

2019 Social Innovation Summit: Pathways to Opportunity
Panel on Careers for Justice-Involved Individuals: *What We Learned*

EVENT DETAILS

Date: March 29, 2019

Location: University of Southern California

Speakers:

- Beverly Parenti, Co-Founder, The Last Mile
- Shanae Polk, Program Director, 2nd Call
- Efty Sharony, Director, Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Reentry
- Jeffery T.D. Wallace, President & CEO, LeadersUp
- Moderator: John MacDonald, Professor of Criminology & Sociology, University of Pennsylvania

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Justice-involved individuals face many significant barriers to effectively re-entering society after incarceration. Lack of employment opportunities, unfair background checks, and mental health issues all undermine their ability to establish stability for themselves and their families. On March 29, 2019 panelists at the Social Innovation Summit held at the University of Southern California discussed these barriers and strategies to overcome them. Panelists concluded that by reshaping the narrative, providing complementary services, and leveraging the power of storytelling, organizations can use social innovation approaches to build and preserve pathways to opportunity for justice-involved individuals.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY

Surveys of re-entrants by the Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Reentry found that obtaining stable, legal employment represents the single most significant barrier to successful reintegration. Even a minor conviction can substantially limit employment opportunities and inconsistent employment undermines an individual's ability to meet basic needs like the provision of food, housing, and security for themselves and their families. Jeffery T.D. Wallace, President & CEO of LeadersUp shared with the panel that youth unemployment is 40% higher in south Los Angeles than the rest of the country, showing the untapped financial resource that opportunity youth should present for companies and communities.

In addition to the shortage of employment opportunities, panelists unanimously condemned background checks as a substantial roadblock to successful re-entry for justice-involved individuals. Background checks uncover parts of a criminal record completely unrelated to a conviction or a court case, meaning reentrants are unfairly judged by potential employers for activities they never received due process on. This, in turn, "pinches the pipeline of talent" by allowing a criminal justice system that disproportionately impacts people of color to systematically marginalize a segment of the population and exclude them from economic participation.

On top of employment, panelists highlighted the difficulties reentrants face in terms of mental health and self-doubt. By the time justice-involved individuals leave institutions, they have already built up mental walls that actively drain the self-esteem they need to apply to better jobs. They are left without the interview skills, self-confidence, and advice or counseling from a peer that can empathize with their background that they need to re-establish themselves as valuable members of their communities. Only by developing these internal strengths can reentrants build the capacity and healthy mind needed to overcome barriers to gainful employment and sufficiently restore a measure of security and normality in their lives.

PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY

In the face of these barriers, the panel spoke on a number of important steps going forward. First, panelists agreed that work needs to focus on combating stigma and changing the narrative surrounding formerly incarcerated individuals in the private sector. Bringing companies into institutions so that they can sit one-on-one with inmates and realize shared values allows organizations to shape the cultural perspective of potential employers. This encourages self-reflection by companies on the role that they can play in improving their communities by guiding and supporting re-entrants. Wallace described this as the following pitch: “95% of people in [prison] are returning home...they are future members of your community...who do you want them to be?” This messaging reframes the conversation about fair chance hiring practices in terms of benefitting a company’s bottom line and supporting their communities.



Panelists also emphasized the importance of supporting reentrants in other areas tangential to employment outcomes. Efty Sharony, Director of the Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Reentry, spoke about her office's comprehensive approach to reentry based on the understanding that sometimes a job alone is insufficient. Reentrants also need behavioral health services and civic services such as help with expungements, restoring licenses, child support, and securing housing. Shanae Polk, Program Director at 2nd Call, also highlighted the essential role that counseling and peer navigation play in ensuring that reentrants have the foundation of strong mental health and confidence requisite to make progress in other areas of reintegration. Improving these support services has a feedback effect that makes overcoming the employment hurdle significantly less intimidating and more clearly within individuals' grasp.

The panel also shared how story-telling and narrative building can fill the role of data in illustrating an organization's track record and justifying further funding. Data is important, but not all nonprofits have the time and resources they need to track, display, and fully leverage data. As a result, many organizations can use story-telling to secure the additional funding needed to scale up their work and further expand pathways to opportunity. Sharing success stories can go a long way to illustrating the importance of a program, such as the story of panelist Shanae Polk. With the support of 2nd Call, upon re-entry Polk successfully identified her anger management issues, found the counseling she needed to overcome them, and started a career giving back by serving as a peer navigator for reentrants. Similarly, Beverly Parenti, Co-Founder at The Last Mile, noted the importance of shifting the narrative to remove the stigma around incarceration. As Wallace noted, this stigma affects 70 million Americans – one out of every three. Shifting the narrative to better support justice-involved individuals reentering the workforce is an important first step in catalyzing the policy changes needed to expand opportunity for this population.