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## A New Pipeline: Building a Transformative Leadership Pipeline for formerly incarcerated individuals

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

**A New Pipeline:  
Building a Transformative Leadership Pipeline for formerly incarcerated individuals**

by

Jacqueline Aguilar

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Capstone Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Master of Nonprofit Administration Degree  
in the School of Management  
directed by Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III

San Francisco, California

Spring 2023

*I dedicate this Capstone Research report to those who have been impacted by the justice system.*

## **Abstract**

While developing leadership roles for employers is critical to running an effective organization, building a bridge for those who have directly lived experiences regarding its mission is critical. Bringing back community members you have served to your organization is highly recommended and essential. This capstone research report will focus on building a leadership pipeline for formerly incarcerated individuals within the nonprofit sector. Returning community members can often be tokenized and are never given the tools and resources to develop as a leader. This report will outline the barriers formerly incarcerated individuals face while providing a foundation on the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and cultivating an inclusive leadership style within organizations. This research aims for nonprofits to invest and develop a more inclusive hiring process and build a leadership pipeline for returning community members. With the data collected, the research examines and offers three recommendations based on the needs and voices of returning community members.

*Keywords:* formerly incarcerated, leadership, leadership pipeline, nonprofit, justice-involved

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## **Section 1: Introduction**

Despite the nonprofit sector's diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives, the industry still does not accurately represent the communities it serves. There is a lack of representation of people of color and those with lived experiences, particularly in leadership positions. Ultimately, this disparity affects the organization's effectiveness in delivering its mission. Nonprofit organizations need to develop a more inclusive leadership pipeline that represents the community it serves because those leaders understand community needs, there is trust and credibility, and lastly, it involves a more inclusive decision-making process. Having leaders representing the communities that nonprofit organizations serve is crucial for ensuring that those organizations can successfully meet the needs and issues of those areas. History has shown that decisions have been made for those who are underrepresented. To be a DEIB-committed organization, you must allow those you serve in the decision-making process; they must have a seat and say at the table.

While there may be efforts to create a plan for those who reflect the community, this research report focuses on how nonprofit organizations can build a pipeline to leadership for formerly incarcerated individuals. This report defines the term formerly incarcerated as those who have interacted with the criminal justice system and now live in the community. The report will also interchangeably use returning community members or those with prior-justice system involvement. The transition from incarceration to the community is not a new phenomenon, and the constraints one faces to reentry are difficult. It is to be noted that Black, Indigenous, and



People of Color (BIPOC) are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system and face even more significant challenges and barriers. This report cultivates the bigger picture of increasing the diversity of leaders in the nonprofit sector that accurately represents the community.

Data was collected through a literature review and interviews to build a pipeline for returning community members in the nonprofit sector. The literature review outlines the obstacles formerly incarcerated individuals face entering the community, the importance of being a DEIB-committed organization, and how to foster an inclusive leadership style. The interviews provided a unique perspective of those impacted by the justice system and now in leadership positions. The data displayed different themes regarding the tools and resources needed to build a pipeline to leadership. It is critical to understand that those impacted by the justice system are unique because they require different needs, support, and resources to address their challenges and barriers. Often, underrepresented communities may be tokenized as a performative action. This report examines and analyzes further how organizations can create a supportive environment by implementing the “Six-Step Inclusive Leadership Pipeline.”

There needs to be a pipeline to leadership for returning community members as they bring in a different perspective, such as understanding the community needs that will ensure the implementation of the right programs. It builds trust and credibility, and community members are inclined to engage and participate more if leaders come from the same lived experiences. Lastly, organizations with leaders that reflect the community are more likely to engage in inclusive

decision-making, considering everyone's perspective. Overall, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: What barriers do formerly incarcerated individuals face that could impact their leadership journey in the nonprofit sector?
- RQ2: What organizations have helped formerly incarcerated individuals develop as leaders?
- RQ3: What can organizations do to build a pathway to leadership for formerly incarcerated individuals in the workplace?

## **Section 2: Literature Review**

### **Barriers Returning Community Members Face**

In order to build a leader who is returning to the community, it is essential to look at the barriers they face. Returning community members face many hardships, and it is critical to note the challenges they may face once released to understand where they are coming from and their needs fully.

Unquestionably, the United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world. In perspective, the U.S. criminal justice system holds almost 2 million people in different facilities. This includes state and federal prisons, local jails, juvenile correctional facilities, and other institutions (Swayer & Wagner, 2023). While more than 600,000 people released from prison undergo the challenge of transitioning back into the community (Carson, 2018). Returning community members face tremendous challenges, including access to housing, education, voting rights, health care, and, most importantly, employment. I will be going into greater detail about

those barriers but will note that I will discuss the employment gap formerly incarcerated individuals face in a different section.

People who have served longer sentences face even more drastic challenges than those who have served shorter sentences. This is not to say those who served a shorter sentence do not face challenges. This is because serving longer time causes barriers that impact an individual's employment opportunities, family support, and mental health to a greater extent. For example, individuals who have been incarcerated for a long time may have difficulty finding employment due to the social stigma associated with a record and lack of work experience. Also, those serving longer sentences could find it more challenging to build relationships with loved ones who may have gone on with their lives during their time in prison. Needless to say, all returning community members face complex institutional challenges. However, it is critical to address these issues and provide these individuals with the support and resources they need to reintegrate into society successfully.

Before considering education, employment, health care, and other rights for returning community members, we must consider housing security. Housing is vital to transitioning to the community; it serves as a solid foundation that can positively impact their transition. Unfortunately, access to housing, let alone affordable housing, is very challenging. Due to housing barriers, “formerly incarcerated individuals are 10 times more likely to face homelessness than the general public.” (Couloute, 2018). “People who have been incarcerated more than once, people recently released from prison, and people of color and women” face higher rates of homelessness, according to Prison Policy Initiative (Couloute, 2018). Several factors can cause housing insecurity in this demographic. Property owners and landlords have the

discretion to list eligibility requirements that may place systemic barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals, such as criminal record checks that can be used against them even after serving their sentence (Couloute, 2018). Other requirements such as a credit report, ridiculously high-security deposits, and references place huge roadblocks for returning community members. Ultimately, housing is a vital process for returning community members. It provides a stable foundation to benefit their employment opportunities, connect with their community, and improve their mental health.

Amongst housing inequalities for returning community members, they face inadequate health care disparities. Affordable healthcare in the U.S. is already challenging enough and even more difficult for formerly incarcerated individuals. During a 2008 study, returning community members were roughly “three times more likely to report being unable to see a doctor for health problems or dentist” due to exorbitant costs (Kulkarni et al., 2010, p. 270). Adequate healthcare amongst formerly incarcerated individuals is essential for a successful transition. It helps with physical and mental health, making reentry less difficult. Addressing health concerns for returning community members promotes a healthy lifestyle, which can help with reentry challenges.

In the United States, formerly incarcerated people face massive voting rights disenfranchisement; in 48 states, some laws prohibit those with felony convictions from voting, and in 2022 roughly 4.6 million people were not eligible to vote due to these laws and policies (Uggen et al., 2022). Restoring voting rights for returning community members is one of the critical steps in allowing individuals to transition to society. As a society, we can only expect individuals to return successfully by giving them the right to exercise their voting rights.

Proposition 17 was approved in California in 2020, allowing people on parole to vote (Uggen et al., 2022). Restoring voting rights to formerly incarcerated individuals is beneficial not only for them but for society as well. For instance, voting increases civic engagement; it allows returning community members to participate in civic life and have a say in policies that ultimately affect them and their community. Voting is a fundamental human right, and denying this right to returning community members places a huge obstacle than they already face.

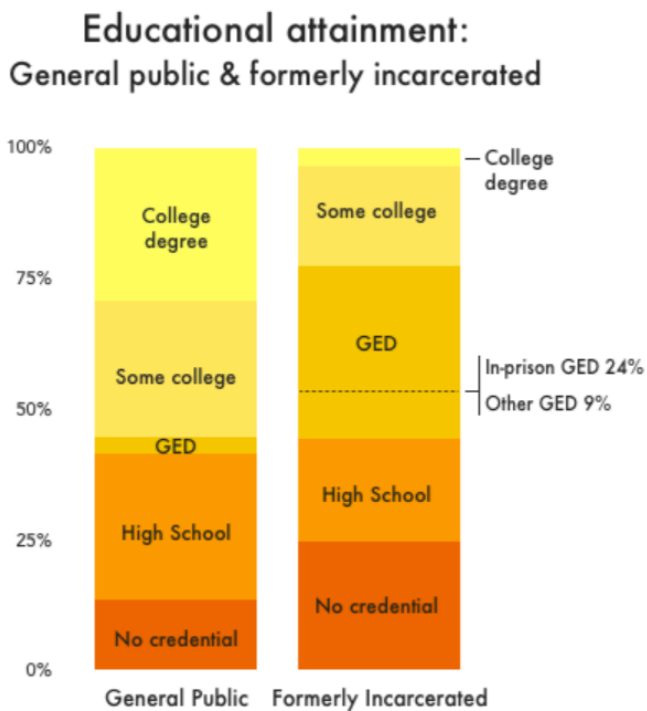
Moreover, another significant challenge returning community members experience is the lack of accessible education. Education is a right to which everyone should have equal access, but for returning community members, this may be different. First, I emphasize that education can be a powerful tool in assisting formerly incarcerated individuals to reintegrate into society. Education can be beneficial in increasing your chances of employment opportunities and improving mental health and social connections. Someone with some certification, vocational training, GED, or college degree is more likely to obtain employment, which can lead to financial stability. Education can improve mental health by increasing “prosocial attitudes, moral reasoning, improving self-esteem, and self-efficacy.” Additionally, education can assist individuals in developing decision-making skills that can improve overall cognitive functions—all of which benefit the individual working towards transitioning to the community (Brazzell et al., 2009, p. 17).

Access to education is equally vital while incarcerated, if not more important. When accessing educational opportunities while incarcerated, individuals work toward personal growth before returning to the community. One person impacted by the justice system states the following:

Inmates would like to have the same educational opportunities as people on the streets. Exercising our minds with healthy educational opportunities and preparing ourselves to transition back into society is . . . important for everyone. — FRANK, A STUDENT INCARCERATED IN VIRGINIA (Brazzell et al., 2009, p. 2)

Equitable access to education is challenging for current and formerly incarcerated individuals; however, they face significant inequalities when obtaining a college degree. For instance, “People incarcerated in state and federal prisons, with limited exceptions, **are ineligible for federal Pell Grants and federal student loans**” (Couloute, 2018). Students who have been convicted of a drug offense while previously receiving federal aid, or who have been involuntarily civilly committed for a sex offense, are ineligible for federal aid even after serving their sentences.” However, the Free Application for Student Federal Aid states that drug convictions no longer affect federal student aid eligibility. In most cases, you would be eligible for student funding if you were released on probation or parole. Nevertheless, those who have “if you’ve been convicted of a forcible or nonforcible sexual offense and you’re subject to an involuntary civil commitment upon completion of a period of incarceration for that offense, you’re not eligible to receive Federal Pell Grants” (*Eligibility for Students With Criminal Convictions*, 2021) Even receiving financial aid is difficult to access. A study done by the Policy Prison Initiative states, “Formerly incarcerated people are **8 times less likely to complete college** than the general public” (Couloute, 2018). The figure below illustrates the educational attainment of formerly incarcerated individuals compared to the general population:

**Figure 1: Comparing the highest level of educational attainment for formerly incarcerated people (age 25+) to the general public (age 25+)**



Source: *Couloute , 2018*

These specific barriers were listed as the main reason to display the challenges returning community members face and to understand where they are coming from. We must meet people where they are. These systemic barriers place a considerable burden that can lead to a difficult reintegration. To foster a leader, we need to understand the context of their need to give them the tools and resources necessary to succeed. As noted earlier, housing, healthcare, voting rights, and employment are all essential and play a role in a successful transition to the community. Overall, returning community members have great potential to develop leadership skills; their unique

experiences and perspectives offer great insight and perspective on some of the most pressing issues we face today.

### **Employment Disparity**

The criminal justice literature on reentry has indicated that employment is one of the most critical components in a returning community member's transition to society. A report conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics states that of 51,500 persons released from the Federal Bureau of Prisons in 2010, a shocking 33% did not obtain employment over the course of four years. Moreover, that percentage never exceeded 40% during the four-year population study (Carson et al., 2021, p. 6). A 2017 report titled *Back to Business: How Hiring Formerly Incarcerated Job Seekers Benefits Your Company* shares that “nearly 75 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals are still unemployed a year after release” (Trone et al., 2017, p.4).

There are a significant number of obstacles that formerly incarcerated individuals face to acquire employment. One of the difficulties returning community members encounter is the social stigma and discrimination associated with having a criminal record. Many employers hesitate to hire a person with prior justice system involvement because of unfavorable preconceptions such as their capacity to do the work, lack of experience, or fear that they will be untrustworthy. Hiring returning community members positively impacts them, their families, and the community. Another barrier they may face is government policies that hinder their process of obtaining licensing that will assist them in securing employment. For instance, 17 states have enacted laws that limit the eligibility of persons with prior justice system involvement (Love & Schlusser, 2019, p. 8). Obtaining occupational licensing could help them transition by increasing their income and confidence in getting back on their feet. Lastly, returning community members



may lack work experience, which can be detrimental to their transition. Some may not have many resources available to help with job readiness when released. Ultimately, the adversities people with prior justice involvement face in obtaining employment are substantial and multifaceted.

While returning community members make an effort to transition back to civility life, not being able to secure employment can negatively affect families. One study shared a 22% decline in the average child's family income when the parental father was incarcerated; the year after release, it remained 15% lower (Johnson, 2009, p.187). This can lead to poverty, a difficult family upbringing, and a challenging transition for the parental figure. However, when an individual with prior justice involvement obtains employment, there is a positive impact. For instance, authors From Prison to Work: The Employment Dimensions of Prisoner Reentry state:

Research has also suggested that work has benefits that reach multiple levels, including the individual, family, community, and societal levels. Individual-level benefits include rehabilitation—work offers former prisoners an opportunity to develop new roles as productive members of society. Holding a job serves as an important signal that the individual is moving toward a crime-free lifestyle. Perhaps most importantly, employment can increase the skill level, breadth of job experience, and earning levels of former prisoners (Soloman et al., 2004).

Thus, as noted above, employment is critical for a successful transition for the returning community member and the family. One individual impacted by the justice system shares his story of securing employment and what it did for him:

Tim was just six days out of prison when he attended a job fair hosted by ResCare and found himself at the eWaste Tech booth. During the interview process, Tim explained the circumstances surrounding his conviction. Mr. Wright recalled, “He came up and said to me: If you give me this chance, I will never ever let you down.” Mr. Wright hired him on the spot, and Tim began training later that week. Tim now runs the shop floor, overseeing the work of all the warehouse and technical employees. There are dozens of stories like his at the company (Trone et al., 2017, p. 21)

While Tim’s story was a success, many did and do not have the same experience. When formerly incarcerated individuals obtain employment, studies show they are often paid less than the general public and exploited to work back-breaking jobs. To support this, a report from the Prison Policy Initiative notes, “In the first few months, formerly incarcerated people were earning just 53% of the median US worker’s wage” (Wang & Bertram, 2022). The image below compares the general public and formerly incarcerated individuals earning wages:

**Figure 2: Formerly incarcerated people earn far less than the general population**



Source: *Wang & Bertram, 2022*

Although returning community members encounter numerous barriers to obtaining employment, there has been considerable progress. A number of laws and policies have been enacted to remove these obstacles, for example, Ban The Box, The Fair Chance Business Pledge, and record sealing. In 2019, the Ban The Box campaign was passed, where 37 states adopted the policy to end employment discrimination against formerly incarcerated individuals. This policy requires employers to remove questions associated with having a criminal record, the box that reads: “Have you been convicted of a felony?” (Avery & Lu, 2021, p. 2). Evans shares, “Ban the Box is a campaign to end structural discrimination — discrimination directed against everyone who has a past conviction, without consideration for individual circumstances.” (Evans, 2016,

p.8). The campaign did not stop there; the movement now asked the nonprofit sector to support this phenomenon by taking the Fair Chance Pledge. The goal was to propel the nonprofit sector to hire and recruit returning community members as staff, board members, or volunteer positions (Evans, 2016). This pledge states as follows:

As an *employer*, I pledge...

To hire and support the formerly incarcerated

To support the elimination of any restrictions on participation that may exclude the formerly  
incarcerated

To encourage others to also institute fair hiring practices

*(Take the Fair Chance Pledge!, n.d.)*

The White House launched The Fair Chance Pledge in 2016, geared toward the private sector for big corporations and companies. It was “a call-to-action for all private sector members to improve their communities by eliminating barriers for those with a criminal record and creating a pathway for a second chance” (The White House, 2016). These efforts have helped remove barriers for those seeking employment after returning to the community, dismantling the cycle of recidivism and supporting a reintegration process.

In addition, record sealing allows returning community members to have their records expunged, lessening the obstacles when finding employment and thus increasing earnings. To substantiate this, research has revealed that within three years of record sealing participants, “earnings grew from \$4,000 below baseline to nearly \$2,000 above baseline, a significant magnitude (\$6,000) equal to roughly one-third of total average earnings (Selbin et al., 2017, p. 8). Though many have been successful due to these efforts, developing an inclusive work

environment is critical. We cannot tokenize returning community members just to say that your organization or company is committed to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging. This goes for both the nonprofit and private sectors. Investing in them to help them on their leadership path requires more effort.

As my research focuses on leadership development, it is critical to highlight the employment obstacles. The nonprofit sector is also part of the employment sector. They can start by removing barriers and unlocking their potential. We must work collaboratively to help our returning community members climb the ladder to leadership.

### **DEIB Commitment**

With the recent push for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, ultimately, organizations and companies tend to focus on race, gender, age, and other diverse characteristics. More often than not, formerly incarcerated individuals are excluded from this class. The terms DEIB are incorporated into organizational principles, and to address implicit biases, diversity trainings are offered without delivering any actual change in policies and procedures from the organization. In other words, organizations and companies need to fully commit to putting their words into action. Especially for nonprofits dedicated to fighting criminal justice issues is their mission; if you are not bringing back some of your clients or hiring returning community members, what does that say about your organization's commitment to DEIB?

By now, it is clear that returning community members face systemic barriers when securing employment. DEIB is typically discussed during the hiring process but must continue in the organization's culture. If it does not continue, it serves no purpose to state that you are a DEIB-committed organization. In an article titled, What is DEI Doing for the Formerly

Incarcerated?, Barton shares that “denying people the jobs they need to support themselves, their families, and their health only contributes to the larger systemic inequalities that DEI is intended to resolve” (Barton, 2021). Furthermore, in the piece, Barton presents Michelle Cirocco, the Chief Social Responsibility Officer for Televerde, a company dedicated to training incarcerated women for release. In Cirocco’s words, “Inclusion means everyone,” meaning DEI initiatives have the potential and capacity to increase equity and inclusion for all individuals (Barton, 2021).

What can organizations or companies do actually to incorporate DEIB efforts? Ferguson, a certified diversity executive (CDE), shares a list of recommendations the workforce should implement to ensure an equitable workplace:

- Get in touch with local community organizations. Across the country, there are hundreds of service providers who specialize in connecting formerly-incarcerated people with available jobs.
- Remove criminal record questions from your job application forms. Don’t ask about someone’s criminal background until the interview, and preferably not until you’ve made a conditional job offer.
- Use inclusive language in your job postings. Avoid phrases like “convicted felon” and “ex-offender.” Instead, note that any applicants with criminal records will be evaluated on an individual basis and clearly note that cultivating experiential diversity in your team is part of your diversity, equity and inclusion efforts (Ferguson, 2022).

Baxter, author of *We Are All Criminals*, shares that “employers play a big part in changing the mindset toward people with criminal records” (Baxter, 2017). While these recommendations focus on DEIB for the application process, I will add some recommendations that will continue the efforts in the organization's culture. These recommendations are drawn and inspired by Fresh Lifelines For Youth, where I am employed. Employers should not assume everyone has the financial capacity to purchase professional clothing. Offering a stipend to cover those expenses can help individuals in their professional development, and it goes a long way in supporting employees. However, it also creates a sense of confidence. Second, offering special development pieces of training throughout the year creates an inclusive environment. It is essential to recognize that not every employee has developed professional skills, and there are always areas for improvement. For example, offering training for new professionals where the area of focus includes: how to show up to meetings (i.e., dressed well and being prepared), communication with your team and supervisor, and developing well-written professional emails. These are just a few examples of incorporating DEIB efforts within your workplace for formerly incarcerated individuals and beyond. DEIB initiatives that support their employee's professional development increase retention and engagement.

This capstone project is dedicated to researching how nonprofit organizations can foster an inclusive leadership pipeline for returning community members. It is critical that I address the systemic barriers and the lack of DEIB efforts for the formerly incarcerated because if we want to develop leaders, we need first to understand their challenges to assist them by giving them the tools and resources needed to unlock their potential in the world.

## **Fostering Inclusive Leadership**

Leadership development is critical in the nonprofit sector; typically, 501(c)(3) organizations serve the public in addressing social issues, which requires a solid and effective leadership team to achieve the organization's mission. A strong and effective leadership team also creates a healthy work environment that cultivates employee retention and engagement and promotes professional development. The nonprofit sector carries many leadership styles: transformational, servant, transactional, inclusive, and more. As discussed earlier, the focus of this research is how nonprofit organizations can build a leadership pipeline for those who were formerly incarcerated. In order to start that pipeline, organizations must evaluate their internal leadership styles. The first step for organizations that seek to invest in returning community members as leaders is to establish an inclusive leadership style in their current organizational culture. Bourke and Titus define inclusive leadership as “assures team members feel respected, valued, included, confident, and inspired (Bourke & Titus, 2019).

To create a culture of inclusion, leaders within the organization must carry inclusive characteristics. The figure below by Bourke and Dillon (2016) describes the six main traits of inclusive leaders:



**Figure 3: The six signature traits of an inclusive leader**



Graphic: Deloitte University Press | DUPress.com

Source: *Bourke & Titus, 2019*

Cognizance, Curiosity, Cultural intelligence, Collaboration, Commitment, and Courage are all characteristics that leaders should practice. Fostering inclusive leadership allows employees to feel empowered and supported in their work, which creates a pipeline of upward mobility. A strong organizational culture is when employees feel a sense of belonging and inclusion, enabling a feeling of equity and fairness. This is where organizations must start bridging that pipeline to leadership for returning community members. If the organization is not inclusive, it can be detrimental to the culture and the communities you serve. One report states

that “Inclusive organizations, on the other hand, not only have diverse individuals involved but, more important, they are learning-centered organizations that value the perspectives and contributions of all people, and they incorporate the needs, assets, and perspectives of communities of color into the design and implementation of universal and inclusive programs” (Arno et al., 2013, p.16 ).

Developing inclusive leaders is critical, but the organizational culture should also be inclusive. For instance, Gough, Jr recommends that nonprofit organizations follow this list if it is dedicated to inclusion. Gough’s first recommendation is “Be sure that all policies, practices, programs, services, and activities promote equity and equality regarding gender, ethnicity, and age, and include a range of races, nationalities, religions, physical and mental abilities, sexual orientations, and income levels” (Gough, 2005, p. 139) This recommendation is a great example of actionable steps to inclusiveness. However, the list should include those with lived experiences. As mentioned above, returning community members are often left out of this list. Another recommendation he gave was “Include these same categories of people in the decision-making process and the implementation of the organization’s policies” (Gough, 2005, p. 140) We have to invite people to the table to speak on matters that affect them, I am a huge advocate for listening to our people's voices and needs.

If our current leaders are not inclusive, how are we supposed to develop returning community members as leaders? It would be extremely difficult, but the point is to foster a space where formerly incarcerated individuals feel supported and invested. We build leaders by believing in them and giving them the confidence, tools, and resources needed. To start this

pipeline, the nonprofit sector must develop inclusive leaders because it allows organizations to empower employees, in this case, returning community members, to be great leaders.

### **Section 3: Methods and Approaches**

This research aims to determine how nonprofits can build a pipeline to leadership for returning community members. This capstone uses a mixed-method approach to analyzing primary and secondary data resources to achieve that. The primary data uses qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with three community leaders in the nonprofit sector in northern California who had prior justice system involvement. The secondary data collection uses quantitative and qualitative data from a literature review of books, peer-reviewed articles, and reports regarding leadership in the nonprofit sector, barriers formerly incarcerated individuals face, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace.

#### **Interviews**

Primary data was collected from three semi-structured interviews; interviewees had some form of prior justice involvement and are leaders within their community and organizations. The participants were selected using purposive sampling; first, I developed a broad list of potential interviewees with those experiences. All interviewees were contacted through various platforms due to my different connections with the participants. One interviewee was contacted through LinkedIn, one was connected via email through their supervisor, and one was introduced to me via word of mouth. Interviewees expressed appreciation and gratitude for participating in my capstone project. Interviews were semi-structured, where I asked eight questions regarding their

experiences and leadership development in the nonprofit sector and shifted depending on the interviewee. The questions asked during the interview include the following:

1. Would you please share a bit about your background, professionally or academically?
2. What interested you about working in the nonprofit sector?
3. How did you acquire your current position?
4. What institutional challenges have you faced in your leadership journey in the nonprofit sector?
5. Have you had any training, coaching, or mentoring that helped you in your leadership journey? If so, can you describe what it was like?
6. Have any organizations or nonprofits helped you develop professional characteristics/skills?
7. What is something you wish the nonprofit industry understood about formerly incarcerated individuals joining the workforce?
8. What 2-3 recommendations would you give to nonprofit organizations to set up formerly incarcerated individuals up for success in their leadership journey?

All three interviews were conducted via Zoom and took roughly 45 minutes to an hour to complete. Interviewees verbally consented to be recorded at the beginning of the interview, and the video was coded to analyze information and major findings to answer the main research questions.

The three interviewees included the following nonprofit and community leaders: Joseph “Joe” Calderon is the Lead Community Health Worker/National Trainer for Transitions Clinic Network. Calderon was sentenced to life in prison at 23 and was incarcerated for 17 years and three days. Since his release, he has served on the San Francisco Reentry Council and the Equity Advisory Committee with the San Francisco Human Rights Commission and completed San Francisco City College’s Post-Prison Health Worker certificate program. Calderon has just launched his consulting firm to advance health equity, and he continues to be a community leader and advocate for social justice. He is referred to as Interviewee 1.

The second interviewee was Lucero Herrera, the Lead Organizer in San Francisco for the Young Women’s Freedom Center. Herrera was system-involved at a young age; she was charged as an adult at 17 and released from prison at 22. Since her release, Herrera has been a huge advocate and organizer in her community, passionate about reforming criminal justice policies amongst young people. She is referred to as Interviewee 2.

The third interviewee was Joanna Hernandez, the Co-Founder of Young Queens on the Rise and Director of Strategic Partnerships for the San Francisco Pretrial Diversion Project, was the third interviewee. Hernandez is a well-known community leader in the Bay Area, advocating for criminal justice reforms and mentoring young women. Hernandez was formerly justice-involved as a young teen, and soon after, she was dedicated to inspiring others to make better decisions. She has served on the San Francisco Sentencing Commission and is the Re-entry Violence and Intervention Committee Chair for the San Francisco Latino Task Force. She is referred to as Interviewee 3.

### **Professional Experience and Viewpoint**

First, I acknowledge my academic and professional background relevant to my capstone research project. I hold a Bachelor's in Criminal Justice, where I have studied and researched the reentry population for over three years. This background has given me the foundational principles of the criminal justice system in the United States and the obstacles returning community members face. I also want to recognize some limitations within my professional experience: I have only worked in the nonprofit sector for a year. Therefore, I only have one year of direct service experience with returning community members as a Reentry Program Coordinator at Fresh Lifelines For Youth. In addition, my experience has been solely based on working with young people between the ages of 13-25. Although I have been working with the reentry community, it is essential to understand where my knowledge and experience come from.

Second, I would like to disclose that I have never been justice-involved, nor do I have close relatives who have been. Conducting this capstone research may involve possible ethics issues, given my point of view and privilege. When I speak on barriers returning community members face, this has been based on academic literature reviews and my observation as a Reentry Program Coordinator this past year. There may be some constraints given my point of view on this research based on my short experience in the nonprofit sector and my organization.

### **Research Aspirations and Community Benefits**

This project is a starting point or template for the nonprofit and private sectors to hire returning community members and build a leadership pipeline for them. Again, returning community members deserve a second chance; more often than not, they may have never had a chance. This report provides a perspective and understanding of the systemic challenges

community members face and detailed recommendations on how nonprofit organizations can build the pipeline to leadership. Hopefully, this project encourages the nonprofit sector to focus on a greater range of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts for returning community members. Finally, this report benefits everyone; the workforce, returning community members, society, friends, and loved ones.

#### **Section 4: Data Analysis**

These interviewees are an essential part of the research. It was important for me to have the voices of those impacted by the justice system speak about their experiences and how organizations can cultivate a supportive environment. Based on the three research questions, the following data analysis table represents major themes, subcategories, and exemplar quotations from the interviews.

**Table 1: Displays the themes with subcategories for RQ1, collected via semi-structured interviews**

RQ1. What barriers do formerly incarcerated individuals face that could impact their leadership journey in the nonprofit sector?	
Theme #1: Collateral Consequences of the System	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Education and	<p>“Challenges I would face is, I would love to have a degree, but from my background, economically, it doesn't make sense right now. Having a house, a bill, being considered possibly successful, and such. I think having a record against me and in many ways hurts me, even though I've been able to utilize it as a part of my success, which is rare, right.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“I'm still paying San Francisco about \$2,800, and they started garnishing my wages, and then they're like if you don't get on a</p>

Economic challenges	<p>monthly plan, and if you don't pay, you're gonna get rearrested. Like I've been in my transformation for hella years. I'm off probation, I'm off parole now you're threatening me because if I'm not gonna pay restitution, I'm still trying to make it here. But when it was restitution, I'm like, I'm trying to still get it together. I'm still struggling.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“...the educational background, I wish I would've pursued it, you know what I mean? I think that I would've been in a different area of the field that I'm in. I think the challenges of having the background, having kids at a young age, I had all these blocks that, that prevented me from doing that.”-Interviewee #3</p>
Systemic institutions	<p>“So it was really my ID situation where my parole, my probation officer. Because I was on parole and on probation at the same time and wouldn't support me with getting my id. I tried to go up to places. I showed my US citizenship, and I showed the legal paperwork that my mom had, so that was a struggle for one in that institutional system, right? The immigration, ice, and the D M V.”-Interviewee #2</p>
Theme #2: Disclosing your background	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Social Stigmas	<p>“Like people wouldn't see me as a human. I already felt discouraged. I didn't feel confident, I felt insecure.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“...having to disclose my background has been a challenge. Over time things kind of like fade away a little bit, so I haven't really run into that.”-Interviewee #3</p>

**Table 2: Displays the themes with subcategories for RQ2, collected via semi-structured interviews**

RQ2: What have organizations done to help formerly incarcerated individuals develop as leaders?



Theme #1: Achieving higher education	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Educational support	<p>“Teachers Pathway, it was great because it was, um, mostly people of color, but everyone was justice as involved to some degree. And then they had led a couple of us old folks in there.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“Project Rebound gave me that lead. I took advantage of that. I worked on, you know, finishing my associate's degree. Then I went out into the field working, I was doing after-school programming initially.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“When I first started, they were like (Young Women’s Freedom Center), do you want to go to school? And I was like, year, but I’m doing the work, how am I gonna do work and do school? They said well, you could a few hours of school, but that still be under your pay”.-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“I've had a lot of C B T training, cognitive behavior therapy training though having because I don't have a BA or a Master's, I think having those certificates and those types of implicit bias training, undoing racisms and C B T and anger management, motivational interviewing. I think that has helped me along the way in my career to really understand what happens with folks that have some of the barriers that one has that goes through the criminal justice system.”-Interviewee #3</p>
Theme #2: Inviting and supporting system impacted individuals in the work	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Organizational opportunities and support	<p>“San Francisco Reentry Council, I joined the San Francisco Reentry Council at one point, transitions Clinic Network. When I got out, I was actually a patient there and, you know, I went from patient to, now, their top lead community health worker nationally.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“...the Young Woman's Freedom Center, I learned about self-determination. I was like, what does, what does this word mean? And they were like, well, we could connect you and give you access and, and, and give you things for you to do it. And, that taught me</p>

	<p>how to advocate for myself, how to self-advocate and how to advocate for others.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“I've done next Generation fellowship. I've been doing Soul Refuge. Soul Refuge was more about healing and practicing indigenous practices. Especially when we return to the world, how do we take care of ourselves? How do we heal from the things that we go through? And I know healing is not an ending thing. It's just, right now, you're not healed. It's a working process.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“Saya Center, that's where I feel like I had a big job, you know what I mean? I was the, I started off as a case manager and then worked my way up to director, uh, intervention services director. I think my first director position and oversaw a couple of contracts under the leadership of Tracy. I founded a girls' group called Young Queens on the Rise. That is the place where I feel like helped launch my career.”-Interviewee #3</p>
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**Table 3: Displays the themes with subcategories for RQ3, collected via semi-structured interviews**

RQ3: What can organizations do to build a pathway to leadership for formerly incarcerated individuals in the workplace?	
Theme #1: Understand with an open mind of lived experiences	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Empathy and understanding	“One is we own our narrative. and in owning our narrative, we should not be ghetto pimped into constantly sharing our narrative to support these nonprofits that say they're doing work for us, but at the same time, abusing those that they say they serve by having them, you know, um, do all this consulting, you know, and for them, either at little to nothing.”-Interviewee #1

	<p>“...some of our leaders lack empathy. I would say have empathy for people, understanding, you know, the ability to do the 180 to stand in somebody else's shoes. If you're gonna work with the reentry community and set up programs for them, be 100 to what you're doing, set up career pathways and ways that they can continue to educate, have other, have, bring other, uh, reentry leaders that are willing.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“It takes a lot of patience. The onboarding is not, you know, it depends. Everybody's situation is different. And I think that really understanding that, you're not just hiring if you're gonna hire someone who's been through that type of trauma of incarceration, especially someone who's done like 30, 40 years. Then they're coming home, and you're hiring them, that you have to have patience and have a different type of onboarding because it's a whole new world for folks.”-Interviewee #3</p>
Theme #2: Financial Security and Literacy	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Fair financial compensation	<p>“I think a lot of us are still striving for our place financially is to be correctly compensated.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“I've been in the other nonprofits where the internship is only for two months, and I'm like, well two months, that's not enough for me to build my skills. Like, and then you're only paying me like \$12, and I'm already taking the community, you're like using me.”-Interviewee #2</p>
Benefits and packages	<p>“...insurance, benefits. Like, we gotta get those things. In retirement, we get none of those things. So if you want a young person to do this work and actually, you know, move your program or your nonprofit, actually take care of our people the way they need to be taken care of.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“...helping them with financial literacy, how to manage their money. Helping to guide them to the right banks, you know what I'm saying?”</p>

	So that they don't, you know, go the old school way, go to a liquor store and try to cash their check.”-Interviewee #3
Theme #3: Believing in system-impacted people	
Subcategory	Exemplar Quotations
Allow returning community members a seat at the table	<p>“Leaders create leaders, right. Bosses just create enemies. So, you know, and so I'm a leader. That's another thing for the nonprofit world. What should they do? Create those positions and those foundations, you know, let us start being a part of where the money goes. Let us be a part of the implementation. Let us be a part of defining the problem as well as the solution. Let us play a bigger role in helping the community understand our community.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“I do believe in, in a lot of ways, we do now have a nonprofit industrial complex where the power and the money is still sitting in white people's hands. And the, and the, and white people are still making decisions for our communities and our organizations as opposed to us having more of a say so.”-Interviewee #1</p> <p>“I would tell the non-profit about these individuals that we’re leaders, that we're the ones closest to the problem and closest to the solution.”-Interviewee #2</p>
Constant support, check-ins, and encouragement	<p>“I would tell the non-profit about these individuals that were leaders that we're the ones closest to the problem and closest to the solution.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“...investing in their education, investing in their leadership are the most top three things that have supported me as a young person when I was young coming into the Young Women's Freedom Center.”-Interviewee #2</p> <p>“...continuing not just a one-time thing. You know, tap in having consistent check-ins with folks.”-Interviewee#3</p>

## **Interview Analysis**

The major themes, subcategories, and exemplar quotations display the barriers, support, and recommendations from interviewees. The interviews provided extensive information that supports and reflects the literature review and research questions. Through the interviews, it is clear the number of challenges system-impacted individuals face even after being in the community for several years. This shows their barriers to understanding how organizations can help them develop as leaders. All interviewees highlighted that they received some type of support or training from different nonprofits or had mentors. All interviewees expressed gratitude towards those who served as mentors and showed faith in their potential to lead.

Interviewee #2 shared her experience at the Young Women's Freedom Center when an individual told her, "I don't care if you're on parole, on probation, you're a leader. Like you're a natural-born leader now. And I was like, nah, man, you're just saying that. Like, you know, I think you just got the game. But because people did, I did, people never told me these things. And when they told me that, I was just like, I gotta continue to come here" (Herrera, Interview 2, April 13, 2023).

Lastly, the suggestions provided by the interviewees proved to be highly valuable in this project, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging the perspectives of those who have been affected. In the interviews, the participants expressed their desire for the nonprofit sector to understand their background and furnish them with the necessary tools and resources to flourish.

When I asked interviewees what drew them to the nonprofit sector, Interviewee #3 stated, "I'm a product of what community programs can do, so having me be in programs that like Tracy ran, I was a mission girl, and still a mission girl. I think it is just what you do, especially being in

San Francisco, it drew me to it. I wanted to help those who were in situations like myself, especially how folks helped me. Yeah. So I just wanted to continue to do the work” (Hernandez, Interview 3, April 14, 2023). All interviewees are well-known community leaders doing great work in the nonprofit sector.

### **Section 5: Implications and Recommendations**

Despite the limitations and the relatively small number of interviewees, the combination of my professional and academic background and the findings presented in this research have facilitated a comprehensive analysis. The practical implications derived from the research suggest the importance of targeted support and professional development for formerly incarcerated individuals in their leadership journey within the nonprofit sector. Moreover, the literature review led to a deeper understanding of the challenges formerly incarcerated individuals face returning to the community and the significance of DEIB initiatives and inclusive leadership in the sector. This research provides a strong foundation for further exploration and investigation into this subject matter for the nonprofit sector.

A Six-step Inclusive Leadership Pipeline has been developed using the literature review and data analysis results. This six-step methodology acts like a framework that may be adjusted to the wants and needs of returning community members in their leadership journey in the nonprofit sector.

**Figure 4: Six-Step Inclusive Leadership Pipeline**



Source: Author's Creation

### ***Step 1: Inclusive Onboarding Process***

Organizations must first develop an inclusive onboarding process to foster a leadership pipeline for returning community members. One of my interviewees highlighted, “It takes a lot of patience. The onboarding is not, you know, it depends. Everybody's situation is different. And I think that really understanding that, you're not just hiring if you're gonna hire someone who's been through that type of trauma of incarceration, especially someone who's done like 30, 40 years. Then they're coming home, and you're hiring them, that you have to have patience and have a different type of onboarding because it's a whole new world for folks” (Hernandez, Interview 3, April 14, 2023). As mentioned above, all returning community members have different wants and needs. The organization may hire someone who has been in the community

for some time and has developed professional skills. At the same time, other organizations may be hiring someone who has not been in the community for long. That is why this first step allows you to consider what an inclusive onboarding process looks like.

The onboarding process is crucial to any new employee, and the organization should encourage its current staff to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. In this initial stage, organizations should develop this process to meet the specific needs of returning community members. Additionally, organizations should offer a professional clothing stipend, significantly supporting returning community members and all new employees. Organizations cannot assume that individuals have the means to purchase professional clothing. Another suggestion is offering a flexible work policy to accommodate the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals.

Recognizing that some system-impacted individuals may be on parole or probation, flexible working hours accommodate their needs, such as meeting with their probation officer by allowing a flexible work schedule. Offering flexibility can help with their transition and provide a supportive work environment.

My final recommendation for this step is to provide support with technology while considering the different lived experiences of returning community members and the potential knowledge they may have in this area. By implementing inclusive practices, organizations are moving in the right direction by cultivating a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters their professional development and leadership journey.

### ***Step 2: Candidate Assessment***

Step 2 evaluates the person's leadership experience, potential, and skills. Assessing where the returning community member may be is critical to meeting their needs in their leadership



journey. To start, the organization should create a list of leadership competencies that identify the key skills that are present in leadership; some competencies may include problem-solving, strong communication, adaptability, and more. During this step, it is also vital to be transparent about why the organization is conducting this assessment; the sole purpose is to see what skills they may have and how to support that in their journey. In this process, organizations should be open-minded; returning community members may have leadership skills already but are not perceived in their traditional form. I call these transferable skills, meaning a skill that is presented in a non-traditional way but can be transferred in a work setting that benefits everyone.

### ***Step 3: Training and Development***

This is an essential step in building a pipeline to leadership for returning community members. In this phase, it is crucial to provide training and development opportunities to grow the leadership skills of the returning community members that also best fit their needs. These development trainings may include mentoring, coaching, and leadership development programs outside the organization. To illustrate, the organization can develop training for new professionals. This training can include how to master professional email writing, demonstrate preparedness in important meetings, utilize Google Calendar workspace effectively, and other relevant skills. Another suggestion is providing a professional development stipend, allowing the person to use funds for a conference, books, a certification, and other relevant opportunities to help them grow.

### ***Step 4: Ongoing Support***

Organizations can foster a positive and supportive environment that allows returning community members to grow and thrive with continuous help. As mentioned early in the report,

organizations may say they are committed to DEIB initiatives but often tokenize employees as a performative action. This step is critical to ensure returning community members receive the necessary tools and support in their leadership journey.

To support returning community members in this leadership pipeline, ongoing support must be ongoing; it cannot just be a one-time thing. It is suggested to have recurring check-ins to see what is or is not working for the returning community member and the organization.

### ***Step 5: Promotion and Retention***

Leadership is not about earning a high title position but about how you lead yourself and others to accomplish change. Leadership looks different to everyone; in this step, promotion can mean ranking up to a higher title position or venturing out to different opportunities that benefit them. Developing a pathway for people to advance in leadership positions or opportunities within the organization is crucial. This fosters an environment of support and encouragement for returning community members and ensures retention.

On the other hand, it is also important to allow returning community members to venture their leadership journey outside of the nonprofit sector. Allowing a clear track to promotion and allowing opportunities for returning community members ensures that the organization is promoting an inclusive environment.

### ***Step 6: Evaluation***

This final step ensures and assesses the effectiveness of this pipeline-to-leadership model for the organization and the returning community member. This is where the organization invites feedback from those acquiring this six-step model. This is a great opportunity to assess and adapt the model and make any necessary changes to ensure that it succeeds in advancing and

supporting formerly incarcerated individuals in their leadership journey within the nonprofit sector.

Overall, this six-step model presents how organizations can cultivate a pipeline to leadership for those whom the system has impacted. This model is to be used as a template for nonprofit organizations to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for leadership while promoting representation.

### **Section 6: Conclusion**

This research was developed on my passion for helping formerly incarcerated individuals achieve their goals and passions. This topic on leadership, diversity, and representation was inspired by two courses in the MNA program, Ethical Leadership and Diversity in the Workplace. One of my most significant values is representation, and this idea came about from how organizations tend to tokenize certain individuals to seem as if they are “diverse” and represent the community. It is one thing to hire, but another to foster a clear pathway to leadership for them. I combined my two interests and created this report. I believe everyone has the potential to be a leader, especially formerly incarcerated folks. It is time to change the narrative and let returning community members lead.

This report provided a better understanding of the obstacles returning community members face to obtaining an education and securing employment. The literature review also highlighted the significance of DEIB initiatives within an organization; formerly incarcerated individuals often get overlooked in these efforts. In addition, it presented the importance of embracing an inclusive leadership style internally to support this research. The interviews spoke for themselves; those impacted by the system know what is needed. I needed to have their voices

represented in this initiative. To cultivate a truly inclusive and equitable workplace, a pipeline to leadership needed to be developed. The Six-Step Inclusive Leadership Pipeline provides suggestions and recommendations on how organizations can cultivate an inclusive pipeline to leadership for formerly incarcerated individuals. This analysis is a starting point for organizations to evaluate its inclusive and diverse leadership measures that reflect the community it serves.

I would like to bring attention to the constraints of this report which include the limitations of the literature collected, the small number of interviewees, and my personal biases. Having the knowledge and experience working with the reentry population, I recognize my biases in this research. I will also highlight that I have not been formerly incarcerated or impacted by the criminal justice system. Given that this report's key contention is how nonprofit organizations can build a pipeline to leadership for formerly incarcerated individuals, further research should be done on how the for-profit sector could benefit from developing these practices. Ultimately, developing a pipeline to leadership that reflects the community you serve illustrates the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

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### **Author's Bio**

Jacqueline Aguilar is a first-generation Mexican-American dedicated to social justice issues affecting underrepresented communities. She is a proud daughter of immigrant parents from San Quentin, Baja, California, Mexico, who migrated to the United States for a better life. She was born and raised in the desert sun of Coachella, California, where her family resides. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice with a minor in Political Science from San Francisco State University. She is a Reentry Program Coordinator at Fresh Lifelines For Youth, a non-profit organization dedicated to partnering with youth to unlock their potential, disrupt the pipeline to prison, and advance justice in California and beyond. Jacqueline is a proud 2022-2023 Chicana Latina Foundation Scholarship recipient, awarded to powerful Latinas who have demonstrated leadership qualities and experience on behalf of the Latinx community. She has also earned a Litvak Social Innovation, Hearst Endowed, and Mabel Eugenie Scholarship from the University of San Francisco's School of Management for the 2022-2023 school year. She will participate in the Engaged Latina Leadership Activist (ELLA) 2023 Cohort from the Latina Coalition Silicon Valley organization. Jacqueline will engage in a six-month leadership program to develop leadership and civic engagement skills through professional workshops and activities. Jacqueline is devoted to serving her community through education and leadership development. She hopes to help the younger generation by being a mentor and role model. She also aspires to be a lawyer representing her community and hopes to work in public interest law.