

New funds to help felons find work

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FULL TEXT

LaTancia Rogers needed a lot of things when she was released from federal prison last May.

After serving 10 years of a 15-year sentence for Medicare fraud, Rogers was released early as covid-19 overran the prison where she was incarcerated. She saw guards and inmates become ill, and a woman in an adjacent cell died of the virus. She was grateful to have survived the pandemic, but returning home in the middle of the corresponding economic downturn presented a new set of challenges for Rogers.

"When I got home, my husband was living paycheck to paycheck, and there were all of these things I needed," said Rogers, 45. "I needed everything. I had nothing. I needed clothes, food, hygiene products, glasses, I had made all kinds of doctors appointments. I had doctors appointments for months."

But jobs were scarce for everyone, let alone for felons. The situation was overwhelming for Rogers, so she turned to her case manager at Total Community Action, a New Orleans-based nonprofit organization that provides services for people returning home from prison. Her case manager suggested a new program called the Covid-19 Returning Citizen Stimulus Initiative, which was working with reentry programs in 28 cities to provide cash assistance to people released from prison during the pandemic.

It all sounded too good to be true to Rogers, but she applied and soon received a payment, then another and another. All told, she received nearly \$3,000 at a critical moment in her life, making her one of about 10,000 people who received money provided by a new philanthropic campaign called the Justice and Mobility Fund.

The fund, a partnership between the Ford Foundation, Blue Meridian Partners, and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, on Wednesday announced a \$250 million commitment to support organizations that work to improve the economic outlook for people exiting the nation's criminal justice system. In addition to the Covid-19 Returning Citizen Stimulus Initiative that supported Rogers, foundation dollars also will go to advocacy groups working to change policy, such as enacting laws that automatically expunge some criminal records as well as supporting and establishing programs that work directly with formerly incarcerated people to help them rejoin the labor force.

Ford Foundation President Darren Walker said that one of the central goals of the new fund is to bring much-needed philanthropic money to an often overlooked aspect of the criminal justice reform effort. Walker said much attention and funding have gone to front-end reform strategies, such as targeting sentencing guidelines in an effort to keep people out of prison in the first place, but that without programs aimed at helping those already affected by the mass incarceration policies of the 1980s and 1990s, an entire generation is at risk of being left behind.

"We have been successful in reducing the spigot of people going into prisons," Walker said. "But we have millions of people in the system that we need to help now. It's kind of like with climate change: For years, all the focus was on prevention. Now people are talking about mitigation."

Although he expects the fund to help many White Americans, Walker sees this work as squarely within the Ford Foundation's racial justice agenda.

"Our focus is on the drivers of inequality, and there's no greater contributor to racial inequality in this country than our criminal justice system," he said.

Jim Shelton, the chief investment and impact officer at Blue Meridian Partners, said the pandemic, which led to

many people being released from prisons earlier than planned, highlighted the needs of the formerly incarcerated. "It made clear that the services that folks need to transition successfully weren't there, and that was exacerbated because such large numbers were coming out," Shelton said. "But the evidence is really clear that if you can get people into jobs, especially jobs that pay enough money, then they are much less likely to go back to prison, much less likely to commit crime in general. And so what we are really asking for employers and policymakers to consider is, what does it really mean to give someone a second chance?"

The direct assistance Rogers received gave her breathing room, and she was able to focus on reentering the job market. After months of searching, this spring, she found part-time work in the marketing department of a business consulting firm. Soon, she will be finishing the accounting degree she started before going to prison. Mindy Tarlow is the managing director for portfolio strategy and management at Blue Meridian and before that led the Center for Employment Opportunities, a Justice and Mobility Fund grantee that provides jobs, training and career guidance to people just out of prison. In her experience, the weeks and months after a person is released from prison present a rare opportunity.

"At that point, when people are just coming home, is when the opportunity is actually the greatest to transform lives, and yet there's the least amount of opportunity," Tarlow said. "You've got this great moment, and you just need to meet that moment. Most people who are going through the system have been there before, so reentry is about being able to break that cycle through things like a living-wage job."

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, even before covid-related releases, 600,000 people were being released from the criminal justice system every year. In all, 77 million Americans, or 1 in 3 adults, have some type of criminal record, with Black people and members of other communities of color overrepresented in that figure. Having a criminal record often is a barrier to getting a job, finding a home and accessing government benefits. The Justice and Mobility Fund is providing support to organizations trying a number of strategies to remove the barriers facing those Americans.

The Center for Employment Opportunities is the nation's largest reentry employment provider, and it will be expanding its work to new locations. Another recipient is the Clean Slate Initiative, a national coalition advocating for policies that would automatically clear all eligible criminal records instead of placing the burden on ex-offenders to petition to have their criminal histories expunged. The fund also will help the Vera Institute of Justice's advocacy, which recently led to Congress's lifting a 30-year-old ban on incarcerated people receiving Pell grants to attend college while in prison.

Policy changes are one thing, the Ford Foundation's Walker said, but he thinks that the biggest hurdle facing those coming out of prison is the public perception of them.

"The biggest challenge is changing the attitude and policies of the private sector," he said. "It's about getting employers to see that this is a population of humans with human potential."

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