



MULTIFAITH EMI

NOVEMBER 2024

Freedom Conversations

The Freedom Conversations toolkit series was designed to maintain the momentum from the 2024 “UnConference” held in Dallas, whether you attended or not. It will help you engage your family, friends, local activists and faith community around issues resulting from the carceral state in our country.

In this WELCOMING RETURNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS HOME edition, you'll...

- Learn the importance of creating an environment where returning community members feel comfortable in our places of worship.
- Understand what basic needs must be immediately met when people are released from incarceration—from food and housing to employment and medical care.
- Explore how to create a faith-based movement that drives systemic reform through policy change.
- Walk away with ideas about how you can engage in this critical work.

WELCOMING RETURNING COMMUNITY
MEMBERS HOME

The number of people leaving U.S. jails and prisons in urgent need of re-entry assistance is overwhelming. In Georgia alone, approximately 17,000 “returning citizens” re-enter their communities each year.

Just as no single church, temple or mosque can feed all the hungry, no single congregation has all the resources to meet returning community members’ needs—from food and housing to employment and mental health services. In addition to providing direct services and welcoming them into our congregations, this crisis calls for faith communities to embark on advocacy and policy work that affects systematic change.

FAITH FRAMING

Faith Work = Congregational Culture + Upscaling Direct Services + Systems-level Policy Advocacy



LEVEL 1: Welcoming Environment

We can see how recently incarcerated people may feel alienated from even the religious traditions and communities they grew up in. Speaking from the Jewish tradition, [Morris Treiblitiz writes](#) about how he didn't feel like he belonged anywhere after getting out of prison, and how he didn't feel like he had a right to be part of community ritual.

It took about 6 months to get [my parole transfer] approved, but until then I was using [heroin] and didn't fit in anywhere as far as I was concerned. I felt distant from my family, my community, my religion and Hashem, and more than anything, I felt distant from myself and the person I wanted to be. All this combined with my reluctance to be seen by some who knew my history was what most likely caused my initial hesitation to recite HaGomel in shul.



Understanding the degree of alienation returning community members might feel about joining in community and ritual, how can your faith congregations create an environment of inclusiveness?

Within the Islamic faith, The [Muslim Re-Entry Initiative](#) is providing full-scale, wraparound services to recently-freed Muslims in New Orleans. They provide mentorship, housing, transportation, food, counseling and cash donations to returning community members. They cite the inspiration for their work in their religious texts:

- “The believers, men and women, are helpers and supporters of one another...”
–Qur’an 9:71
- “And they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive...”
–Qur’an 76:8
- “Help one another in acts of piety and righteousness.”
–Qur’an 5:2
- “Verily, the believers are like a structure, each part strengthening the other.”
–Sahih Bukhari
- “If anyone relieves a Muslim believer from one of the hardships of this worldly life, Allah will relieve him/her of one of the hardships of the Day of Judgement.”
–Sahih Muslim
- “Whoever guides someone to virtue will be rewarded equivalent to him who practices that good action.”
–Sahih Muslim

LEVEL 2: Direct Services

Considering how people can meet their basic needs (their social determinants of health like housing, food, transportation, etc.), are there resources in your faith communities that would allow you to provide these kinds of services, either within your congregation or linking up with other congregations or nonprofits?

In the Christian tradition, the book of Matthew tells how Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes to feed the enormous crowd. We cannot perform the miracles of creating something from nothing, but we can organize and use our collective voices to push those with resources (policymakers) into ‘multiplying’ the resources for returning community members.

LEVEL 3: Policy Change

Can advocating for policy work serve as a way for people of faith to “multiply the loaves and fishes” beyond our immediate resources?

Christians often reflect on the story of the prodigal son, which highlights themes of homecoming, unconditional love and grace. In this story, a father welcomed his wayward son with open arms, free of judgment, immediately ready to celebrate his return.

A good book that reflects on these themes of return, hospitality and grace is Henri Nouwen’s [The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming](#). Nouwen writes that we all have elements of the younger son in our prodigality, elements of the older son in our self-righteousness and jealousies, and elements of the welcoming father, who is God-within-us, and holds out their hands in redemption without condition. “I now see”, Nouwen writes, “that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own.”

CIRCLE PRE-WORK MATERIALS

Returning community members often start from square one to rebuild their lives. Many times, they have no resources, family or community support. They also face great stigma and barriers in housing, employment, healthcare and community reintegration. As people of faith, we can reflect and act on redemption and hospitality to ease the process of re-entry. Our faith guides us toward creating welcoming congregations that provide direct resources and services, and our faith challenges us to engage in advocacy work that affects policy change for returning community members.

Prior to your discussion...

1. Complete this [simulation](#) on the tough decisions formerly incarcerated individuals must make when released from prison, and how their lives under supervision affect those choices.
2. Read [Reentry: An Insider's Guide](#), by a group of formerly incarcerated people in the Gainesville, FL, area. This guide offers valuable insight into the challenges newly released people face and the social support they may need.

Glossary

PIECP (Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program): Part of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, PIECP programs place people who are incarcerated in realistic work environments, pay them prevailing wages and give them a chance to develop marketable skills that will increase their potential for rehabilitation and meaningful employment upon release.

Returning Community Member: A person who has been released from prison or has a criminal history. The term is used to describe people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system, and is intended to reflect their potential to participate in society. (Often referred to a “returning citizen.”)

Social Determinants of Health: Non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live and age, as well as the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. Read more here: <https://odphp.health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health>.

HISTORICAL FRAMING

The ACLU reports that, “70 million Americans—one in three adults—have a criminal record. This is the result of nearly five decades of punitive criminal justice policies that fed mass incarceration. While 2.3 million people are imprisoned in the United States, 95 percent of people in state prisons will re-enter our communities at some point. More than 640,000 people are released from prisons each year.”

Many individuals released from prison must rebuild their lives from scratch. Often, they have less than \$200 to their name and may be disconnected from family support due to long-term incarceration. They may not have basic identification, such as a driver’s license or Social Security card, and in some states, their criminal record may disqualify them from social services like Medicaid or food stamps. When applying for housing, property owners and banks frequently discriminate against them because of their record. And when applying for jobs, they can be automatically denied after a background check. A 2017 Urban Institute Report found that 28% of applicants without a record received a job callback, compared to just 15% of those with a record. Background checks themselves are often inaccurate and unregulated, with little oversight at the state or federal level to ensure the accuracy or context of the information they provide.

Many formerly incarcerated people are unfamiliar with modern technologies like smartphones and computers, making it difficult to search for jobs, housing and services. Prisons typically lack access to up-to-date technology to train inmates ahead of release. And while there is a need for technology training, the formerly incarcerated are often denied student loans.

Many former inmates describe experiencing sensory overload when reentering society, overwhelmed by the unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells. The trauma endured in prison often requires an outlet for processing, but many also face serious health issues due to inadequate prison healthcare, and need immediate medical

attention upon release. Like everyone else, they need the social determinants of health, including stable housing, food security, transportation, reliable income, healthcare, mental health support and community connections.

The barriers to employment, housing and health, along with the social stigma that newly freed people experience, often causes them to face homelessness, serious illness or death, or a return to incarceration. When people are released, they are often subject to regular supervision fees from their parole officer. In their first year out, incarceration-related fines and fees often become unmanageable. Failure to pay probation-related fees is a prominent cause of recidivism. [A Department of Justice report](#) followed prisoners released from prison in 24 states for 10 years (2008–2018). Within the first 3 years, approximately 66% were arrested and within 10 years, 82% had been arrested again.

A [Brookings Institute report](#) on reforms relating to re-entry suggests the following ways to combat these challenges:

- Ending restrictions on occupational licensing, safety net programs and hiring for those with criminal records
- Expanding and enforcing anti-discrimination rules and regulations
- Enhancing oversight and regulation of the criminal background check industry
- Creation of pre- to post-release education and work-based learning programs. Reforming outdated security rules and technology policies in correctional facilities that limit the development of new rehabilitation programming
- Expanding internet access in correctional facilities
- Reorienting parole and other forms of community supervision toward social and economic reintegration

- Increasing access to services related to housing, employment, health/addiction and social reintegration
- Improving rehabilitation services in correctional facilities by adopting a continuity-of-care model
- Expanding funding for prison rehabilitation programming to meet demands

Additional effective reforms include providing larger cash sums to people upon release, as well as providing them with a social environment and a mentor to support their reintegration.

Slavery by Another Name

Incarcerated people are often forced to work in unsafe conditions for just pennies per hour. This practice is permitted due to an exception in the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery “except as a punishment for crime” after a person’s conviction. Additionally, state and

federal governments have consistently failed to extend labor wage and safety protections to incarcerated workers.

According to this [January 2024 study by Worth Rises](#), “incarcerated workers are paid an average of \$0.86 per day for their work, though wages can range from system to system and job to job. Generally, facility operations and maintenance pay the least, in all cases less than one dollar per hour—an average wage rate across states of \$0.09 per hour on the low end and \$0.42 per hour on the high end. Jobs in government-run businesses or public projects often pay more, sometimes up to a couple dollars per hour. And finally, private sector jobs, especially those regulated by PIECP that mandate prevailing wages, pay the most even after substantial wages are garnished. Importantly, seven states pay no wages at all for a majority of jobs: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas.”

610,000 people are released from state and federal prisons each year



Compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative from the Bureau of Justice Statistics sources *National Prisoner Statistics, 2019* (for total releases) and *Prisoners in 2020 - Statistics Tables, Table 9* (for the number of deaths counted among releases, which were then subtracted from each state’s total releases)

LEARNING – THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

We habitually underestimate the power of language. The Bible says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” In fact, all faith traditions recognize the power of words and, in particular, names that we are given or give to ourselves. Ancient traditions considered the “naming ceremony” one of the most important rites of passage. Your name indicated not only who you were and where you belonged, but also who you could be.

Multifaith EMI Board Member Burrell Ellis said, “The worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me is that I begin to believe it myself, ‘for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.’ It follows, then, that calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly what I can be. I can be and am much more than an ‘ex-con,’ or an ‘ex-offender,’ or an ‘ex-felon’ ...Simply refer to us as PEOPLE.”

Below are examples of words we might use, based on preferences of those who have been impacted by the criminal legal system. Keep adding to this list as you see fit.

SAY THIS	NOT THAT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person, sibling, brother, sister, the person’s name when known • Incarcerated people, imprisoned people, people in prison, people in jail, people jailed in X facility 	Inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, offender, delinquent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person, sibling, brother, sister, the person’s name when known • X name on parole/probation, formerly incarcerated people 	Ex-con, ex-offender, ex-felon, ex-prisoner, parolee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning community member • Person returning to community • Returning citizen* 	Ex-con, ex-offender, ex-felon, ex-prisoner, parolee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person with justice system involvement • Young person impacted by the criminal legal system 	Juvenile offender, juvenile delinquent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person experiencing homelessness or unhoused person 	Homeless
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with mental health needs 	Mentally ill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with a history of substance abuse 	Addict, substance abuser
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with a sex offense conviction 	Sex offender

See also these references from [The Marshall Project](#) and [The Fortune Society](#).

Discussion Questions

- Does the number of people released from prison each year in your state feel disempowering to you? When you see the statistics, how do you feel?
- Have you ever considered policy advocacy as a faith-based activity? Do you have any reservations about considering it in that light?

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Analyze Understand costs associated with re-entry

- Research the resources that returning community members have access to in your state, like cash upon release, access to social services like Medicaid and social service help with housing, food and employment. Also, research the fees required to pay parole officers.
- Read policy recommendations on re-entry reform, including increasing cash support amounts upon immediate re-entry.

Amplify Tell your story, post on social media, talk to elected officials

- Organize a letter writing and advocacy campaign around policy that could significantly improve the lives of returning community members. See the [Center for American Progress](#) articles on “Second Chances” for reform ideas.

Act Link up with an existing campaign

Find organizations in your area that work in re-entry, such as:

- [Exodus](#) in East Harlem, supports reentry with a holistic approach, focusing on six areas: family, employment, education, health, community and spirituality, emphasizing trauma-informed care. Most staff are formerly justice-involved.
- [Sponsors](#) in Eugene, Oregon, offers transitional housing, employment services, mental health support and mentoring to help people rebuild their lives after incarceration.
- [Muslim Re-Entry Initiative](#) in New Orleans provides mentorship, housing, transportation, food, counseling and financial support to recently-freed Muslims.
- [The Anti Recidivism Coalition](#) (ARC) in California empowers formerly incarcerated individuals with reentry services and policy advocacy to reform the justice system.
- [A New Way of Life](#) Reentry Project provides housing, legal aid, case management and leadership development for those rebuilding their lives after prison.

TAKING ACTION

Pray with Your Feet

“I prayed for freedom for 20 years, but received no answer. Until I prayed with my legs.”

– Frederick Douglass

“I prayed with my feet.”

– Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, returning from the Selma voting rights march, when asked when he had time to pray

“Silence is akin to complicity.”

–Talmud Yevamot 87b

(This Jewish teaching reminds us that remaining silent in the face of injustice is an active choice – a form of tacit consent. Allowing an injustice to persist unchallenged is, in essence, committing an injustice yourself.)

“Whoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand [by taking action]; if he cannot, then with his tongue [by speaking out]; and if he cannot, then he should hate it in his heart, but that is the weakest form of faith.”

– The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)