

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model



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Features

Re-entering and Revitalizing New York's Economy



Elyha Ford is an employee at IHOP in Henrietta, NY.

Jason Hargrove has hired more than 25 formerly incarcerated people to work in IHOP restaurants he oversees in New York State. Now he is on the front lines of the nation's first governor-led campaign to persuade more employers to put people with records to work.

Launched by New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo as a pilot in 2012 and expanded statewide in February, the [Work for Success](#) initiative has so far enlisted 1,015 businesses to hire 1,645 formerly incarcerated people. The program mixes old and new media, from billboards to YouTube, with traditional outreach through chambers of commerce to promote the business and economic benefits of hiring people returning to the community, and to address stigmas and biases head-on.

"Men and women with criminal records confront significant

In Brief

For Your Toolbox: The Economic Case for Equity

Give your campaigns a boost with two new tools from PolicyLink on how to make the economic case for equity: A new Alliance for Justice blog post from Angela Glover Blackwell on [the four reasons why equity is essential for our economy](#), and a recent webinar on [how to tell a compelling story about why equity matters for everyone](#).

Water, Water, Everywhere

Cities are investing billions in sorely needed water system upgrades over the next 20 years, and many of those dollars will flow through low-income communities and communities of color. Two new reports by [Green for All](#) and [PUSH Buffalo and Partnership for the Public Good](#) outline how to use community benefit strategies – including local hire policies, social enterprises, green infrastructure investments like parks and rain gardens, and more – to ensure these investments grow strong neighborhoods, cities, and regions. For examples of

obstacles in connecting with the job market," said Alphonso David, New York State deputy secretary and counsel for civil rights and the public face of Work for Success. "Connecting formerly incarcerated men and women to jobs will reduce costs for businesses and the state. We recognize that for the state's economic strategy to be sustainable, it must be inclusive."

In a nation where [700,000 people](#), disproportionately African American and Latino, are released from state prisons annually, efforts like New York State's are critical for removing job barriers that squander human potential, hurt local economies, and hamper overall growth. Having a job significantly reduces the risk of recidivism, but as many as [75 percent](#) of former inmates nationally are unemployed a year after their release.

With limited opportunity, more than 40 percent of people released from state prisons are re-incarcerated within three years. New York State officials say [40,000 former inmates](#) have been screened and trained and are ready to work.

Successful re-entry and economic recovery

Work for Success grew out of the governor's post-recession push to get New Yorkers back to work. Officials recognized that to succeed, the effort had to be inclusive, with targeted programs to improve job prospects for groups facing the biggest employment hurdles: immigrants, people with disabilities, and at-risk youth, in addition to people returning from prison.

New York State bars employers from refusing to hire someone strictly because of a criminal conviction — they must consider whether an applicant's record bears any direct relationship to his or her fitness for the job. But a survey of 500 hiring executives found that few knew the law, David said.

Nor were most aware of the protections and incentives available for hiring from this population. These include a federal tax credit of \$2,400 per hire, six months of free bond insurance, and rigorous pre-employment counseling and training. The state partners with nine nonprofit organizations that have track records for effective job training in a wide range of industries, including food service, construction, weatherization, computer science, and hospitality. The organizations also provide skills training tailored to specific

cities and communities pioneering these strategies, read our previous stories about [PUSH Buffalo, Verde](#), and the [City of Portland, Oregon](#).

Policies for Developing Without Displacement

The latest boom in cities can mean rising housing prices and the increased risk that low-income communities of color will be pushed or priced out. Causa Justa :: Just Cause released a new report, [Development Without Displacement: Resisting Gentrification in the Bay Area](#), that includes principles and policies that other cities can also use to ensure long-term residents and communities of color can stay and thrive. The [executive summary](#) is free to download and the [full report](#) is available for purchase.

employer needs.

To some extent, Work for Success simply streamlines federal resources available to employers nationwide and amplifies work by community groups to create pathways for successful re-entry. But the governor's imprimatur can help bring such programs to scale. "By making this a statewide priority, we hope to increase exponentially the number of people coming home from New York State prisons and moving into the workforce," said Marta Nelson, executive director of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) NYC, a Work for Success partner that has been engaged in this work for 30 years.

Workplace gems

Work for Success has enlisted employers to appeal to their peers. In videos and interviews, they defuse fears about people with criminal records and describe them as "hidden gems" — skilled, motivated employees who can boost productivity and reduce costs associated with training, absenteeism, and turnover. Franklin Cruz, owner of DEC Green, an environmentally friendly cleaning products and systems company in the Bronx, admits to being "skeptical" when he was approached about hiring someone returning from prison. But he took a chance on one and it worked out so well he hired others.

"My new employees are loyal, devoted to the company, and have played an enormous role in our success," he said.

Hargrove calls his formerly incarcerated employees some of the best workers he has had. "I wish I had more employees just like that." Most Work for Success hires come in at entry level, at minimum wage, but Hargrove points to two men who began as dishwashers and worked their way up, first to line cooks and then chefs.

Although the state emphasizes the business case for making these hires, it is also lifting up the voices of formerly incarcerated people and broadcasting the message that "just because you have a past doesn't mean you shouldn't have a prosperous future."

"I shouldn't have to walk around the rest of my life with a scarlet letter," said Donna Hylton, who now works as an administrative assistant. "I am not the sum product of my

incarceration."

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Union Strong: Interview with SEIU's Gerry Hudson and Laphonza Butler

How do we create good jobs and ladders of opportunity for the health aides, domestic workers, and other service employees who rank among the fastest-growing, lowest-paid segments of America's workforce? And how can these workers — mostly people of color, women, and immigrants in traditionally non-union jobs — unite to strengthen their voice



Gerry Hudson and Laphonza Butler

and power? [Service Employees International Union](#) (SEIU) leaders Gerry Hudson and Laphonza Butler have devoted their careers to addressing these questions. Hudson, SEIU senior executive vice president, and Butler, president of SEIU [United Long Term Care Workers Union](#), spoke with *America's Tomorrow* about labor organizing in a changing economy, recent union setbacks and successes, and why multiracial worker solidarity is key to rebuilding the middle class.

Tell us about SEIU's organizing strategies and priorities.

Gerry Hudson: Long before the recession of 2007, SEIU began to organize workers in the service sector, which has historically been low-wage and non-union, and largely people of color and women. In the last few years, we've seen significant losses due to right-wing attacks on our public sector unions. In Wisconsin, we had a union of 14,000 homecare workers, which is now down to about 3,000. In Ohio, we had organized about 5,000 homecare workers, and we lost them due to the last election there.

But we also see the potential and the need for new organizing. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, we are in a moment when we expect that the healthcare system is going to grow and change and need more workers. We're working to capture that moment. With a different kind of healthcare delivery system, we need to stabilize the employment of homecare workers, up-skill it, and create pathways for advancement.

Have you had any recent successes in doing this?

Laphonza Butler: In California, we worked with Governor Brown and President Obama's healthcare administration to create what's called a coordinated care initiative. What that does for homecare workers is provide a pathway for career development. They're playing a more integral role in not just the social aspects of the person for whom they are providing care, but also the medical aspects. A homecare worker who's spending 180 hours a month with a senior can be the front-line eyes and ears for a physician, avoiding unnecessary emergency room visits or medication complications. We are trying to use the opportunity presented in the changing of the healthcare delivery system to both protect the rights of workers and advance policies that positively impact the community at large.

What's most challenging about organizing the service sector and lifting workers out of poverty?

GH: It's the nature of the work. It's usually multi-employer with smaller units where the workers don't really know each other, or in homecare, where the workers work in isolation. You have to knit them together by geography. It's very different than organizing an auto plant that has thousands of workers. Most of the campaigns that we've run really draw on community support. You have to mobilize the community to own the project and put pressure on the employers.

How can equity advocates support such efforts?

GH: Let's together try to create a space in which restaurant workers, homecare workers, day laborers, and others can find their own voice and use it to build power up for the community. We're not just talking about worker organizations. We're talking about trying to create other kinds of community-owned economic agents, like co-ops. I like to think of this in a wild way as democratizing our economy. That draws people into a multiplicity of relationships to the economy, either through politics that regulate it, or ownership, or union organization. And it draws many people into the conversation about what kind of economy we want to exist in.

There is a complicated history of racism and exclusion among some unions and communities of color. How can we move past that and build multiracial labor solidarity?

LB: I don't think that we move past it without acknowledging that it is our past. Part of the challenge is that we don't acknowledge that some unions of old were exclusionary and exclusive clubs that you had to have the right color to belong to. We've got to do some real work inside of labor to really acknowledge the story of our movement and to appreciate that the future is going to look very different.

GH: I've always believed that the growing weakness of the labor movement was that it was racially divided, and that there was no path to re-growing and strengthening the labor movement that did not involve bringing together people of different races and of both genders.

How have your own experiences shaped your understanding of racial solidarity and unions?

GH: I came out of SEIU local 1199 [United Healthcare Workers East]. I grew up in the union – my mother was a housekeeper in a nursing home for 30 years and very active in 1199. That was a union made up largely of black and brown women, so I took for granted people of color being in leadership and bringing their own histories and unique social vantage points to the work. It wasn't until I came to the international here in D.C. and began working with folks trying to grapple with their situations elsewhere that I came to appreciate that it was a real battle to get folks to see that they needed to create solidarity across racial groups. And that workers of color brought their own histories and unique perspectives that were important in trying to figure out how to organize not only other workers of color but all workers period. Asserting that you need multi-racial labor solidarity is something that needs to happen not just by black workers but also by white workers.

LB: I came to SEIU from Jackson, Mississippi. I chose to go to a historically black college because I thought I should have the experience of having civil rights workers who were in jail serve as my teachers. All I knew in Mississippi was that you were either white or you were black. When I joined SEIU, two weeks after I graduated from Jackson State, my first assignment was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, organizing private agency homecare workers who were Asian, Latino, everything. That was a whole new world for me. What I have learned is the union is not the goal. It is the means to the goal of social and economic justice. And in order to achieve that goal of social

and economic justice, we have to be able to build across those racial lines and frankly across the institutional lines of what union you belong to or what membership you have in your community organization. We have to put all of those things together in order to build support for unionization, which is a way to build towards the broadening of the middle class and a way to bring together political power to effect policies on behalf of working people.

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America's Tomorrow highlights campaigns, leaders, policies, reports, and local models that are advancing equity as an economic imperative. It is produced by Chris Schildt, Sarah Treuhaft, Fran Smith, and Ana Louie. To learn more, visit the *America's Tomorrow* [webpage](#).

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