

A state-funded reentry program stops the revolving door for Colorado's formerly incarcerated

Christopher Parker

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When Russell Turner completed his second stint in a Colorado prison, after nine and a half years served of a 20-year sentence, he was not expecting any help when he got outside. He said he has never received any before.

Mr. Turner has spent nearly 25 years in and out of jail or prison, starting with stints in juvenile detention as a minor. He says that he was repeatedly abused while incarcerated, targeted by police after his release and denied support, like housing assistance and addiction counseling, when he tried to get it. The cycle of recidivism that he experienced, including bouts of homelessness and drug abuse, is [common](#) in the United States.

"I've been through the system in Colorado, and I've just never gotten a single day of help," Mr. Turner said. "I've never had a handout here. I've always tried to [stay out of prison] on my own. And I've seen that it's almost impossible."

But upon his release last May, Mr. Turner did find help at a low-rise, brown building called the [Murphy Center for Hope in Fort Collins](#). The Murphy Center, a project of the Homeward Alliance, provided all the support that Mr. Turner had not received after previous prison releases: training for a job in manufacturing, counseling to locate appropriate transitional housing and personal attention from a dedicated case manager.

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The pay and benefits offered by his new job are above anything he could have hoped for, he said. This time he believes he can stay out of prison.

Homeward Alliance's re-entry program at the Murphy Center has grown enormously in recent years, thanks to a statewide initiative that also expanded programs at 17 other anti-recidivism efforts around Colorado. The [Work and Gain Education & Employment Skills](#) program (Wagees) began as a \$500,000 experiment in 2014. Since then, it has become a staple of re-entry services in Colorado. With bipartisan support its 2020 budget expanded to \$9 million. Prison reform advocates, including the [Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition](#) and the [Urban Institute](#), have praised the program for having "dramatically changed the field of re-entry in Colorado."

"WAGEES is a leading example of a state department of corrections directly investing in and partnering with community providers, many of which are led by people with firsthand experience in the justice system," according

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Kayla King, the director of Homeward Alliance's re-entry program, said that her staff meets weekly with the Larimer County parole office to identify candidates for Wagees at the Murphy Center. She praised the parole office's "open communication" and was grateful that her liaison there prefers to avoid punitive approaches towards clients who are struggling.

"I'm really impressed by the partnership we have with the parole office. I don't think that's a very common partnership," Mrs. King says.

Sixty-two percent of incarcerated people return to prison within three years of their release. The rate of recidivism among clients of the Homeward Alliance at the Murphy Center is just 9 percent.

The parole process in Colorado has historically been riddled with problems, as is the case in most of the United States. In a 2019 study of each state's parole process, [the Prison Policy Initiative](#) gave Colorado a failing grade. The United States has one of the worst rates of recidivism in the world. A [2021 Department of Justice report](#) found that 62 percent of incarcerated people return to prison within three years of their release. That number is only slightly better in Colorado, where 50 percent of parolees end up back behind bars within that time.

The rate of recidivism among clients of the Homeward Alliance at the Murphy Center, according to Mrs. King, is just 9 percent.

She attributes much of that success to the sense of community and mutual accountability created by the re-entry program at Murphy.

Securing employment alone, she explained, will not prove enough to keep the recently released from returning to prison. "It's going to be that social support," she said, "and having someone that you can lean on when things get tough."

According to the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, nearly 60 percent of Wagees case managers were formerly incarcerated people themselves. There is a strong emphasis at the Murphy Center on mentorship and using personal experience to guide recently paroled people.

Cliff Donnelly is a deacon and the director of prison and jail ministry for the Diocese of Colorado Springs. The diocese is home to two state institutions, the Limon Correctional Facility and the Buena Vista Correctional Complex. His interest in ministering to incarcerated people began in 2000, when his nephew received a lengthy sentence after a conviction for his role in a homicide.

"Why do we have the people with the least amount of money having to go all over town to get the services that they need?"

Mr. Donnelly said a lack of access to everyday services made rebuilding a life nearly impossible for his nephew.

"For my nephew to get his driver's license, it took three trips to the D.M.V. To open up a bank account, it took two or three trips to the credit union," he said. "And these guys, many of them are on parole, so at a moment's notice they [may] have to run down the street and do a U.A. [urinalysis test], and they don't have money for a car or money for transportation."

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“The concept” for the site, she explained in an interview with **America**, was reached in answer to a simple question: “Why do we have the people with the least amount of money having to go all over town to get the services that they need?”

When Mr. Turner first spoke to **America** last October, he was just daring to hope for a new start. He had a new job; he found a place to live in a halfway house; and he had just placed his name on a waitlist for affordable housing through Volunteers for America. He was eager to leave behind his transitional living program and begin a new chapter. But a lot can go wrong in four months. Mr. Turner has battled addiction, depression and health issues most of his life. Any one of these past problems, combined with the everyday stress of life as a formerly incarcerated person, threatened to return him to jail.

Homeward Alliance helped buy furniture and a car to drive to work—“nothing special, but, you know, it’s mine.”

Yet just under six months into his job at Woodward Inc., manufacturing parts for engines that are used in anything from military planes to bulldozers, Mr. Turner has held fast. He has grown to act as a mentor to other formerly incarcerated people and as the liaison between his employer and Homeward Alliance. He has helped others who are undergoing re-entry to find work, and he said that he has already managed to recruit six or seven formerly incarcerated men to work with him at Woodward.

Volunteers for America helped Mr. Turner secure his first apartment in 10 years—a comfortable unit in a building only a few years old. He now owns a car to drive to work—“nothing special, but, you know, it’s mine.”

Mr. Turner is living up to promises he made to himself, and he said that he has been empowered to do so through the support of Wagees and Homeward Alliance.

He said that these programs have cleared a path to freedom and self-sufficiency, and now it is “up to me to walk it.”

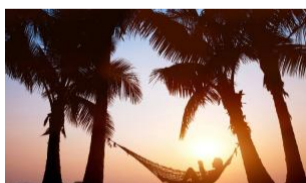
“It was the little bit of help that I needed,” Mr. Turner said. “It helps me to see that my past doesn’t define my future.”



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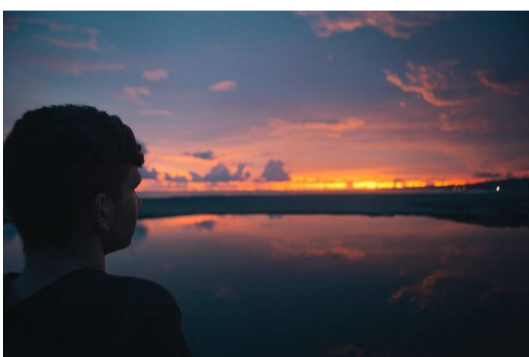
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