



Testimony of the Legal Action Center
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Public Protection
February 13, 2024

I represent the New York State Alternatives to Incarceration and Reentry Coalition, a collaborative of service providers with decades of experience providing constructive reentry and alternatives to incarceration to people across New York. Collectively, our coalition members serve over 30,000 justice-involved individuals annually, providing essential services including employment assistance, housing support, mental health and substance use treatment, family reunification, and legal advocacy.

In the fall of 2024, the NYS ATI and Reentry Coalition completed a statewide study to assess the effectiveness of ATI and reentry programs and identify barriers to success. This report, funded by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), explores the impact of Alternatives to Incarceration (ATIs) and reentry programs across New York State. It highlights the need for increased investment in non-carceral approaches to public safety, particularly in upstate and Western New York, where incarceration rates have been rising.

The study findings were based on statewide roundtables with ATI and reentry service providers, in-depth interviews with frontline staff who work directly with participants, and focus groups with justice-involved individuals sharing their experiences in these programs.

The resulting white paper, [*Unlocking Potential: The Role of Community-Based Alternatives in Strengthening Public Safety*](#), provides an in-depth look at both the successes of ATI and reentry programs and the challenges they face due to funding gaps and systemic barriers.

ATIs and reentry programs are more effective than incarceration at improving public safety outcomes and reducing future convictions.¹ Research shows that every \$1 invested in ATI programs generates between \$3.46 and \$5.54 in benefits, saving New York over \$100 million annually in incarceration costs.² Despite their effectiveness, ATI and reentry programs remain underfunded, particularly in upstate and rural counties, where incarceration rates have risen by 66% since 1991.³ Additionally, Black and Latine New Yorkers remain disproportionately incarcerated, and in some upstate counties, Black individuals are nearly 20 times more likely to be convicted of a felony than their white counterparts.⁴

¹ Johnson, A., Ali-Smith, M., & McCann, S. *Diversion Programs Are a Smart, Sustainable Investment in Public Safety*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022.

² Brinson, C., et al. (2022). "Transforming Criminal Legal System Outcomes in New York City." *Legal Action Center*.

³ Prison Policy Initiative, "State Incarceration Trends in New York," *Prison Policy Initiative Report*, 2021.

⁴ McCormack, Simon, and Jesse Barber. "A Racial Disparity Across New York That Is Truly Jarring." *NYCLU*, 2022.



The most pressing challenges facing ATI and reentry programs include lack of affordable housing, inadequate transportation, limited job opportunities, and barriers to reentry services, particularly in rural and upstate communities.⁵

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget allocates \$31.42 million for ATI programs and \$11.526 million for reentry services; however, this funding is insufficient to meet the current needs. We call on the Legislature to ensure an additional \$21 million is included in the final budget to adequately support these essential programs. This investment is necessary to:

- Expand ATI and reentry programs to meet growing demand, particularly in upstate and Western New York.
- Strengthen support for justice-involved individuals, ensuring access to housing, employment, and transportation—the key drivers of successful reentry.
- Increase wages and staffing capacity for ATI providers, ensuring that case managers, peer specialists, and service providers earn a living wage, reducing turnover, and strengthening service delivery.
- Create career pathways for ATI participants, allowing individuals with lived experience to transition into service provider roles by removing unnecessary licensing barriers.
- Reduce reliance on incarceration and ensure cost-effective public safety solutions that benefit all New Yorkers.

While expanding ATI and reentry services is critical, we cannot service our way out of structural issues, and funding must also support:

- Housing – The lack of transitional and permanent housing is the single greatest reentry barrier.⁶
- Reliable Transportation – Many participants in rural and upstate counties cannot access required services due to limited public transit.⁷
- Employment Pathways – We must establish clear pipelines for justice-involved individuals to enter the workforce, particularly within reentry services.⁸
- Workforce Stability and Fair Wages – Many ATI and reentry programs are understaffed and struggle to recruit and retain workers due to low wages and high turnover. Currently, 60% of human services personnel in New York State qualify for public assistance, and peer specialists

⁵ *Unlocking Potential*, 10.

⁶ Listwan, S. J., Hartman, J. L., LaCourse, A. “Impact of the MeckFUSE Pilot Project: Recidivism Among the Chronically Homeless.” *Justice Evaluation Journal*, 2018.

⁷ Tonry, Michael, and Joan Petersilia. “Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Research Findings from the Urban Institute’s Prisoner Reentry Portfolio.” *Urban Institute*.

⁸ Brinson et al., “Transforming Criminal Legal System Outcomes in New York City”.



earn wages far below the living wage. Increasing funding for salaries will ensure a stable, experienced workforce that can provide high-quality services.

- Direct Stipends for ATI Participants – Providing financial support for housing, food, and transportation is crucial to ensuring participation and success.⁹

New York has made important strides in criminal justice reform, but without sufficient investment in ATI and reentry services, we risk stalling progress.

We urge the New York State Legislature to increase ATI and reentry funding by \$21 million in the final FY 2025 budget, ensuring these programs receive the resources they need to continue transforming lives and strengthening communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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New York ATI/Reentry Coalition Members

[BronxConnect \(Urban Youth Alliance\)](#)

[CASES](#)

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[Legal Action Center](#)

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⁹Owens, Mandy D., Jessica A. Chen, Tracy L. Simpson, Christine Timko, and Emily C. Williams. "Barriers to Addiction Treatment Among Formerly Incarcerated Adults With Substance Use Disorders." *Addiction Science & Clinical Practice* 13, no. 1 (2018): 19.