



**Center for  
Employment  
Opportunities**

**NYS Assembly & NYS Senate Joint Standing Committees: Exploring solutions to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities**

**Monday, May 18, 2020**

The Center for Employment Opportunities, Inc. (CEO) has long provided and continues to provide essential services in New York through our transitional jobs and vocational service program for recently released individuals. CEO's program has been deemed essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other things, CEO's program provides (i) basic necessities to economically disadvantaged populations, (ii) building cleaning and maintenance, and (iii) landscaping, and (iv) essential services necessary to maintain the safety, sanitation and essential operations of residences or other businesses.

**Responding to COVID**

During this crisis, we have been doing everything we can to maintain our core services in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester and Albany. Many weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, CEO has remained fully engaged in its emergency relief efforts to support formerly incarcerated job seekers. We have converted all vocational services and central staff to a work from home configuration, in which staff engage participants remotely. For transitional work crews that can stay open, we have instituted protocols to safely operate teams using guidance from the CDC and other public health authorities. We continue to offer remote paid training options and coaching sessions for participants, even those who cannot attend work crews, to maintain engagement.

CEO has already responded to emergency requests in New York City, the epicenter of the outbreak, from a variety of government agencies: :

- Because CEO's crew model provides city government with the flexibility to adjust workforce as needs change, one of our largest New York City customers (NYC DCAS) on short notice requested more crews to support cleaning and sanitation needs for courthouses and other municipal buildings during the during the first two weeks of the pandemic.

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- On April 1, NYC MOCJ made an emergency request for CEO to provide staff to support the city in releasing more than 100 people from Rikers Island who were incarcerated on technical parole violations and currently homeless. When the city released these individuals to a local hotel, CEO staff began providing daily wellness and safety checks with these individuals.
- Additionally, NYCHA requested that we add additional crews to support their cleaning and sanitation needs for city housing agencies, which launched on April 27. NYCHA has stated that it views CEO crews as essential workers.

Across the state, our priority remains channeling resources to formerly incarcerated New Yorkers to allow them to put food on the table, find upward mobility, and avoid recidivism. This is critical because our participants come from some of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester and Albany. Participants are primarily people of color, mirroring the demographics of the prison system, and 45% are young adults between the ages of 18-25.

### **COVID's Impact on Communities of Color**

The U.S Centers for Disease Control indicates that “current data suggest a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups.”<sup>1</sup> According to the NYC Department of Health, people of color made up 24% of COVID cases, 72% of hospitalizations and 88% of deaths in New York City.<sup>2</sup> Prisons have become incubators for the virus with growing rates of infection endangering inmates and staff. According to a report from the Marshall Project, New York State has experienced 16 inmate deaths and 28 staff have died from COVID.<sup>3</sup>

As the state and local jails release persons from incarceration to combat the epidemic there is an increased need to provide support for these individuals. Many Returning Citizens will not be eligible for the federal relief being offered. They will return to communities already reeling from the COVID crisis. The national unemployment rate grew to 14.7% in April; white unemployment was below the average at 14.2% while African-American unemployment stood at 16.7%.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Disease Control. See:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>

<sup>2</sup> NYC Hospitals.

See: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-deaths-race-ethnicity-04162020-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Marshall Project COVID Tracking Project: A State by State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons. See:

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>

<sup>4</sup> US DOL (Friday, May 8) Employment Situation Summary. See:

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

Unemployment among the formerly incarcerated was already at Great Depression levels prior to COVID-- 27% according to one analysis.<sup>5</sup>

To address the disparate impact on communities of color, CEO recommends the following:

- **Work to Maintain the Capacity of Nonprofits:** The state must support nonprofit partners during this difficult time. This crisis has hit the nonprofit community unbelievably hard - the organizations that serve the most vulnerable in our state have struggled to operate through COVID-19, despite the fact that their services are in demand now more than ever. The state must continue to fund nonprofits providing essential services, and register existing contracts to make sure nonprofits are paid for work they do throughout this crisis - otherwise, the state will jeopardize the services in recovery that support communities of color.
- **Release More Incarcerated People with Support Services:** The state should move to safely release many more people from prisons and jails across the state and use alternatives to incarceration to prevent, where safely possible, admitting new entrants. New York has been a leader in reducing incarceration and crime, and this has been possible through community justice partnerships with nonprofits across the state.
- **Improve Access to SNAP Employment and Training Resources:** Now more than ever it is critical that the state leverage federal resources through the SNAP program to address food security and economic mobility for vulnerable New Yorkers. The SNAP E&T 50/50 program facilitates access to employment services for SNAP recipients by reimbursing 50 percent of all non-federal funding spent on our reentry employment services for SNAP recipients. More than a dozen service providers and workforce coalitions in New York have recommended OTDA make changes to increase the availability of SNAP E&T funding and streamline the program so providers can better access these funds.

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<sup>5</sup>Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people (July 2018) See: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

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