

# Greater Riverside SRT Starting Over Event Summary

March 7, 2024

## Purpose of Event

Starting Over, Inc combines direct services with civic engagement and public policy work. By addressing homelessness, recidivism, and reentry, this organization helps homeless men, women and children transition away from homelessness and the often-associated cycles of poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, and recidivism.

During the listening session, 30 attendees participated in large-group discussions and breakout sessions in which participants used sticky notes to capture and organize their responses to discussion questions. In addition, 8 participants stayed after the event to participate in 5-minute recorded interviews to share their personal experiences navigating barriers to accessing jobs. Participants discussed barriers to quality jobs and a high quality of life faced by formerly incarcerated individuals and offered their solutions to these barriers.

Participants were asked a range of questions:

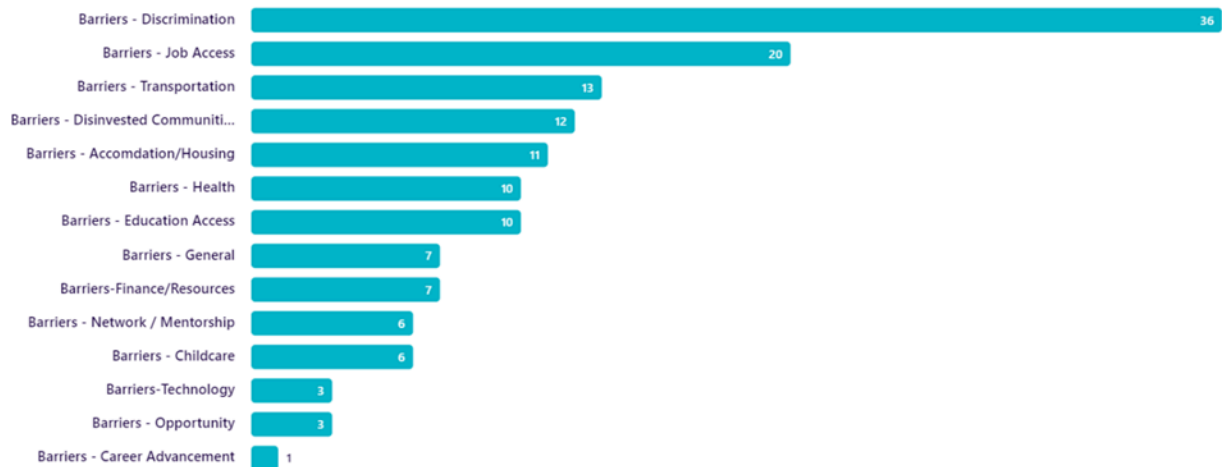
1. *What is their biggest barrier?*
2. *What communities are affected and how?*
3. *What solutions could solve their barriers?*
4. *How can we do better?*

When participants were asked these questions, they sometimes discussed multiple questions at once. For example, In responding to a question about potential solutions, one participant began talking about a solution, and then transitioned into discussing related barriers. Given the overlap of participants' responses, the analysis and summary below has been organized into two larger questions about barriers and solutions. We summarized the themes that received the most number of mentions and also those themes that were identified as top priorities by participants during their breakout sessions. Participants indicated their top priorities by starring or writing their initials next to the themes.

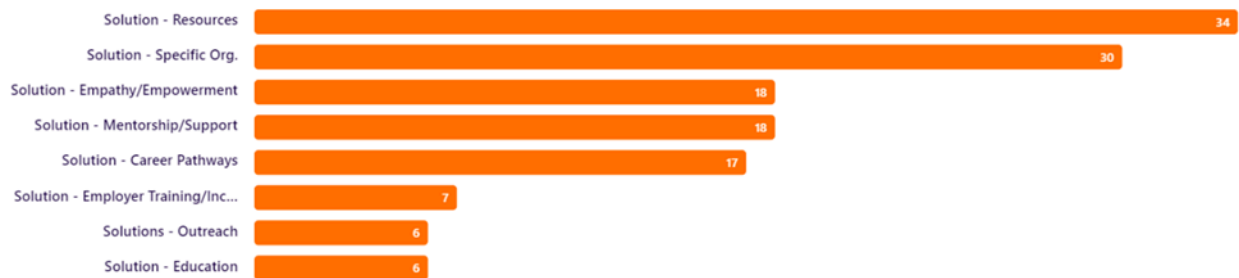
# Summary of Questions

In the charts below, the number refers to the number of times a theme was mentioned; each person was able to contribute multiple ideas. For example, some of the 30 participants mentioned the phrase “discrimination” as a barrier 36 times.

What is the biggest barrier to quality jobs and high quality of life?



What solutions help overcome these barriers?



## Key Themes

The barriers and solutions presented by the participants are highly intersectional; all themes overlap and impact each other to create a larger picture of the experiences of these individuals. The top themes serve as a guide for areas that need the greatest attention according to the participants.

# Barriers

The top three reoccurring themes when asked for their greatest barrier were *discrimination, job access, and transportation.*

## Barriers - Discrimination

Participants felt their backgrounds, even minor offenses, prevented them from being able to access opportunities despite their qualifications. Several shared being denied jobs specifically due to their legal records. Racism and judgmental attitudes were also discussed as barriers. Finally, appearance - including tattoos, clothing, and speech patterns - led to discrimination, preventing them from achieving a high quality of life i.e., a good job, housing, and resources.

Solutions offered included enforcing policies like "Ban the Box," removing background check requirements, providing equal employment opportunities, eliminating discrimination in affordable housing, and giving second chances to the formerly incarcerated. Some felt employer education on reducing bias and discrimination could help. Overall, participants sought opportunities to prove themselves and not be defined by past mistakes.

## Barriers – Job Access

Participants indicated that there are not enough good paying jobs available in the Inland SoCal region. Overall, lack of local employment and barriers to employment for the formerly incarcerated are presented as issues that lead to broader economic and social problems. Some employers are unwilling to hire formerly incarcerated people. Even when jobs are available, wages may be unfairly low for those with records.

Several people in the document advocate for more "felon friendly" hiring practices to be adopted by employers. Multiple people call for more job training initiatives that actually help connect people to quality local jobs. More inclusive hiring and access to living-wage jobs are suggested as solutions.

## Barriers – Transportation

Transportation was a major issue discussed during the event. Several speakers mentioned relying on public transportation or getting rides due to not having a driver's license. One speaker had been incarcerated for a year and now had to use public transit or Uber. Another speaker could not get their license until December. The lack of transportation made it difficult for some speakers to access resources, apply for jobs, or get to transitional or affordable housing within their county. One speaker felt there were more programs in LA County and that people were being sent there even if they were originally from Riverside County, which they felt lacked resources.

Some suggestions were made to improve transportation access, like volunteer taxis, more funding for public transit, carpool services, and phones or devices to map routes.

## Solutions

**When asked directly for solutions, participants most often responded by indicating a need for *resources* and gave specific names of organizations. Themes of *empathy/empowerment* and *mentorship/support* were also most common in the responses.**

### Solutions – Resources

Participants discussed the need for more resources and support for formerly incarcerated individuals transitioning back into society. They mention that some existing programs, like the Scholars program and Starting Over, provide financial assistance, housing, peer support, and help finding jobs. However, many individuals, including those on probation or parole, lack awareness and access to such programs.

Suggestions include expanding funding and outreach for transitional programs, setting up business startup grants, offering in-school education about re-entry opportunities, and addressing basic needs like food, clothes, and transportation access. Specific examples are given of services found helpful by Starting Over participants, like temporary free housing, savings matching, and rent/deposit assistance. However, the overarching theme is that there are not enough supportive transitional programs available, nor sufficient funding and coordination to connect those in need with existing resources. Participants said more can be done through government, community, and private initiatives to set returning citizens up for success rather than struggles with homelessness, unemployment, and recidivism.

### Solutions – Specific Organizations

Organizations mentioned:

*Raising Scholars (5), Starting Over (4), 211 (3), Chaffey College, RCC, Project Rebuild, Score.org, Last Mile Coding Company, Path to Seed, City Net Hope, SOI Transition Program, Ready for Life, Kindful Restoration, Liberty Ranch, Transitioning Minds, Loving Well, Underground Scholars, Justice through Code, Alanna, CalWorks, Victory Outreach Church*

The listed organizations were called out by name as organizations that are meeting the needs and expectations of the individuals at the event. Participants noted that these organizations are providing resources such as financial, housing, and transportation assistance as well as providing much needed *mentorship and support* for formerly incarcerated individuals while navigating their unique situations.

## Solutions – Mentorship & Support

Participants emphasized the importance of one-on-one mentorship programs to help guide people towards education, jobs, housing, and peer support. They advocate for equal access to re-entry programs, especially in economically disadvantaged areas.

The goal would be to provide the resources and training necessary for successful transitions, so those who receive support can eventually give back by mentoring others in need. Specific suggestions include small business incubation programs to motivate entrepreneurship, as well as bringing in guest speakers to inspire youth that success is possible.

Overall, people called for expanded funding and outreach for re-entry initiatives and programs, with an emphasis on sustained individual guidance to firmly establish people in their career.

## Solutions – Empathy & Empowerment

Empathy and empowerment within the context of the event means giving people a chance and not judging them based on their backgrounds or past mistakes. Participants emphasized that we all have different life experiences and humanity should be more open-minded and willing to hire those with criminal histories or who are homeless. The speakers urge listening to marginalized communities and humanizing the experience of struggling.

Several solutions were provided, such as businesses being more open to hiring and training those without traditional educations. Employers should consider how applicants can use their existing skills productively rather than dismissing them due to previous offenses. Understanding and empathy from those in power can uplift people from difficult circumstances through encouragement and connection. If problems like homelessness and recidivism are to be tackled, the focus should be on more equal opportunity and nonjudgment.

## Sticky Note Prioritization

Upon completion of the sticky note discussion activity, participants were asked which barriers and solutions should be prioritized. Individuals tallied which sticky note they viewed as their highest priority and the notes with the highest votes for prioritization were marked with either an asterisks or circled. Three groups (G1,2,3) participated in prioritization. G1 did not prioritize any solutions. G4 did not complete the prioritization exercise.

The results of the prioritization exercise echo the larger themes of the event. Individuals chose to prioritize barriers related to *discrimination* due to their criminal background, *lack of funding* and *financial resources*, issues related to *transportation*—such as not having a device with which they can map public transportation and limited public transportation options, *awareness*, *confidence*, *a lack of available jobs*, and *lack of supportive services* overall. The solutions

individuals chose to prioritize reflect the barriers noted; they want better access to *resources, employment, housing, transportation, technology, and support.*

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Priority</b>
Background checks/criminal background	prioritized by 2 out of 3 groups
Confidence	prioritized by 1 out of 3 groups
Transportation/Bus Routes	prioritized by 1 out of 3 groups
Financial crisis	prioritized by 1 out of 3 groups
Lack of a good job	prioritized by 1 out of 3 groups
Lack of supportive services	prioritized by 1 out of 3 groups
Awareness	prioritized by 1 out of 3 groups