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NEWS: “Pathways to Prosperity” Symposium unites Milwaukee business leaders, Officials to boost employment for the formerly incarcerated

MILWAUKEE, WI—Oct. 14—Leaders of Milwaukee’s business community met today with Lt. Governor Rebecca Kleefisch and state and city officials to discuss promoting employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated adults.

Lt. Governor Kleefisch joined with Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, state legislators, and administrators from the corrections and labor departments to emphasize how city and regional business leaders can join initiatives and navigate the hurdles and benefits to hiring people with criminal records.

Around 30 leaders of local businesses attended, some of whom have no previous experience employing or engaging the reentry population. Groups from across the political spectrum are now beginning to recognize that, for millions of Americans, a criminal conviction can lead to a lifetime of diminished employment opportunities.

Milwaukee has taken steps this year to increase its knowledge and application of advanced reentry approaches. In addition to engaging the business community, the city is currently participating in a pilot project through the National Reentry Resource Center (NRRRC), an initiative of the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center.

Wednesday’s breakfast is part of a growing conversation nationwide between business leaders and policymakers on improving employment outcomes for individuals with criminal records. It is modeled after a national event held in June 2014 at the White House and is inspired by “State Pathways to Prosperity,” an initiative supported by the CSG Justice Center.

“Our goal is to create that essential connection between those reentering society after incarceration and the employers who form the backbone of our economy,” Lt. Governor Kleefisch said. “Clearing the pathways to allow someone to reenter a productive line of work helps them earn a living, establishes their roots back in the community, and benefits our public safety.”

Hosted by the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board (MAWIB) and Milwaukee Reentry Network (MRN), Wednesday’s meeting included Sen. Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee) and Rep. Rob Hutton (R-Brookfield). Panels combined perspectives from across the workforce and corrections systems, including Department of Corrections Assistant Deputy Secretary Don Friske and Department of Workforce Development Secretary Reggie Newson.

“By leveraging the abilities of all Wisconsinites who want to work, including those who are returning to the community following incarceration, we can fill employers’ demand for skilled workers and create a win-win for businesses, working families, and public safety,”

Secretary Newson said. "We look forward to advancing innovative, demand-driven training partnerships that expand opportunities for those returning to the workforce."

Data shows Milwaukee County's unemployment rate is 5.4 percent, markedly higher than the 3.9 percent rate across Wisconsin. And research shows that unemployment is even more prevalent for people with criminal records.

Trends among Milwaukee's reentry population were presented by Ray Woodruff, Reentry Employment Coordinator at the Department of Corrections, and by analysts from the CSG Justice Center, who are working to develop a system of assessment-driven referrals in Milwaukee as part of the Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies (IRES) pilot project. This effort will impact the estimated 2,400 people released each year from state DOC facilities into Milwaukee County, as well as the vast number of individuals living in the region with criminal records.

"We are a nation of second chances. When we help people reach for a second chance and ensure they get the tools and training they need to succeed, we reap the economic and societal benefits," said Sen. Lena Taylor. "I applaud the businesses eager to be good community partners by participating in this event. I hope it produces results across our region."

"Local business leaders have shown today that they have the initiative and commitment to help all sectors of Milwaukee's reentering workforce find and retain employment," Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett said. "Our city and region support these efforts, and recognize the work of the many stakeholders who support our innovative approach."

To coincide with Wednesday's discussion, the NRRC released a factsheet, "**The Consideration of Criminal Records in Hiring Decisions.**" The guide, available online at www.csgjusticecenter.org, advises policymakers on the impact of fair hiring practices among a reentry workforce, as well as considerations for successful implementation.

Wednesday's event was endorsed by groups including Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development; Wisconsin Department of Corrections; CSG Justice Center's NRRC; Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership/Building Industry Group Skilled Trades Employment Program (WRTP/BIG STEP); Center for Self-Sufficiency; and the Milwaukee Achiever Literacy Services.

About the Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies (IRES) Pilot:

The IRES pilot project tests innovative strategies to reduce recidivism and increase job readiness for individuals with criminal records. The pilot project builds cross-systems coordination among corrections, workforce development agencies, and community-based service providers on a scale rarely seen in the field. This allows agencies to apply resources based on an assessment-driven referral process, with the aim of improving outcomes for recidivism and employment. Through its pilot sites, IRES aims to provide a replicable framework for organizing systems in a cost-effective way. The project is being supported through a public-private partnership between the U.S. Department of Justice and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor.

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