

# [***A new barbershop in Denver is staffed with formerly incarcerated people***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BWT-TBY1-DY7V-G00N-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; "This is nerve-wracking," James Canody exclaimed - through an exhale - of his new job as an apprentice at the Denver-based business R&R Head Labs. When speaking with CNN, Canody had been working as an apprentice at the barbershop for 13 days.

Fourteen days ago he had been released from prison, where he served 6 and a half years of an 18-year sentence.

Canody is one of 650,000 people released from prison every year across the United States, according to the Department of Justice. That's a population of which nearly [*75%*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/03/31/a-proclamation-on-second-chance-month-2022/) are still unemployed a year after being released. According to the Brookings Institution, stable employment has been shown to reduce recidivism, but even for those who find a job, earning capacity is likely hindered: Based on a report released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, formerly incarcerated people who do find employment after their release tend to earn just 53% of the median US worker's wage.

Canody is one of eight employees - apprentices, barbers and managers - at R&R Head Labs, a barbershop which opened its doors in February exclusively employing formerly incarcerated and justice-impacted individuals. It aims to address the financial, logistical and emotional inequities associated with their reentry into society.

Fresh starts and fresh cuts

R&R Head Labs' model creates a pathway to employment by utilizing skills - and sometimes a barbering license - its employees gained while in prison. (Prison programs offering barber/cosmetology licenses are not federally mandated, rather determined state-by-state based on a variety of factors.)

Barbering skills aren't a requirement to work at R&R Head Labs, however, as its paid apprentice program shepherds employees through training, the 2,000 hours of working as an apprentice and 300 hours of classroom or in-shop time required to get a barber license in Colorado.

"This opportunity feels surreal and overwhelming," said Canody. "But that's a good thing. I am getting comfortable with being uncomfortable and see how barbering can help me change my life."

R&R Head Labs is the brainchild of James Repenning, a former president of the national barber chain Floyd's 99. After learning about prison barbering programs, he saw potential in combining his professional experience with a greater purpose. Together with an advisory council - a group which includes formerly incarcerated people turned advocates - Repenning has also implemented mentorship programs and community outreach in Denver.

"We started by asking ourselves how we find barbers who have really committed to change and then asking, what do they need?" Repenning explained in a Zoom interview with CNN. "It's about understanding how we support them in the work environment, because the pinnacle of what we want to do is give them hope and a path."

Repenning and his team work with Colorado prisons to recruit individuals and get them into the apprenticeship program. According to Repenning, the support from the Colorado Department of Corrections has exceeded expectations, with parole officers facilitating barber tool starter sets and arranging job fairs.

"It's important (for formerly incarcerated people) to make money - both because parole requires it and for basic survival," he told CNN. "The solution was to create apprenticeships, so someone can start working immediately and toward the hours they need to earn their barber license."

Transformational opportunities

In Denver specifically, R&R Head Labs recruitment and reentry efforts are steered by Charles Smith, a member of the company's advisory council. Smith served 24 years in prison; after his release, he became the director of advocacy and earned income strategies for CommunityWorks, a non-profit organization which provides job seekers with support service and job readiness instruction.

Speaking about the main challenges formerly incarcerated individuals face, Smith lists housing and employment as the most crucial. "Employment is going to sustain you," he told CNN. "The idle mind is the devil's workshop. You start doing things, you start drifting. Employment keeps you stable and focused."

"The model would be to have someone like Charles in every state we go to," added Repenning. "Many of the people we talk to are people he served with, so there's a great deal of trust there."

Smith aims to connect with inmates around 90 days before their release date, to start mentoring and prepping them to make their acclimation to life outside of prison easier and more tolerable. Understanding the "***politics*** of what happens in prison" is something Smith considers a crucial aspect of his work, and one he believes offers an advantage in approaching and vetting prospective barbers.

Several of the seven full-time and part-time barbers currently working at the first location are people Smith knew while serving his own sentence - including James Canody.

"People in prison are a forgotten population," said Smith. "It is a huge help to people coming out of prison to see and feel that someone finally believes in you. It makes you want to be better."

In keeping with its overarching ethos, even R&R's physical space was designed to best accommodate formerly incarcerated people. With guidance from the advisory board, the space was specifically designed to minimize triggers for its employees, down to its color palette and barber chair positioning.

"Everything by design has to do with connectedness," explained Repenning. "A lot of barber shops are stainless steel... ours needs to be super welcoming and warm." Repenning and his team learned which colors and palettes to stay away from: Certain shades of orange, red, green and blue (which could serve as a reminder of jumpsuit colors) were out; brighter colors, embodying outdoor themes of woodlands and greenery were chosen instead to soften the environment and make it feel uplifting, energetic and approachable.

Barber chairs are positioned so that no barber's back is to the door, another potential vulnerability for an employee who had previously served prison time. "Prison can be a very dangerous place," said Repenning. "'Watching your back' takes on extra significance, thus our barbers tend to want to know who's behind them and who's walking into the space." A round bar where people are invited to sit and wait for their appointment was designed specifically to facilitate conversation and community.

A barber's compensation includes floor earnings and commission comparable to other barbershops - but less commonly, barbers at R&R Head Labs are able to set (and raise) their own prices. Employees also receive health insurance and vacation pay.

R&R Head Labs is looking to open an additional shop in Denver later this year, with future expansion into the Boston, Chicago, and New York markets planned.

In its first months of business, the R&R Head Labs location has attracted a diverse crowd, Repenning told CNN. "We're seeing every race, hair type, gender, income level and age. It's been a predictably slow start because our barbers typically don't come with a 'book' (of pre existing clients) as they would if they were transferring from another barbershop. However, we are attracting 10+ new customers per day."

"It's like bringing the 'hood and Beverly Hills together," added Smith. "And creating this amazing beautiful space. A safe space."

By Melissa Magsaysay, CNN

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