To: Executive Director - Decarceration Organization
From: Paul Yuergens, MPA
Date: May 19, 2025
RE: Balancing Abolitionist Ideals and Impact: Supporting Michigan Programs that Enable Systemic Change

Executive Summary

The abolitionist movement seeks to end the mass incarceration of Black and Brown individuals—driven in part by the criminalization of mental health disorders and addiction—and to build economic and social systems that do not rely on police, punishment, or the carceral state. This memo analyzes two Southeastern Michigan programs—the Washtenaw County Community Mental Health (WCCMH) Millage and the Grand River@14th Social Justice Hub (GR@14th)—which address prevention and economic opportunity for returning citizens respectively. It argues that even well-intended ideological efforts to address systemic problems—whether in modern architecture or justice reform—have often failed to achieve lasting change. GR@14th risks repeating these mistakes by offering a compelling community symbol, but one that currently lacks the scale and policy infrastructure required for structural transformation. In contrast, WCCMH Millage is already diverting individuals with mental health and substance use challenges away from incarceration, while building capacity for long term change. For these reasons, the abolitionist movement should support the WCCMH Millage as an evidence-based foundation for systemic change.

Background

The Impact of Mental Health and Addiction Criminalization on Black and Brown People

A disproportionate number of people with serious mental illness end up in jails unequipped to treat them. In 2014, 5% of the general population had a serious mental disorder, compared to 17% of the jail population[1]. While 8% of the general population has a diagnosable substance use disorder, the rates among incarcerated individuals are much higher: 53% of state prisoners and 68% of jail inmates[2]. In Michigan specifically, 20% of male inmates and 25% of female inmates had symptoms of severe mental disability[3]. Black and Brown residents are incarcerated at nearly seven times the rate of white residents in Michigan—worse than the 5:1 national average[4]. This overrepresentation compounds the harms of incarceration, including persistent psychological effects after release. Black men with incarceration histories report significantly worse mental health outcomes than their never-incarcerated counterparts, including 16% higher reported severity of discrimination and 14% higher severity of depression[5].

Restorative Justice, Alternate Response, and Behavioral Diversion Efforts

Alternate response programs began in 1988 with the Memphis Crisis Intervention Team (CIT). Behavioral diversion programs date back to the 1970s and 1980s in states like New York, Florida, and California. More recent models—such as Denver's Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) and Eugene, Oregon's Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS)—combine alternate response and behavioral diversion approaches. A growing number of states have also incorporated restorative justice into law and policy, including Colorado in 2013, California in 2016, and Massachusetts in 2018.

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[1] Fred Osher and Phyllis Potter, *Addressing a National Crisis: The Justice Center's Focus on Mental Health and Jails* (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, October 2015).
[2] "NRRC Facts & Trends," *Council of State Governments Justice Center*, November 29, 2016, https://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/facts-and-trends/.
[3] Michigan Department of Corrections. *Report to the Legislature Pursuant to P.A. 114 of 2009, Section 302: Mental Health Independent Study*. 2010. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/2010_Boilerplate_302_Final_Version_316653_7.pdf.
[4] Ashley Nellis, *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons* (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2016).
[5] Shervin Assari et al., "Discrimination Fully Mediates the Effects of Incarceration History on Depressive Symptoms and Psychological Distress Among African American Men," *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 5, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 243–52, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-017-0364-y.

The Economic Impact of Mass Incarceration on Black and Brown Communities

Formerly incarcerated people in Michigan face an unemployment rate nearly five times higher than the general population, with even higher rates among Black Michiganders[6]. Formerly incarcerated Black women experience extreme economic hardship, with median annual earnings of less than $11,000[7]. The economic damage deepens across generations—incarcerated parents, who are disproportionately Black and Brown, are less able to provide financial stability for their children, deepening the cycle of poverty[8].

Economic Opportunity Programs for Returning Citizens

Efforts to provide economic opportunity for formerly incarcerated individuals include both state-led and abolitionist-aligned initiatives. In Michigan, the Department of Corrections launched Vocational Village in 2016 to provide prisoners with skilled trades training. Abolitionist-aligned programs such as Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi, ChiFresh Kitchen in Chicago, and Drive Change in New York City aim to create economic opportunity outside the criminal legal system through community-rooted alternatives.

Options Analysis

This memorandum analyzes two programs that aim to disrupt the carceral pipeline at different points—prevention and re-entry. It compares the Washtenaw County Community Mental Health program, which focuses on diverting individuals with behavioral health and addiction needs from incarceration, with the Grand River@14th Social Justice Hub, which seeks to provide economic opportunity and community support for returning citizens.

OPTION 1: Grand River @ 14th

GR@ 14th emerged from community engagement efforts by Designing Justice during their work on the neighboring LOVE Building. The project focuses on three areas: restorative justice, food and retail, and digital media and fabrication. It is "intended to be a national model for what to build instead of prisons, and contribute to the vision of Detroit becoming the country's first restorative justice city." The project is being developed in collaboration with community members affected by mass incarceration, including a Community Activators Board composed of local leaders and "pop-up" activations—small-scale, evolving installations that reflect neighborhood needs and inform long-term development. The ultimate goal is to create a replicable model in which local businesses generate economic opportunities for returning citizens[9].

Raphael Sperry, a prominent prison abolitionist and current president of Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility, serves on the board of Designing Justice. Sperry led the Prison Design Boycott for Alternatives to Incarceration, and from 2012 to 2020 successfully petitioned the American Institute of Architects to prohibit the design of execution and solitary confinement facilities.

Pros

- Fully independent of law enforcement and the carceral system, aligning with abolitionist calls for non-police, community-rooted solutions.

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[6] Prison Policy Initiative, "Out of Prison & Out of Work," accessed May 19, 2025, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html.
[7] Prison Policy Initiative, *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019*, accessed May 19, 2025, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html.
[8] Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, accessed May 19, 2025, https://ellabakercenter.org/reports/who-pays/.
[9] "Grand River @ 14th," *Designing Justice + Designing Spaces*, accessed May 19, 2025, https://designingjustice.org/grand-river-14th/.

- GR@14th aligns with Raphael Sperry's argument that "we shouldn't be designing prisons and jails. We need to be doing community reinvestment and designing jail alternatives."

Cons

- The LOVE Building displaced an existing artist community prior to launching its own community-led process, raising concerns about this project's ability to align with its stated values[10].
- Scalability: Without public funding, projects like GR@14th often serve dozens or hundreds—not the thousands impacted by incarceration each year.

OPTION 2: Washtenaw County Community Mental Health (WCCMH) Millage

The WCCMH Millage supports several initiatives that divert individuals in crisis from the criminal justice system. The Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion and Deflection program (LEADD) provides intensive case management as an alternative to arrest. The Crisis Negotiation Team pairs mental health professionals with sheriff's deputies to de-escalate high-risk situations, such as suicide threats. Ypsilanti Township's Co-Response Unit focuses on individuals experiencing homelessness and behavioral health challenges. WCCMH also operates a 24/7 unarmed crisis team that offers phone-based support[11].

The millage also funds expanded substance use services, providing a single point of entry for individuals and families. Expanded referrals, once limited to just two providers based on birthdate, are now tailored to the caller's needs and preferences. In addition, the WCCMH Millage supports both emergency housing placements and permanent supportive housing for individuals with behavioral health conditions[11].

In response to rising rates of mental illness, suicide, and social isolation among local youth, the millage prioritizes a broad range of school- and community-based services in underserved areas. These include psychiatric care, advocacy, family support, recreational programming, and in-school behavioral health services[11].

The WCCMH Millage initiatives are evidence-based and undergo rigorous, independent, peer-reviewed evaluation. The LEADD program is evaluated by the Center for Health Research and Transformation (CHRT), a nonprofit housed at the University of Michigan. The Co-Response Unit is being studied by the University of Chicago's Urban Health Lab, while the mobile crisis team is evaluated by Wayne State's Center for Behavioral Health and Justice[12]. In addition, the WCCMH Millage also participates in a complex systems modeling initiative with CHRT and the University of North Carolina. This project includes the development of dashboards that track, among other metrics, treatment bed availability—helping communities shift from systems of detention to systems of care[13].

Pros

- In 2023 alone, the unarmed crisis team handled 2,628 calls, and 1,965 people were connected to substance use resources. Overall, the number of individuals receiving mental health treatment through WCCMH has doubled

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[10] Steve Neavling, "Oh, the Irony! Nonprofit Displaces Artists in Detroit to Fight Gentrification," *Detroit Metro Times*, accessed January 6, 2025, https://www.metrotimes.com/news/oh-the-irony-nonprofit-displaces-artists-in-detroit-to-fight-gentrification-21921378.

[11] *WCCMH Millage Impact Report 2023*. Accessed January 16, 2025. https://www.washtenaw-mentalhealthmillage-impact.org/.

[12] "A Q&A with Lisa Gentz on WCCMH's Approach to Evaluating Millage Initiatives." *Washtenaw County, MI*. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://meetings.washtenaw.org/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=2765&ARC=5714.

[13] "Applying Complex Systems Modeling to Understand and Strengthen Washtenaw County's Local Acute Mental Health Crisis Care System." *Center for Health & Research Transformation (CHRT)*. Accessed January 21, 2025. https://chrt.org/project/modeling-washtenaw-countys-lmental-health-crisis-care-system/.

with Millage funding —from approximately 2,000 to 4,000 annually. Citizens are being treated for behavioral health and addiction needs rather than detained[11].
- The Millage allows WCCMH partners with more than 20 local organizations—from youth programs to housing initiatives—and allocates over $500,000 annually to outreach and education, reinforcing a long-term commitment to behavioral health and community well-being[11].

Cons
- Continues partnerships with law enforcement—including armed co-response units—which may conflict with abolitionist commitments to fully non-police responses.
- WCCMH staffing does not sufficiently reflect the Black and Brown communities most impacted by incarceration and criminalization.

Evaluation Criteria
When deciding the best approach to end mass incarceration, the abolitionist movement should consider political feasibility, ease of implementation, and alignment with long-term systems change.

- **Political feasibility:** Policies must operate within—or strategically challenge—existing political conditions. Given public safety concerns, perceptions of law enforcement, and differing levels of support for decarceral policies across regions, political feasibility involves the ability to sustain voter support and navigate legislation. Every policy has opponents. The strength of this opposition is a major consideration.
- **Ease of Implementation:** Effective initiatives must have the administrative infrastructure, staffing, funding mechanisms, and legal authority to operate in the short term. Programs that require major policy shifts or new laws often face delays or fail under bureaucratic or legal challenges.
- **Alignment with Lasting Systems Change:** The creation of alternatives to policing, punishment, and incarceration is a long-term project. Programs must lay the groundwork for systemic transformation, even when they work within imperfect systems today.

Recommendation
Based on these criteria, I recommend prioritizing support for the WCCMH Millage. Implemented in 2018, the millage is fully operational and embedded within the community. It is actively diverting individuals from detention, and requires no new legislation. The abolitionist movement need not endorse every aspect of WCCMH Millage's approach, but it should recognize its current impact, as it continues building toward a non-carceral future. Supporting the millage does not compromise abolitionist ideals—it advances them.

Long-term sustainability depends on continued voter support, but early signs are encouraging. The original 2017 millage passed with 64% of the vote, and its renewal received 69%, suggesting that voters are increasingly open to non-punitive responses to public safety. While the millage's success is rooted in Washtenaw County's politics, its replication in other Southeast Michigan counties shows promise. Voters in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties approved a tri-county millage that raises $28.6 million annually for the Detroit Institute of Arts. That public support indicates a willingness to fund community goods—suggesting voters may also back investments in community mental health. Currently, the WCCMH staff is indicative of the broader national disparity in the racial composition of care workers but the millage funding has created pathways to address it. Notably, the LEADD program has begun actively recruiting and hiring formerly incarcerated Black and Brown individuals, helping build infrastructure that reflects the communities it serves.

Systemic inequality is deeply embedded and demands complex, strategic responses. Through its collaboration with the University of North Carolina, the WCCMH Millage uses data dashboards and systems modeling to guide resource allocation and strengthen the shift from detention to care. These tools are designed to demonstrate—through rigorous

evidence—that care is not only more equitable than incarceration, but also more cost-effective. Unfortunately, this proof remains necessary to win over skeptical audiences and maintain political support.

GR@14th represents a powerful and visible investment in a community long harmed by incarceration. Symbolically, it marks a critical shift: from punishment to healing. But while the vision is compelling, the policy infrastructure needed to support it does not yet exist. There is currently no legislative or funding framework in Michigan that enables the creation of restorative justice centers fully independent from carceral systems. The Restorative Justice Enabling Act (HB 5987), which could provide that framework, has stalled in committee. Despite popular slogans like #AbolishThePolice, efforts to fully dismantle law enforcement—such as Seattle's Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone—are polarizing[14]. The absence of legislative grounding for the GR@14th model puts its long-term viability at risk. The project's success also relies heavily on small business development. Yet 65% of new businesses fail[15], raising serious questions about economic sustainability over time. Without structural support—such as stable policy, funding mechanisms, and legal protections—relying solely on entrepreneurial success to sustain a justice model is risky.

There is historical precedent for such risks. Housing projects, specifically the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis attempted to resolve deep social issues through architectural design alone. Its failure, now often cited as the symbolic "death of modernism," was not due to poor design but to the absence of structural solutions for racism, disinvestment, segregation, and inequality[16]. Still, GR@14th serves as a valuable and necessary complement to the WCCMH Millage. Its experimental nature offers a bold demonstration of justice beyond incarceration. But in the absence of legislative traction or long-term sustainability, it is not yet ready to anchor a strategy for reallocating public funds or reshaping systems.

No single program can dismantle incarceration overnight. But the WCCMH Millage offers a rare combination of scale, evidence, and systems-level engagement that abolitionists can embrace as a step toward transformative justice. Refusing to engage with programs like this risks leaving millions in public funding on the table—resources that will otherwise be absorbed into more carceral, less accountable systems. Even initiatives tied to police can shift power, redistribute resources, and create conditions for deeper change. Abolitionists need wins that scale—not just statements of principle.

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[14] Nellie Bowles, "Abolish the Police? Those Who Survived the Chaos in Seattle Aren't So Sure," *New York Times*, August 7, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/07/us/defund-police-seattle-protest.html.
[15] "Entrepreneurship and the U.S. Economy," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed May 19, 2025, https://www.bls.gov/bdm/entrepreneurship/entrepreneurship.htm.
[16] Katharine G. Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44, no. 3 (May 1991): 163–171, https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1991.11102687.