

Project Return FY 2020 Direct Appropriation Request

1. What services does your organization provide to the residents of Davidson County?

We provide opportunities for successful, productive lives after imprisonment. This not only directly benefits the men and women who enroll, by the hundreds each year, in our programs and services, but also is a boon to the public safety and prosperity of the entire county. Project Return is in its 40th year of delivering reentry assistance to people who land on the downtown streets of Nashville after being released from prisons and jails across the region and state. We were founded by Reverends Bill Barnes and Don Beisswenger, local visionaries who agonized over the nearly insurmountable odds faced by people coming back from prison. The mission of Project Return is to provide services and connect people with resources needed to return successfully to work and community after incarceration. Our vision is a full and free life after incarceration.

Employment Readiness and Ongoing Support

Our primary focus is employment – because that is the #1 predictor of a free future – and we wrap that around with a full array of assistance and signature support. We coach people through their job search, acquisition, advancement, and retention. We begin by providing food, transportation, and clothing as needed to participants, who participate in our Job Readiness (soft skills) program, a 2.5-day curriculum specifically developed for people who have been incarcerated. Our Job Readiness curriculum addresses the array of soft skills needed to be successful in the workplace, and additionally incorporates financial literacy, relapse prevention, interview practice, and digital literacy. Completion of our Job Readiness classes leads to a structured day of individualized assistance, including résumé development, mock interviewing, and job search planning. And this is just the beginning of our ongoing assistance and support. Our work is relationship-based, and our services are intensive, iterative, and individualized. Our service continuum is designed to spread over a course of about 15 months, with, additionally, a few discrete opportunities – entrepreneurship training, and affordable housing, for example – as well as ongoing assistance with employment, that arise in the years to follow. Unlike many organizations serving justice-involved people, Project Return is not a mandated program; rather, men and women choose to come to Project Return of their own volition.

Wraparound Services

For any job acquisition, we provide participants with equipment, clothing, transportation, and ongoing coaching, including wraparound support, encouragement, and feedback. We pair that employment-centered assistance with a wide array of wraparound services and ongoing support to address their immediate, critical needs, such as: paying for medical, dental, and vision exams; connecting them to mental health and substance abuse support services; purchasing birth certificates and photo IDs; providing food, clothing, and bus passes; and dispensing stipends for housing and utility expenses. Additional programs at Project Return

include child support services, job retention services, and hard skills training courses, as well as an entrepreneurship program.

Social Enterprise & Immediate Employment

We offer the opportunity for immediate employment through our transitional jobs social enterprise, Project Return Opportunities for Employment (PROe). We are people's best first job after prison! With PROe, we bridge the terrible gap between incarceration and regular employment; our transitional employees gain income, work experience, personalized coaching, and, most importantly, a pathway to their brighter future.

2. How many residents are your currently serving and how do they benefits?

Last year, Project Return provided our signature services and support to a total of 1,273 individuals across Davidson County. Of those 1,273 people, 556 started anew with Project Return in 2018. They typically have no ID, a few dollars in their pocket, the clothes they're wearing, no job prospects, and no family to connect with. They come to Project Return because they gain job opportunities and ongoing, wraparound support. With the help of Project Return, more than 4 out of 5 people get employed. In 2018, we had an 81% job acquisition rate. This is the direct opposite of the common experience for those who are returning to the community; research shows that between 60 to 75% of people remain unemployed for their first entire year after prison. Not only does Project Return help individuals find and keep jobs, we help people stay free from the criminal justice system. Our recidivism rate in 2018 was 18%, while state and national rates far exceed 50%.

Our employment-focused services and support provide our participants with a number of benefits. To propel motivated people into employment, we are coaching and building job readiness through our in-house curriculum, all while building relationships with employers across the community. We offer the opportunity for temporary employment through PROe, giving them the benefit of immediate income, on-the-job coaching, ongoing assistance (including transportation to and from work), and an invaluable work experience that will propel them to long-term employment. In addition to our employment-related services, we provide other necessary supportive services that address their immediate, critical needs such as paying for medical, dental, and vision exams; connecting them to mental health and substance abuse support services; purchasing birth certificates and photo IDs; providing food, clothing, and bus passes; and dispensing stipends for housing and utility expenses. We recognize that without these critical needs being met, it is practically impossible to maintain steady employment, and thus focus on providing our participants with everything that they need to succeed in the workplace.

3. How much funding are you requesting from Metro?

Project Return is requesting \$200,000 for Fiscal Year 2020.

4. If funding is awarded, how many additional residents will be served and how will they benefit?

With the requested amount, Project Return will be able to serve an additional 25 participants, at \$8,000 per participant for the entire 12-15 months that they are enrolled in our services. All of these participants will be eligible for our free-of-charge services, which begin as soon as an individual walks through our door, starting with our orientation process, and then moving on to our Job Readiness courses. Services during our Job Readiness course includes: bus passes for transportation assistance; food bags; housing, clothing, and food referrals, and more. Once a participant has completed our Job Readiness course, they are eligible for more services, including: obtaining ID documentation; medical, dental, and vision assistance; court cost consultations and child support services; rent and utility assistance; and more. They also participate in a structured day of individualized assistance, which includes résumé development, individualized job search strategy, and mock interviews. Participants who are then hired on through PROe are also eligible for the following additional services: transportation to and from their place of employment; individual on-the-job coaching from our PROe coaches; budgeting assistance, and enrollment into our Job Retention program, through which participants receive up to one year of supportive services from Project Return.

Our participants not only benefit from our signature services, but are also met with encouragement and ongoing support from our staff as soon as they walk through our doors. We deliberately make our work person-centered, and this is all the more important when considering the dehumanizing experience from which our people are emerging, where they were literally a number and were subject to complete control. Stepping into the Project Return lobby, one is greeted with warmth, kindness, compassion, and confidence. We intentionally avoid social service constructs of case management, terminology like “pro-social,” correctional processes like “intakes” and “risk assessments,” and even basic clinical-type practices like appointments – all so that we can function as humanely and personally authentic as possible, building relationships, as well as trust, through our programs and services, delivered genuinely and without a pathologizing patina.

5. In addition to serving more residents, are there other community benefits Metro funding would help you achieve?

Public Safety

While we provide opportunities for people’s successful, productive lives after imprisonment, this not only directly benefits those men and women, but also is a boon to the public safety and prosperity of the entire county. Individuals are being released from prisons and jails and they typically land, penniless and prospectless, on the streets of downtown Nashville. In their destitution, they are a threat to public safety, a drain on the local economy, and a burden on our public services. We meet their need and motivation with opportunity and signature support. With Metro funding, Project Return can achieve the community benefits of public safety and economic uplift. By fostering people’s employment and self-

sustainability, we are adding to the workforce of Davidson County and giving more of its residents the opportunity to be productive members of the community.

Economic Development

In addition to serving our participants on a daily basis, Project Return is also able to contribute to the economic development of Nashville through our social enterprises. Since the launch of PROe, our transitional employment social enterprise, in 2013, we have achieved year-over-year growth, securing new employment contracts with businesses in Nashville every year, and employing an immense number of people who deserve a second chance. Our business development team works within the community, building relationships and making connections to countless employers throughout Nashville, all to the effect of meeting the workforce needs of employers while reducing the stigma associated with hiring people with conviction histories. Now in its sixth year, PROe has provided real-world work experience to more than 660 people, paying them collectively more than \$1.2M in wages while propelling them into regular employment and successful new lives across Nashville and Middle Tennessee.

Equitable Housing

Project Return preserves and restores affordable housing across Nashville. In 2017, Project Return launched its second social enterprise, Project Return Opportunities for Housing (PROh), an innovative, scattered-site affordable housing initiative designed to meet the permanent housing needs of people who have returned from incarceration. Through PROh, we acquire and rehab residential properties for permanent, affordable rental housing to lease to hard-working Nashvillians who have left prison behind. Since launch, Project Return has acquired and rehabbed 16 homes for rent to people with conviction histories. By purchasing small older duplexes and similar properties, Project Return helps to preserve a deeply needed source of housing in Nashville's real estate market.

Business Leadership

Lastly, within the human services nonprofit sector, Project Return strives to hold out a model of extraordinary performance and business excellence, doing our part to elevate this realm of work. In 2017, we won the Chamber of Commerce's Regional Impact Award for our strides in business development and economic inclusion. In 2018, Project Return was a finalist for a NEXT Award from the Entrepreneur Center for our latest start-up social enterprise, and we are currently a finalist for the Nashville Business Journal's 2019 Best in Business Award. Relatedly, innovation is a part of our company culture, and, with our third social enterprise now underway, we are in the vanguard of our industry, taking nonprofit sustainability to a higher level and owning our destiny as a company while remaining mission-focused and true to the people we exist to serve.

- 6. How would you use this funding to help create a more equitable Nashville, where all residents have an opportunity to participate in the city's success?**

Project Return is committed to creating a more equitable Nashville with a focus on social and economic mobility at both the individual level and with businesses. We give the marginalized, excluded, and left-behind residents of Nashville the support to lead independent and productive lives, thereby leveling the playfield and making Nashville a more equitable and inclusive place for all.

When men and women who are returning to our community after incarceration are connected with opportunities for employment, and wrapped around with resources and supportive services and coaching, they are able to gain jobs, lead productive new lives, and leave prison behind. Men and women leave prison with no income or employment prospects, a few dollars in their pocket, one set of clothing, tens of thousands of dollars in debt from fees charged throughout their involvement with the criminal justice system, limited-to-no housing options, no identification, and tremendous stigma. About 65% are homeless or will live in transitional (short-term, privately run) halfway housing, and the rest are staying temporarily with a friend or family member. More than half of the people coming through Project Return did not graduate high school, and less than 20% will have had any college or technical schooling. Additionally, less than 1% are eligible to regain their voting rights at that point.

Additionally, mass incarceration epitomizes structural racism, and as criminal justice continues to be enacted in a racially disparate fashion, it is a primary driver of the social and economic inequities along racial lines that persist today. The unemployment rate for black Americans is still double that of white Americans, and one in three black men in this country can expect to be incarcerated in their lifetimes. In Tennessee, 17% of people are African American, but our incarcerated population is 44% African American. Black Nashvillians also disproportionately experience a range of illnesses and morality when compared to their white counterparts, and income and intergenerational wealth diverges along racial lines, as do educational outcomes. More than 20% of black Tennesseans are also unable to vote, based on felony disenfranchisement laws that are among the most restrictive in the country. Our work is at the core of racial equity in Nashville – Project Return gives those who have been marginalized by the criminal justice system a new opportunity for a free and productive life. By giving these individuals a second chance after incarceration, we are giving our entire community a second chance for racial equity.

Our participants' commonality is their determination to improve their futures, despite their criminal pasts. In the face of their hardship and crippling stigma, we create a welcoming and strengths-based atmosphere. We offer clarity of focus on their employment as the key to their success, and on empowerment through their diligence and hard work. We recognize their desire for a hand up, not a hand out. We are insistent on the worth of each individual, and we view all who come through our doors as human beings of hope and potential. Thus, our organization's approach for advancing and accelerating social and economic mobility amongst the people we serve is an aggressive prioritization of their employment, together with a relentless belief in their best selves, and an ends-of-the-earth assurance that they have what they need to be successful on the job, now and in the future.

We define social and economic mobility as the opportunity, first and foremost, for men and women who've been incarcerated to successfully and permanently extract themselves from that criminal justice system, as much as is allowed. And, beyond that, to begin to lead lives in which they experience a sense of belonging to the Nashville community as well as the opportunity to work and earn income. Further social and economic mobility comes from advancing in employment and finding meaning in work.

Additionally, through our relationship building with local employers, we have witnessed changes in mindsets towards hiring people with conviction histories. Employers who, a few short years ago, would never have considered hiring someone with a conviction history, are now employment partners with Project Return. Employers who have worked with us as employment partners share what great employees our people make for their company, and through informing and working with employers across Middle Tennessee, we are able to help meet their growing workforce needs. By engaging the community in which our people live and work, through active awareness building and word of mouth among our employment partners themselves, the resulting changes in hiring practices are transforming the business landscape, and creating a more equitable Nashville for all.