



2023 END-OF-YEAR REPORT

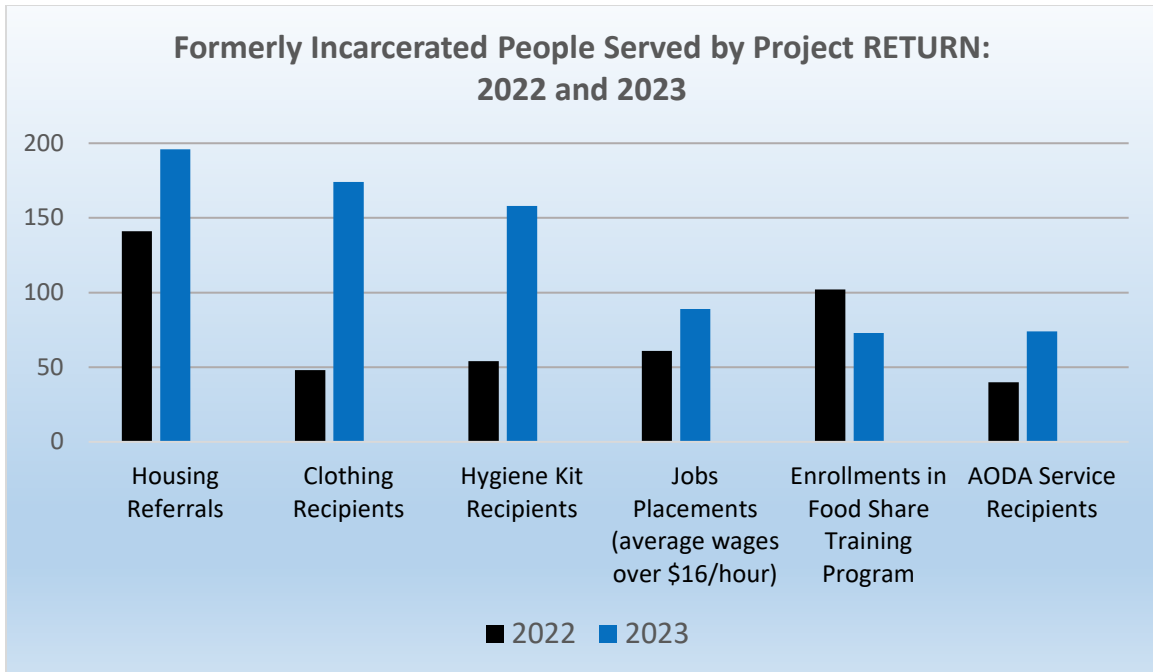
The challenges of re-entry have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic and severe staffing shortages within Wisconsin's prisons. Prison programming that was curtailed during the pandemic has returned slowly, if at all. Fewer of those returning to Milwaukee have received job skills training and other educational programming that was available in prisons prior to 2020.

Overview of Services

Project RETURN continues to meet people where they are—even though they are often several steps behind their counterparts of just a few years ago. We create an individualized plan to help each client access the resources needed for employment success. Examples of the services we provide include:

- Building employability skills and connecting people to specialized, short-term job training in high-demand occupations.
- Helping clients arrange transportation to get to and from training or work.
- Assisting with the cost of tuition or textbooks.
- Offering free, donated clothing from our resource room, as well as hygiene kits.
- Purchasing work tools or specialized, safety clothing.
- Helping people obtain food and housing.
- Providing training that prepares clients for leadership roles at work and in the community.

Our case managers, most of whom have been incarcerated themselves, work with clients on a flexible, individualized basis to help them meet their goals. The table below gives an overview of some of the services we provide:



Circles of Support

Our Circles of Support program continues to grow! These small groups meet regularly to provide a stable, supportive network to individuals returning from incarceration. They help to overcome the social isolation and stigma that those returning from incarceration encounter and enable them to realize new possibilities in their lives. Last year a record-setting 391 formerly incarcerated people participated in one of our 13 Circles. Additional Circles of Support are planned in 2024, including two that will be offered inside correctional facilities for individuals who are close to their release dates.

We are currently in the midst of a research collaboration with Marquette University and UWM to assess the impact of our Circles program on re-entry success and will be excited to share results when they become available mid-year.

At the core of our strategy—across all programs—is our reliance on peer specialists. We believe that formerly incarcerated people—board, staff, and volunteers—have insight and perspectives essential to our work. We prioritize their input and believe it should have a direct imprint on our work with clients, as well as our advocacy efforts.

Advocacy

Advocacy is essential in changing community mindsets and reducing systemic barriers to re-entry success. Along with other stakeholders, Project RETURN has advocated for added funding for Milwaukee County’s mental health treatment court. The goal of the treatment court is to break the cycle of criminal behavior for individuals struggling with mental illness through court-ordered, long-term behavioral health treatment with intensive court supervision. At one time a pilot project, the court now has a full-time coordinator and strong support from the Chief Judge of Milwaukee County’s Circuit Court.

Housing Initiative

As seen by the large number of clients who are desperate to find housing, too many people return home only to find they no longer have one. According to the report *Who's Coming Home?* (Data You Can Use, 2021), about 42% – or 1,042 people per year – of the individuals who return to Milwaukee from prison each year do not have a stable place to live. Research shows that finding stable housing within a month of release reduces the chances of returning to prison; conversely, individuals who enter a homeless shelter within the first two years after release are more likely to be re-incarcerated.

For years, Project RETURN has worked with landlords to open up housing opportunities to clients who are in need. We have seen our clients struggle repeatedly to find safe, affordable housing—a prerequisite to moving ahead in their lives. It is not easy to find and keep a job if you do not have a stable place to live! The Project RETURN Board of Directors is committed to moving ahead with plans to provide secure, affordable housing for people facing homelessness upon release from incarceration.

People We Have Served

The stories of the people Project RETURN serves are the best indicator of the importance of our work. Here are a few examples.

Tre

Tre became a client of Project RETURN on 8/23. Tre, like many of our clients, came in with housing and employment needs. While searching for employment and housing he would stop in weekly to have a 1 on 1 talks about things that were taking place in his life that were weighing heavy on him. After coming in for a couple months Tre found employment with and because of his new employment Tre was able to get housing as well.

Frank

Frank became a client with Project Return in the mid year of 2023. Frank came in, half beaten, full of bruises, cuts across his face etc. Frank was going through an emotional rollercoaster. He needed employment, housing, hygiene and most importantly someone to help him address his mental health needs. Frank came in for 1 on 1 sit downs with Project RETURN staff a couple time a month. We were able to get him in touch with one of our community partners, ALMA Center to address some of his anger behaviors. Staff at Project RETURN created a resume and he has gained employment making \$15.00 a hour. Frank comes in often to let us know that he is doing ok and is still working and going to groups. Frank is looking very well, his demeanor has changed for the better and he's in better spirits.

Wayne

Wayne was an individual that had visited our office in the Fall 2023, shortly after his release, riding on a bicycle. He was living in a transitional living facility (TLP) and his needs were extensive. Wayne was unemployed, with a limited amount of time to seek housing (as his TLP living arrangement was due to expire). Furthermore, he was listed as a sex offender with restricted residential living options and this created a high level of stress for him. Wayne enrolled into the Food Share Employment Training (FSET) program which immediately gave him some transportation for job searches, etc. Shortly thereafter, he received an opportunity for some

temporary services employment. His case manager at Project RETURN spoke with his parole agent in hopes of getting him into housing arrangements for registrants and his agent denied that option. Nonetheless, Wayne was persistent and found his own housing approved for sex offenders and moved into that living arrangement.

Soon after Wayne found his own housing, he came back to the office, and we began assisting him with job placements. He was introduced to Andre Brown, our employment specialist, who gave him some job leads. Throughout this process, Wayne was relentless, and just on the week of January 22nd, 2024, Wayne called to inform us that he has now received a better job. He is employed in Germantown working full time at \$17 an hour. He also took all necessary measures to reinstate his license and purchase a vehicle.

Wayne is truly the epitome of what we do here at Project RETURN. In fact, his assertiveness by being proactive throughout his efforts in finding housing, employment, and transportation has made him a model of success as it relates to reentry.

Sophia

Sophia is a former intern from Ohio, attending and enrolled in Marquette University's Reentry Internship Program. She started working with us in early September of 2022 and her undergraduate degree was in psychology. Her mentor has taken on the philosophy of being "hands-on" in terms of providing interns with an up-close and personal look into the lives of individuals who are marginalized and underserved in this community of Milwaukee Wisconsin. He wanted Sophia to "get her feet wet" quickly. In fact, Sophia was somewhat of an introvert, perhaps even a bit hesitant in approaching this demographic but quickly adjusted in terms of realizing that she was truly helping people in "real-time." Fortunately, the outreach work of Project RETURN broadened Sophia's scope from exclusively connecting with our primary population of serving justice impacted individuals and as a result, something amazing happened. Near the end of Sophia's internship, she had decided to stay in Milwaukee and was searching for employment. She interviewed specifically for a position in the realm of Food Share Employment Training (FSET) program, which her mentor coordinates for Project RETURN, and got the job! She literally became a FSET case manager! Allow us to quote a portion of an email we received from Sophia date 1/26/2024.

"Working in FSET helped me finally decide to pursue my Masters of Social Work. I am most passionate about helping people by addressing their lived experience with an empathetic perspective and working diligently to get them to where they need to be. I would of course have not gotten such an opportunity without working with you at Project RETURN, which in itself helped introduce me to working within the social services field."

Sophia's experience at Project RETURN changed her life! She left Milwaukee to return back home to Cleveland, Ohio, and enrolled in graduate school. This is a testament of our organization of not only assisting those who are most in need but in this case, creating exposure for others to look into our lens and inspire them enough to want to be a agent of change as well. Let us conclude this incredible story of success with another quote from my former intern.

"My time working at Project RETURN was invaluable in that it provided me with so many connections, experience and variety that truly helped me grow in a professional and personal sense. I honestly can't thank you enough for the mentorship you gave me."

Sidney

Sidney is a military veteran who was incarcerated for 32 months on a 48-month sentence. During Sidney's incarceration he made it a point and personal mission to assist other incarcerated Veterans in their journey of rehabilitation and integration. Once released Sidney was referred by the VA (Veteran Affairs) to Project RETURN. We worked with Sidney on resume and employment leads. Sidney also assisted us in navigating contact and communication with Veteran based organization/individuals. Because of these efforts Project RETURN is now in a partnership with the Veteran community. Here are 3 Veteran based organization's Project RETURN interacts with;

American Legion Post

Veteran Affairs (VA)

Center for Veteran Issue (CVI)

Sidney received his "Peer Support Specialist" certification at the very beginning of 2024. In February of 2024 Sidney was offered and accepted a position as a "Veteran Peer Support Specialist," making \$20 hour. In his role Sidney provides support to Veterans that come for a respite. Sidney continues to work with Project RETURN when his time allows.

Mary

Mary was referred to our program by her probation agent. She was struggling to get connected and find a new path for herself to heal. Mary was able to join our Circles of Support program and start getting connected to the community. She has since joined two different circles, has a new home in a good neighborhood, and is finally healing and taking care of herself. She has found a new smile and a reason to keep pushing. Mary was also able to successfully complete her probation by the end of 2023.

Shannon

The first time Shannon came to a Circle of Support he was not a firm believer that this was the right place for him. After three circles he was able to find and keep a city job. He is now driving for the city with a new home and a purpose to why he was able to come home. Shannon came back to circle last month and shared with us that since we last saw him he has gotten a raise, reconnected to family, and is gaining new experiences every day. He said that it would not have been possible without the support of Project RETURN and circles.

Swigert House Circle

There are multiple men in this Circle of Support. Because we were able to start a circle with this Halfway House, we were able to reach men when they are at their lowest and do not have a look to the future. They stay in this Alternative to Revocation (ATR) for about three months. Through this time we have been able to build up 45 men to leave the Swigert House with jobs and places to stay. They have been able to stay sober and use the connection and community of the circle to succeed and change the path of their lives.

Eric

Eric was referred to Project RETURN by the Public Defender's Office through the Mental Health Treatment Court, which Project RETURN assists in case management and as a court advocate. Eric was referred to our Circles of Support Program to find a supportive community that may address his social anxiety. Eric started to attend two separate Circles. Over time he became more comfortable with the groups and the staff of Project RETURN. Eric started having individual sessions with the program coordinator of our Circles of Support program who is also a mental health professional. Through these individual sessions Eric developed a re-entry plan that would put him on a path to success. Both he and the staff at Project RETURN recognized that he was in need of further training to achieve his career goals. As a result, the program coordinator for the Circles of Support spoke with our FSET Coordinator and got Eric enrolled in the program. Through FSET, Eric was able to get into training to obtain his Commercial Driver's License. Project RETURN staff then worked with Eric, all while he still attended the Circles of Support, to find stable employment utilizing his newly acquired CDL. Today, Eric is employed as a driver earning nearly \$100,000 annually. This was accomplished only because of a referral made to our Circles of Support program. Through this program Eric was able to gain confidence, address his anxiety and formulate his interests into a career path.

Velma

Velma is a client who has participated in our women's support group. She has gotten out of prison, found employment and housing. After years of instability, she has maintained employment and safe, stable housing for over a year now.

Velma's main goal was to live a drug and a crime-free lifestyle so she can someday be reunified with her 2 minor sons. She has been working very hard to meet all the requirements needed to have them home.

While maintaining her job and housing, Velma has continued to work with Project RETURN on life skills and mentoring services. She has completed all the programs that the Department of Corrections mandated of her.

Henry

Henry was living at the Milwaukee Rescue Mission when he heard about Project RETURN. He is an elderly man seeking employment and housing.

We helped him attain housing with through a partner organization and also got him connected with Ser-Jobs for people 55+ looking for employment. Henry is still employed and has stable housing that he can afford living on Social Security.

Financial Report

Finances were raised for the organization through individual donations, foundation grants, and two fund raisers (Golf Outing and Banquet). Workplace giving campaigns were also executed under the umbrella organization of the United Way.

Due to some restructuring of many grantors and the sunsetting of some granting partners, Project RETURN ran a deficit in 2023. The surplus from 2022 was more than the deficit in 2023, so the organization’s finances are still strong. There is a plan to correct the deficit in 2024.

Specific sources of revenue over \$5,000 are listed below under the heading they are designated in the budget.

Regional Church Bodies

- National Catholic Campaign for Human Development \$50,000

Foundations

- Reva & David Logan Foundation \$100,000
- Siebert Lutheran Foundation \$90,098
- United Way Reducing Barriers to Employment Grant \$75,000
- Forest County Potawatomi Foundation \$15,000
- Greater Milwaukee Foundation \$11,500
- National Christian Foundation \$10,000
- Patrick & Anne Cudahy Fund \$10,000
- Wisconsin Partnership Program \$9,500
- Anon Charitable Trust \$8,000
- Catholic Community Foundation \$7,500
- American Family Dream Foundation \$5,000
- Ralph Evinrude Foundation \$5,000

Collaborations

- FSET \$41,250
- Marquette University \$5,000

Individual Contributions

- Elaine Burke \$10,000
- Randy & Janet Peterson \$5,000
- Jeanne Kowalski \$5,000

During 2023 Project RETURN was led by Wendel Hruska, Executive Director, who reports to a fourteen-person Board of Directors. Members of the board are:

- Rob Schreiber, President
- Judge Patricia Gorence, Vice President
- Pam Gustafson, Comptroller
- William Harrell, Treasurer
- Ed de St. Aubin, Secretary
- Charles Hampton, Member
- Rev. Joe Ellwanger, Member
- Rodney Evans, Member
- Dr. Tom LaBel, Member
- Chris Avallone, Member
- Maggie Kuhn, Member
- Monte Mabra, Member

- Rev. David Rebey, Member

In 2024 the direct service and advocacy work of Project RETURN will continue and more lives will be changed by the work of the dedicated 7-person staff and over 50 committed volunteers. Our goal at Project RETURN is to work ourselves out of a job, to no longer be needed. For now, however, the need for our services continues to grow.

For more information about Project RETURN or the services we offer, please go to our website, www.projectreturnmilwaukee.org.