re-enter society, get back on their feet, and lead self-sufficient lives. This means more intact families, less crime, and fewer taxpayer dollars going to prisons.

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ORGANIZATIONAL

Atlas Network’s CEO, Brad Lips, praised GCO’s innovative approach to criminal justice reform.

“GCO’s Prisoner Reentry Initiative demonstrates that compassion for the incarcerated and their families can be aligned with the interests of taxpayers and public safety,” Lips said. “It’s a wonderful initiative that deserves to be emulated.”

GCO’s “Hiring Well, Doing Good” and “Georgia Works!” initiatives are two other programs that have spun out from the success of GCO’s Prisoner Reentry project.

GCO’s Hiring Well, Doing Good events aim to develop new partnerships between businesses and those serving the unemployed so that more people find work.

The events also seek to inspire business leaders to expand opportunities to those who are struggling to find work by learning from their peers and understanding the extent of the problem. Topics at these events cover legal and liability considerations, tax incentives available to businesses hiring from certain populations, nonprofits with which businesses can partner, and the experiences of other businesses.

These events have garnered support from the Atlanta Falcons, Uber, Georgia Pacific, the Arthur M. Blank Foundation, Goodwill Industries, and CKS Packaging. More than 125 community leaders attended GCO’s most recent Hiring Well, Doing Good event and roughly 30 businesses

signed intentional efforts to hire the chronically underemployed.

The purpose of Georgia Works! is to develop and implement cost effective, comprehensive programs that meet the needs of a diverse population working to break the cycles of homelessness, addiction, and criminal recidivism.

The program houses participants at their facility for one year during which time they earn at least \$7.40 an hour working 30 or more hours a week. The program is designed to break down the barriers that keep the unemployed in cycles of dependency by treating addictions, offering personal support and life preparation tools, and providing GED classes.

Georgia Works! also helps participants meet the necessities of a normal life, such as getting a driver's license and setting up a bank account.



RANDY HICKS, president and CEO of GCO

Obstacles & Factors For Success

Factor for Success: SEEKING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Randy Hicks, GCO's president and CEO, credits much of the project's success to the strategic partnerships they developed across the state. "These partnerships," he said while speaking at Atlas Network's Liberty Forum & Freedom Dinner in New York City, "had an exponential effect because they allowed us to look much larger than we were. In the end, we had a de facto coalition that made sure all those recommendations passed when it came to removing barriers to employment. They were so passionate and ready to go to work for it."

Take Away

- Finding the right partnerships to amplify your policy solutions is essential for smaller organizations and projects with tighter budgets.

Factor for Success: BRINGING TOGETHER DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

By developing the Working Group, GCO was able to bring together diverse stakeholders to address recidivism in Georgia. This model, which was vital to its success, provided an effective strategy for bridging research, policy, and practice in order to achieve real reform. Hicks stated "As we did a sweep through the state [to find members for the Working Group], we were looking for the people who knew the most. We didn't need to be ideologically aligned. We just needed to know what they knew, so we took the time to seek them out and listen to their concerns and experiences. This way we had the clearest possible understanding of what was going on in the state when it came to prisoner recidivism."

Take Away

- Many of the Working Group members disagreed with GCO on the organization's other policy issues, but were still willing to work together to achieve marketable solutions

to the problem of large prison populations and high recidivism rates.

- Working Group members provided a passionate cadre of influential leaders ready to advocate for and defend their recommended policy solutions.

Factor for Success: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

As a nonpartisan think tank, GCO encouraged members of the Working Group to think boldly when considering the possible solutions to reduce recidivism in Georgia. In contrast to government commissions and other similar bodies, independent think tanks like GCO are afforded greater freedom to champion ideas that may push the envelopes of conventional wisdom or current political feasibility.

Take Away

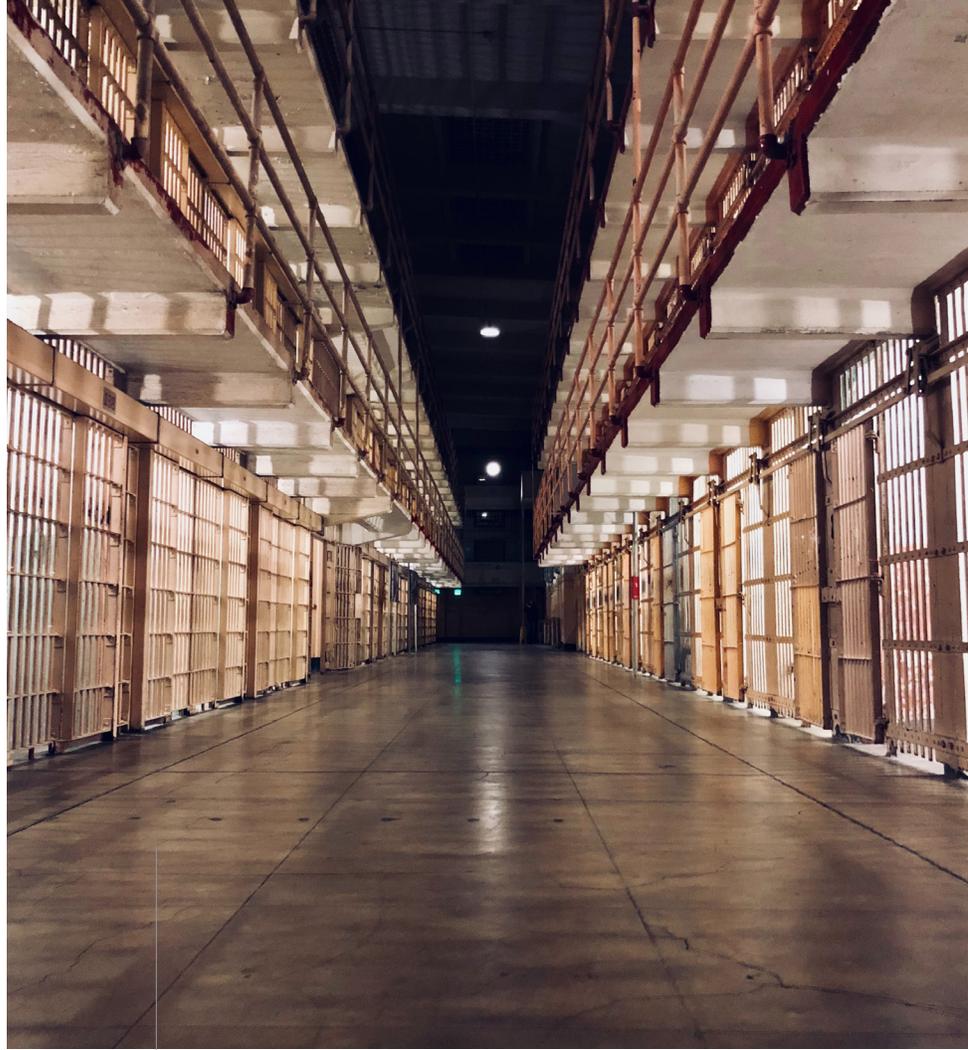
- Allowing your organization to think boldly creates an opportunity to discover policy solutions that have not yet been explored, or ones that other organizations have thought were unfeasible.

Obstacle: BALANCING DISPARATE VIEWPOINTS

As the project was just beginning, a Working Group member advocated for a policy that would have put limits on or instituted a quota system for the racial makeup of those arrested and charged for crimes. The group understood this was a politically unworkable approach and wouldn't lead to policy change.

Take Away

- When developing a group like GCO's Prisoner Reentry Working Group, it is vital to communicate the goals of the group upfront. Knowing that this policy recommendation would not be adopted, and thus would not help the group achieve their goals, the idea was subsequently tabled.



- During the Working Group's monthly meetings, GCO made sure the group stayed away from buzzwords and fringe issues surrounding prisoner reentry and remained focused on what needed to be dealt with to create change in the state.

Obstacle: CONVINCING THE STATE TO LOSE REVENUE DURING A DEFICIT

GCO received some pushback from legislative leaders and the governor who didn't want to adopt some of Working Group's reform ideas. Georgia was in a budget deficit and ideas like the state bonding program and tax credits for hiring ex-convicts would cost the state money.

Take Away

- Due to the fact that GCO sought out strategic partnerships and built its Working Group from the state's foremost experts on criminal justice reform, total pushback on policy solutions was minimal.

Reflections

Georgia led the United States in the per capita number of people under correctional supervision. This reality posed tremendous financial and social costs on the state. GCO addressed this disturbing problem with its Prisoner Reentry Initiative.

After forming a Working Group on the issue in 2013, GCO produced expert insights in two

landmark reports. In the years that followed, nearly all of the organization's recommendations were adopted into law, helping to broaden opportunities for former inmates reintegrating into society. With a 6 percent drop in Georgia's prison population since 2012 – a \$264 million saving for taxpayers – the reforms spearheaded by GCO are driving this positive trend. GCO's Prisoner Reentry Initiative gives formerly incarcerated individuals and their families a renewed and revitalized outlook on life.

For Further Reading:

Michael Schulte. September 29, 2014. The Georgia Center for Opportunity. "The State of Corrections in Georgia." <http://georgiaopportunity.org/state-corrections-georgia/>

Report of the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform. January 2014. https://dcs.georgia.gov/sites/dcs.georgia.gov/files/related_files/site_page/2013-GA-Council-on-Criminal-Justice-Reform.pdf

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