



Decarcerate Groups Memorandum of Support Unemployment Bridge Program (S3192 / A4821)

March 7th, 2023

Dear Governor Hochul, Speaker Heastie, and Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins,

As organizations representing currently and formerly incarcerated people and people in re-entry, we write to you in support of the **Unemployment Bridge Program (S3192 / A4821)**, a transformative program that would provide 750,000 workers across New York State with access to unemployment compensation for the first time in New York's history. Not only would this program be a lifeline for undocumented workers and self-employed workers who are shut out of the safety net now, but it would also be life-changing for New Yorkers who have been recently released from incarceration.

Incarcerated New Yorkers are forced to work for the state for just pennies per hour, making essential products from license plates to state uniforms. **Many of the desks in your Albany offices were made by the labor of workers who are behind bars.** When New York needed to ramp up the production of hand sanitizer during the pandemic, incarcerated workers were forced to step up, at great risk to themselves as they were, at first, denied the ability to use the sanitizer they were making. Yet when incarcerated workers are released, they can't rely on the safety net like other workers can. Incarcerated work does not count toward the accrual of UI benefits and is exempt from employment and labor protections. The resulting lack of opportunities for employment coupled with the lack of access to unemployment insurance is likely the most common reason a person may be re-incarcerated.

Rather than condemning people to continuous cycles of incarceration, we can and must include the work that incarcerated people do in our unemployment insurance system. The Unemployment Bridge Program would open access to unemployment support for those in re-entry, including those under post-release supervision if they become unemployed in the period up to one year post release. Up to 21,000 workers re-entering the labor force would be covered. Not only would this be the morally right thing to do, but it would also save taxpayers money while improving safety for all. Providing formerly incarcerated people access to UI is cost-effective, compared to incarcerating people at enormous taxpayer expense. Recidivism can cost the state upwards of **\$50,000 per person** per incident, while UI claims are **\$4,200 - \$12,000 a year**. Providing workers in re-entry with access to the safety net would also directly address longstanding racial inequities. The Immigration Research Initiative has found that a whopping 73% of the New Yorkers who would benefit from the Unemployment Bridge Program are non-white, compared to 27% who are white.

Before unemployment insurance was passed nationally during the Great Depression, states led the way by passing programs of their own. Now, after the biggest crisis we've faced since the Great Depression, it's time for New York to lead the way once again. It's time to close the unjust gaps in our safety net that leave workers in re-entry behind. We strongly encourage you to pass the Unemployment Bridge Program this year.

The following organizations strongly urge that this legislation be included in the New York State SFY 2023-24 budget.

Signed,

The Release Aging People in Prison Campaign/RAPP

Center for Community Alternatives
Youth Represent

Osborne Association

A Little Piece Of Light

National Action Network NYC
Chapter Second Chance Committee

NYU Law Criminal Defense and
Reentry Clinic

Decrim NY

Black and Pink NYC

Unchained

Envision Freedom Fund

New York State Association of
Criminal Defense Lawyers

Freedom Agenda

Women & Justice Project

WESPAC Foundation, Inc.

New Hour for Women & Children LI

Long Island Social Justice Action
Network

Newburgh LGBTQ+ Center

Justice Impact Alliance (JIA)

The Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law at
NYU Law

Sing Sing Family Collective

Capital Area Relief & Liberation

Riverside Church Prison Ministry

National Employment Law Project

Center for Employment Opportunities

Unlock the Bar

The Bronx Defenders

Brooklyn Defender Services

The Legal Aid Society

CUNY School of Law Defenders Clinic

New York County Defender Services

Rehabilitation Through the Arts

**For questions about this memorandum of support, please contact
Fund Excluded Workers Campaign Manager Nishat Tabassum
(nishat.tabassum@maketheroadny.org).**

