

THE JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND OPPORTUNITY (JEO) INITIATIVE

Chaired by Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton

2025 Annual Report



JULIANA STRATTON
OFFICE OF LT. GOVERNOR

Opening Letter

The foundation of the Justice, Equity, and Opportunity (JEO) Initiative's work is a commitment to shared humanity and collective care. The past year reinforced a vital truth: systemic transformation begins with presence, with listening intently to those most affected by inequity. It requires walking alongside communities that have endured disinvestment for generations.

Across the nation, the weight carried by community-based organizations is undeniable. Rising operational costs and resource instability continue to test the endurance of even the most steadfast partners. Yet, these non-profit organizations stand as the essential infrastructure for holistic public safety. They deliver the focused services that address the root causes of system involvement, acting as a crucial defense against violence and poverty. Within this reality, Illinois remains a place of profound conviction.

Through the ongoing work of the JEO Initiative, a model of government that actively listens and responds is being built. Through visits and conversations with community-based organizations throughout the state, we continue to observe how equitable policy takes concrete shape in the daily rebuilding efforts of local leaders, who mobilize resources and restore neighborhood vitality. The strength of Illinois is rooted in their persistence, requiring a collective and sustained response.

Looking toward the future, gratitude anchors the JEO Initiative's path. Recognition must be paid to the advocates, partners, and residents whose belief in this work provides ongoing guidance. Their dedication reminds all that progress is a shared labor, achieved when compassion leads. Together, the JEO Initiative moves toward a vision of Illinois where every community is valued, opportunity feels within reach, and dignity defines the measure of success.

Respectfully,



Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton

The Justice, Equity, and Opportunity (JEO) Initiative: An Introduction

Governor JB Pritzker signed [Executive Order 2019-09](#) on February 11, 2019, formally establishing the Justice, Equity, and Opportunity (JEO) Initiative. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Governor Stratton, the JEO Initiative has positioned itself to fulfill the Administration's vision of redefining equity, public safety practices, and community health through a trauma-informed, healing-centered lens. Serving as a national model, JEO fosters stakeholders and cross-agency collaborations to transform the criminal legal system into a more grounded, rehabilitative structure. These efforts advance significant research and pilot programs to test pivotal changes and create a common ground for data analysis and assessments on program efficiency to be shared among partners while uplifting restorative justice approaches.

The JEO Initiative is a first-of-its-kind effort in Illinois and a restorative justice model for other states across the nation. The initiative continues to:

Create a collaborative environment and convene discussions between stakeholders, state agencies, and organizations with which they organize and bolster enterprises;

Support research and pilot programs that will test groundbreaking efforts to implement healing, trauma-informed, and equitable policies and practices while providing data analysis to assess program efficacy and guide new efforts; and

Improve channels of communication across state agencies to ensure coordinated, holistic effort to transform and implement changes to address issues of equity and injustice;

Advise the decision-making process as a means of ensuring the different branches of Illinois' government are working proactively to create a fairer and more equitable justice system.

The following agencies conduct operations under the supervision of the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, producing projects and cultivating partnerships applicable to the mission of the JEO Initiative.

Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA)

Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ)

Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board (ILETSB)

Conceal Carry Licensing Review Board (CCLRB)

Prisoner Review Board (PRB)

Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC)



ICJIA Executive Director Delrice Adams speaks at a public safety roundtable in Chicago next to Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton and JEO Policy Manager Ariana Correa, September 2025

The Justice, Equity, and Opportunity (JEO) Initiative: Who We Are

Meet Our Team



Yaacov Delaney
*Deputy Chief of Staff
& Director of the
JEO Initiative*



Ariana Correa
*Policy Manager of
the JEO Initiative*



Chelsey Varela
*Program Manager of
the JEO Initiative*



Angel Pantoja
*McCormick Fellow &
Reentry Policy Coordinator
of the JEO Initiative*

Our team is comprised of experienced restorative justice (RJ) practitioners who are deeply committed to fostering healing, understanding, and community connection. At the heart of restorative practices is the belief that healthy communities are built on strong relationships, mutual respect, and open communication. Restorative justice, originally rooted in Indigenous traditions, is a philosophy and practice that emphasizes repairing harm, restoring relationships, and creating spaces where every voice is heard and valued.



Attendee at a higher education in prison conference convened by JEO in partnership with ICJIA stands next to artwork created by students in Illinois prisons, February 2025

The Justice, Equity, and Opportunity (JEO) Initiative: Our Purpose

The following four principles guide the JEO Initiative's short-term and long-term efforts:

1

Address the social determinants of crime and incarceration.

2

Improve equitable deflection and diversion opportunities from the justice system.

3

Refine conditions and address the needs of vulnerable populations impacted by historical disinvestments and trauma.

4

Support positive reentry outcomes to reduce recidivism.



R3 Board members discuss new business at their first quarterly meeting of the year in Chicago, January 2025

JEO Initiative Deliverables

Planting seeds for community healing and exercising traditions rooted in restorative practices, the JEO Initiative advanced various deliverables for each of the following goals in 2025:

Goal #1: Address the social determinants of crime and incarceration

The Restore, Reinvest, and Renew (R3) Program

The Restore, Reinvest and Renew (R3) Program reflects Illinois' promise to confront the legacy of disinvestment with intentional care. Established through the [Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act \(CRTA\)](#), and guided by the JEO Initiative in partnership with the Illinois Criminal Justice

Information Authority (ICJIA), R3 is designed to redirect 25% of adult-use cannabis tax revenue into the communities that have endured the deepest impacts of poverty, violence, and incarceration. The JEO Initiative also facilitates R3 Program Board meetings to support program governance, including determining board membership in accordance with statute.

By statute, R3 funds must be granted to organizations working in the following areas: workforce development, economic development, reentry, youth development, and civil legal aid. Since its inception, the program has directed more than \$280 million to over 400 organizations across the state. This investment is strategically allocated to support reentry services, expand youth development and economic opportunity, improve access to civil legal aid, and sustain violence prevention efforts. In order to sustain this infrastructure, this year the R3 Program Board extended funding for 86 Cohort 3 grantees through October 31, 2027, prioritizing the stability and continuity of community-based efforts. ICJIA is actively supporting these grantees through compliance reviews, amendment processes, and site visits, ensuring rigorous accountability.

Planning for Cohort 4 advanced throughout the year with a refined, two-track funding structure. One track will dedicate funding to foster immediate capacity in reentry, economic development, and civil legal aid. The second track will allocate funding specifically to fortify youth development and violence prevention initiatives. Through this persistent evolution, the R3 Program is consolidating its role as a national model for state investment, rigorously aligning funding decisions with lived experience and measurable community outcomes.

The JEO team conducts grantee engagements across Illinois to learn how funding can lead to real community action. Throughout the year, the team visited several organizations that provide invaluable assistance to the communities they

JEO Initiative staff meet with R3 Grantee East Side Aligned and Christian Activity Center staff, program participants, and parents during a tour of their site in East St. Louis, September 2025



serve with the aid of R3 funds. In Chicago, Friends of the Children connects youth with long-term mentors, helping them build stability and opportunities from kindergarten through high school on the West and South Sides. In the western suburbs, Healthcare Alternative Systems provides essential behavioral health and recovery services in Broadview, meeting urgent needs and helping families feel secure again.

In Southern Illinois, Arrowleaf offers workforce training and mentorship for youth, empowering people in the region. Youth Be Heard in Greenville uses art and writing to support mental health and create a sense of belonging. The Foundation Academy in Belleville helps with career readiness and teaches important soft skills. East Side Aligned, working with the Christian Activity Center in East St. Louis, directly invests in youth leadership and neighborhood wellness. Each engagement confirmed a consistent truth: progress is sustained when community leadership informs the policy that enables the work.

Healing-Centered Illinois Task Force (HCITF) Final Report Rollout and Ongoing Implementation Efforts

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor JEO Initiative hosted the HCITF Rooted in Wellness: Reimagining Illinois' Path to Healing celebratory gathering on February 28, 2025, at Chicago State University's Gwendolyn Brooks Library. This gathering celebrated the progress made, highlighted key findings from the report, and sparked conversations on the next steps toward implementation of the HCITF final policy recommendations.

The Task Force's (TF) 17 recommendations outlined within the report were rooted in principles and values of equity and inclusion, prevention of harm and promotion of healing, and alignment with best practices and current initiatives at local, state, and federal levels.

Recommendations focused on strategies to develop and expand trauma-informed and healing-centered efforts across Illinois through the development, expansion, and/or strengthening of strategies for:

- Public Awareness and Education
- Data and Evaluation
- Workforce Development and Training
- Implementation and Sustainability
- Funding
- Policies and Protocols

We believe that trauma-informed, healing-centered work transforms lives and communities. If you're interested in getting



McCormick Fellow & JEO Reentry Policy Coordinator Angel Pantoja facilitates the Rooted in Resilience panel discussion in Springfield, May 2025

involved or sharing your insights, please complete our brief Ongoing Engagement Survey by scanning the QR code below.



**HCITF Ongoing
Engagement
Survey QR Code**

Latino Unity Day

Rooted in Resilience: Healing from the Legacy of Mass Incarceration Within the Latino Community

On May 8, 2025, the JEO Initiative hosted the Latino Unity Day panel, *Rooted in Resilience: Healing from the Legacy of Mass Incarceration*. The JEO team worked in collaboration with the Latino Unity Day host committee to publicize and promote the conversation to attendees. The panel brought together advocates, practitioners, and community leaders to explore the enduring impacts of incarceration on Latino families and neighborhoods across Illinois. The discussion centered on healing as a form of justice and the power of shared experience to build new pathways toward belonging and opportunity. Panelists reflected on histories of over-policing, incarceration



Rooted in Resilience panelists (left to right: Armando Mancilla [Southwest Organizing Project], Representative Barbara Hernandez, Representative Dagmara Avelar, Senator Celina Villanueva, Ariana Correa [JEO Initiative], Orlando Mayorga [Polk Bros. Foundation], and Amy Williams [New Life Centers]), May 2025

and exclusion that have shaped generations. There was also discussion on how education, leadership, and community investment can restore the human connections that punishment once severed. Their stories revealed how resilience is cultivated in the everyday acts of care that help communities recover their strength and voice.

The dialogue also invited participants to imagine what repair looks like in practice. From youth mentorship to reentry programs, each story offered a vision of justice grounded in empathy and collective responsibility.

Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA) Five Year Violence Prevention Plan

The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority’s Statewide Violence Prevention Plan for 2025-2029 represents a bold commitment to transformative justice, grounded in the Pritzker-Stratton Administration’s vision of redefining public safety through equity, restoration, and healing. Aligned with Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton’s leadership mandate to center community voices and address persistent inequities, this comprehensive plan operationalizes a trauma-informed, healing-centered approach that moves beyond punishment toward collective restoration.

The plan’s three core goals—preventing violence through evidence-based, comprehensive interventions; advancing equity through equitable grant access and economic opportunities; and fostering cross-sector collaboration—directly advance the JEO Initiative’s transformative mission. By prioritizing communities most impacted by violence and addressing systemic inequities in housing, education, healthcare, and economic opportunity, the plan embodies JEO’s commitment to dismantling structural racism and disinvestment.

Developed collaboratively through the ICJIA Violence Prevention Ad Hoc Committee—this plan reflects the Administration’s unwavering belief that true public safety is achievable only through community-led healing and justice. It charts a course toward safer, healthier Illinois communities grounded in dignity, accountability, and hope.

Goal #2: Improve equitable deflection and diversion opportunities from the justice system

Commission on Children of Incarcerated Parents

In 2020, the Children of Incarcerated Parents Task Force published their report which outlined a series of recommendations, including the development of a commission to coordinate an implementation plan for the Task Force's recommendations. In 2023, the Commission on Children of Incarcerated Children (CCIP) was formally established through legislation. The CCIP is composed of members from government, state departments, community-based organizations, and individuals personally impacted by related policies.

Throughout 2024 and 2025, the CCIP divided members into sub-groups to address specific recommendations proposed in the Task Force report and convened quarterly to review draft implementation plans with live feedback from diverse voices, ranging from state departments to community members. Using research and fact-based data representing the scope of parental incarceration and its longstanding effects on their youth, the CCIP aims to finalize their implementation plan in 2026.

Chelsey Varela, Program Manager for the JEO Initiative, continues to serve on the Commission as a designee for the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, providing expertise in the development of policies and implementation efforts that seek to minimize trauma experienced by children of incarcerated parents while introducing synergetic measures between agencies to condense duplication. This work directly advances JEO's core mission by addressing root causes of systemic involvement, protecting vulnerable populations from unnecessary harm, and building coordinated systems that facilitate equitable pathways away from the criminal legal system.



JEO Initiative staff with IDJJ leadership at the Monarch Youth Center grand opening in Lincoln, September 2025

Goal #3: Improve conditions and address the needs of vulnerable populations in correctional facilities

Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice: 21st Century Transformation Model

Monarch Youth Center Grand Opening

The JEO Initiative maintains its partnership with the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) to advance the transformation committee's recommendations. Earlier in the inception of the IDJJ 21st Century Transformation model, JEO collaborated with IDJJ to convene roundtable discussions with community stakeholders, including formerly justice-involved youth and

their families, centering their voices and lived experiences in shaping juvenile justice policy.

With the leadership of IDJJ Director Robert Vickery, this collaborative effort culminated in a new model designed to reduce the harm of incarceration for youth, particularly Black and Brown youth disproportionately represented in the system. IDJJ continues to uphold their commitment to transforming the experiences of youth in custody.

Community stakeholders advocated for more family-centered facilities with programming that connects youth to resources and organizations in their home communities. The Monarch Youth Center, which officially welcomed partners and stakeholders to its grand opening in early September 2025, represents the direct realization of this vision. Located in Lincoln, IL, the facility will use a holistic, trauma-informed approach that prioritizes family and community connection.

Educators, staff, and community members will work alongside youth to build the necessary skills and career readiness to minimize recidivism while bringing love and compassion into program delivery. This collaborative effort accomplishment reflects how the JEO Initiative continues to advance this administration's vision of transforming our criminal legal system through healing-centered practice.

Higher Education in Prison

As we evaluate the current state of higher education within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), it is important to acknowledge the significant progress made over the past year. IDOC has successfully onboarded Illinois Wesleyan University, who has successfully completed its first cohort of their Reading to College initiative at Lawrence Correctional Center and continues active discussions with Governors State University and Illinois State University to expand academic programming across facilities.

While these developments represent meaningful strides forward, challenges remain. Historically, women who are incarcerated have faced limited access to higher education, and this continues to be a critical concern. Today, one of the most pressing barriers is no longer the interest or commitment of higher education institutions, but the limited physical space available to accommodate the growing number of colleges and universities seeking to offer programs at Logan Correctional Center.

This year, hundreds of incarcerated men and women across the state celebrated major educational milestones, earning bachelor's and associate degrees, high school diplomas, and GEDs. Thanks to the IDOC, many of these students were able to commemorate their achievements alongside family members, who were invited to share in the celebration.

Higher education in prison plays a transformative role by empowering incarcerated individuals with the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed for



Panelists at the Higher Education in Prison: Degrees of Change Conference in Chicago respond to questions from the audience (from left to right: Colette Payne, Maria Garza, Michael Harrell, Toni Pizarro, Jose Verdurri), February 2025

successful reentry and long-term success. These accomplishments reflect the dedication and collaboration that make them possible: educators and administrators from both partnering higher education institutions and IDOC work tirelessly to ensure students are not only earning certificates and degrees, but also gaining the confidence and abilities necessary to rebuild their lives, pursue meaningful employment, and contribute positively to their communities.

Higher Education in Prison (HEP) Conference

In February 2025, the JEO Initiative, in partnership with the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA), convened the statewide Higher Education in Prison: Degrees of Change conference. The two-day event brought together over 150 stakeholders—including higher education leaders, state and local agencies, community organizations, and system-impacted individuals—to discuss the future of higher education in correctional settings across Illinois. The JEO Initiative team played a key role in developing and executing a major conference on higher education in prison. Panel discussion questions designed by the team engaged audience members and highlighted the need for expanded educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals. Leveraging their networks, the JEO Initiative

recruited diverse expert panelists, including formerly incarcerated people, educators, and state agency representatives, and effectively moderated several panels. Throughout, the JEO Initiative prioritized collaboration, giving partners autonomy while contributing their expertise, resulting in an inclusive, impactful, partner-driven event.

The conference opened with remarks from Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, ICJIA Executive Director Delrice Adams, and Northeastern Illinois University President Dr. Katrina Bell-Jordan, underscoring Illinois' commitment to expanding educational opportunities as a key component of reentry and public safety. Participants engaged in panels and breakout sessions that explored a range of critical topics, including the implementation of Pell Grant expansion, digital learning access within

correctional facilities, the role of community colleges in program development, and strategies to strengthen reentry pathways from classrooms to communities.

Day two included the Navigating Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education in Prison panel, moderated by Angel Pantoja, Reentry Policy Coordinator for the JEO Initiative. Panelists representing IDOC, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Northwestern University, and Adler University discussed barriers to program expansion, facility access and technology, and reaching marginalized populations, particularly women and youth. The session also emphasized cross-agency collaboration, policy alignment, and sustainable partnerships between higher education institutions and correctional facilities.



Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton reads the event program booklet at the Higher Education in Prison: Degrees of Change Conference, February 2025



Panel discussion at the Higher Education in Prison: Degrees of Change Conference in Chicago, February 2025

Another highlight of the conference was the Lived Experience Panel: Stories from Students and Alumni of Higher Education in Prison Programs, which centered the voices of those directly impacted by the system. Guided by reflective discussion questions, panelists shared their educational journeys, challenges, and triumphs while incarcerated and after release.

The panel provided powerful firsthand insight into how education fosters personal transformation, strengthens families, and supports community reintegration. These narratives reinforced the central message of the conference: that equitable access to higher education in prison is a vital component of both public safety and human dignity.

There is still work to be done—access to technology across all 27 adult institutions is essential for delivering quality education,

enabling remote instruction, digital learning, and skills development critical for reentry success. A primary priority is to expand technology access across all 27 adult correctional institutions to support digital learning and remote instruction. To advance this goal, the JEO Initiative will collaborate closely with IDOC and the Department of Innovation and Technology (DoIT) to review existing policies and identify any that may impede progress, with the aim of streamlining implementation and accelerating technology deployment.

Another key focus is to broaden participation in prison education programs through continued targeted outreach. The JEO Initiative, in collaboration with its educational partners, will recruit additional institutions of higher learning to develop and deliver programming within correctional facilities.

Finally, the JEO Initiative will partner with the Illinois Community College Board to deepen engagement among its 28 member institutions. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to provide foundational pathways to associate degrees, which serve as critical prerequisites for many four-year higher education programs in prison. Given that only two community colleges currently offer associate degree programs across the 27 adult facilities, increasing involvement from this sector is essential to expanding equitable access and supporting the educational aspirations of incarcerated men and women.

Women's Justice Reform

Fox Valley Adult Transition Center

Through a shared vision of transformative justice, Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton and First Lady MK Pritzker continue to leverage their leadership to advance systemic change for women impacted by Illinois' criminal legal system. Their collaborative efforts have resulted in meaningful progress, including a 50% reduction in the women's prison population during the COVID-19 pandemic with sustained reductions of 46%. These statistics illustrate the power of intentional partnership across the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Office of First Lady MK Pritzker, and a broad ecosystem of state agencies, non-profits, and service providers. By centering the voices and experiences of women themselves through direct engagement at correctional and transition facilities, this convening of stakeholders works not merely to reduce incarceration but to address its root causes and create pathways for women to build promising futures.

On October 14, 2025, the JEO Initiative continued this work with a follow-up visit to Fox Valley Women Transition Center, convened by the Office of the First Lady MK Pritzker alongside attendees from the prior year's engagement. While residents reported notable improvements since the 2024 visit, through a commitment to transformative justice, the Office of the Lt. Governor and Office of First Lady MK Pritzker are collaboratively responding to the needs of the residents of the Fox Valley Transition Center.

The ultimate goal is for everyone who comes through Fox Valley Transition Center to be treated with humanity and dignity, and to be equipped with the tools and support needed to return to their communities whole, restored, and positioned to thrive.

Goal #4: Support positive reentry outcomes to reduce recidivism opportunities from the justice system

Justice Cabinet

The Justice Cabinet is a newly formed partnership between Deputy Governors Grace Hou and Bria Scudder, First Lady MK Pritzker's Senior Advisor Willette Benford, and the Lt. Governor Office, and the teams and agencies within each of their portfolios. The goal of the Justice Cabinet is to leverage the assets of relevant state agencies to change existing systems and/or create new ones as needed, to prevent the over-incarceration of individuals and to create opportunities and services for at-risk and justice involved Illinoisans to thrive.

Three working groups, workforce development, healthcare, and housing, were composed to assess the landscape in preparation of a final report and recommendations from the Justice Cabinet.

The Justice Cabinet Workforce Development Workgroup, which included JEO Reentry Policy Coordinator Angel Pantoja, continued advancing cross-agency strategies to reduce justice system involvement and support healing-centered reentry. The Justice Cabinet's broader goal is to build a restorative system that prioritizes prevention, diversion, and equitable access to housing, healthcare, and employment.

Throughout the year, the committee focused on five foundational priorities for system-wide reform:

- Improving information sharing,
- Coordinating resources,
- Creating a seamless continuum of care,
- Shifting from punishment to restoration, and;
- Using data to inform decision-making.

Discussions centered on aligning these principles with workforce development strategies to strengthen employment access and retention for justice-impacted individuals.

The committee identified several immediate action strategies, including expanding job-matching systems for returning residents, developing regional training and employment pathways in partnership with IDOC and the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) improving digital access to the Education Justice Mapping tool, and enhancing in-prison work opportunities with continued post-release job coaching and support.

Long-term recommendations emphasized reforming state hiring and licensing policies, developing waiver systems to remove employment barriers, and incentivizing employers through tax credits and wage subsidies. The committee also prioritized expanding equitable access to jobs in education, healthcare, and emerging industries while strengthening interagency coordination.

The Justice Cabinet Healthcare Workgroup developed five foundational recommendations for the Justice Cabinet final report that intends to fundamentally shift Illinois criminal legal system from punishment and compliance to recovery and healthy community reintegration.

Rather than viewing incarceration as an endpoint, Illinois' goal is to design a comprehensive continuum of care that meets individuals where they are—connecting them to resources before release, during transition, and as they rebuild their lives. This includes trauma-informed practices, accessible healthcare information, coordinated case management, and cross-agency collaboration that treats reentry as a collaborative process between government, healthcare providers, and community partners.

The workgroup's recommendations directly advance the JEO Initiative's core goal of supporting positive reentry outcomes that reduce recidivism. By implementing healing-centered concepts throughout the justice system, from preventative health education to quality healthcare standards in facilities, Illinois demonstrates that true public safety emerges not from punishment, but from supporting individuals to successfully reintegrate into their families and communities as whole, healthy people.

This alignment between Justice Cabinet and JEO efforts recognizes that transformative justice requires entire systems to evolve in service of human dignity, restoration, and measurable reductions in recidivism.

Illinois State Identification Card to Returning Residents Program

As of November 2025, over 5,000 individuals have walked out of IDOC facilities with a state ID card in hand. While these numbers represent progress, they tell a far deeper story: over 5,000 pathways to stable housing, employment, educational opportunity, and community belonging made less complicated. Because of the collaboration of multiple state agencies, over 5,000 individuals' reentry was fundamentally less burdensome.

This collaborative achievement was forged through the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Office of First Lady MK Pritzker, the Secretary of State's Office, and the Illinois Department of Corrections. By recognizing identification as both a human right and a practical necessity, Illinois has affirmed that those returning home deserve a smoother path forward.

Today, the JEO Initiative continues partnering with IDOC to lift up these narratives to remind us that transformative justice isn't abstract; it's measured in human dignity restored, in employment secured, in housing stability achieved, and in stronger communities built when people are welcomed home with the resources they need to thrive.

The Justice, Equity, and Opportunity (JEO) Initiative: Internships

Internship Opportunity

Each year, the JEO Initiative recruits policy interns to work closely with staff on justice related policy development, the implementation of public safety and reentry initiatives, and the planning of convenings and public engagements hosted by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. Interns support policy driven and community informed work that connects state agencies, legislators, and community-based organizations, helping ensure our recommendations reflect the realities on the ground.

During the Spring 2025 semester, the JEO Initiative hosted three interns: Juliana Carreiro-Oliver (University of Chicago), Tatiana Babcock (DePaul University), and Emily Ramos (DePaul University). Together, they contributed to core deliverables and program support, including drafting a Humanizing Language Memo to strengthen human-centered and trauma-informed communication across partners, conducting research on restorative justice practices and opportunities for expansion in school and juvenile justice settings, and supporting early planning work connected to the State ID Pilot Program for individuals leaving IDOC custody. Interns also contributed written content for the JEO Newsletter and supported event coordination

and outreach, including Latino Unity Day, where they helped develop panel questions and assist with logistics for statewide policy conversation.

This internship is unpaid. Students are eligible to participate if they are earning academic credit through their department or accessing institutional stipends or grants where available. The internship model may be adjusted on a case-by-case basis to accommodate in-person, hybrid, or fully remote participation. Work hours are also flexible to support student schedules. Internship openings vary by semester, and postings are shared on the Office of the Lieutenant Governor's website.



Spring 2025 interns group photo (left to right: Juliana Carreiro-Oliver, Emily Ramos, Tatiana Babcock)



JEO Policy Manager Ariana Correa facilitates a resume building and professional development workshop for UIC's Public Policy 490 class, September 2025.

Professional Development Workshop

The JEO Initiative led a professional development workshop during the 2025 Fall semester for students in the University of Illinois Chicago's College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs PPOL 490 course, creating space for an honest discussion about preparing for careers in public service. Drawing from the JEO Initiative's work, the session helped students reflect on how their lived experiences and academic learning can inform their professional paths. Through guidance on resume building, maximizing internship experiences, and developing career-readiness skills, students gained practical tools to communicate their strengths and approach new opportunities with confidence and clarity.



Former Governor Jim Edgar with Deputy Chief of Staff and Director of the JEO Initiative, Yaacov Delaney, August 2025

Additional Noteworthy Engagements

Edgar Fellow Program

August 2025

Established by the late Governor Jim Edgar, the Edgar fellowship commitment to cultivating statesmanship through bipartisan cooperation and cross-regional partnership aligns seamlessly with the JEO Initiative transformative justice work. By bringing together diverse leaders—regardless of partisan, ethnic, or regional backgrounds—the Fellowship creates a collaborative foundation essential to advancing justice-centered policy.

JEO Initiative Director Yaacov Delaney, a 2024 Edgar Fellow, exemplified this collaborative effort when he returned in 2025 alongside 2024 Edgar

Fellow cohort member Kari Gallasi to present restorative justice lessons to current Fellows. Yaacov illustrated how the R3 Program’s \$280 million investment back into communities throughout the state, communities directly impacted by the War on Drugs and decades of investment, while Kari illustrated how JUST DuPage, a Reentry program based in the DuPage County Jail is allowing detainees an opportunity to transform their lives through specialized programming. This pairing illuminates a fundamental truth: transformative justice depends on the relationships and mutual understanding, and cross-sector collaboration the Fellowship cultivates among leaders committed to equitable governance.

safer, they intensify fear and trauma, disrupt daily life, and can cut people off from basic supports like school, work, and food access.

These experts identified several concrete actions the State can consider to advance in partnership with community-based organizations:

- Strengthen protections and rapid response for immigrant communities and schools so families can access education and essential services without fear.
- Increase access to healing-centered supports like trauma-responsive mental health resources for youth, families, and frontline staff, recognizing that healing is core to violence prevention.
- Invest in frontline capacity for community violence intervention teams, including practical safety tools and training that help outreach workers save lives and de-escalate harm in real time.
- Expand grant application support for smaller and emerging organizations so more community-rooted groups can access State resources and sustain programming.
- Advance smarter partnership models with local and state law enforcement centered on relationship building, training, and shared understanding of community needs rather than punitive or militarized approaches.

Community-based organizations funded through the R3 Program, into violence prevention, youth development, and economic development are achieving real reductions in violence because

they address what data confirms: sustainable safety by confronting poverty, disinvestment, and lack of equitable opportunity. The Lieutenant Governor emphasized, “the work of community leaders is the real solution, and the data continues to validate that community led strategies are driving measurable declines in violence, not federal threats or spectacles.”

Safer Foundation CARRE Policy Conference

February 2025

At Safer Foundation’s 23rd Annual CARRE Policy Conference on February 22, 2025, Angel Pantoja, Reentry Policy Coordinator for the JEO Initiative, contributed to the Redeeming People Panel, emphasizing redemption as a driver of his work. He stressed that trauma-informed care and healing, integrated into reentry services, are critical for achieving absolute freedom, enabling justice-impacted individuals to thrive. Systemic changes, such as expanded pre- and post-release healthcare, barrier-free access to housing and jobs, and community-led initiatives, are essential to improve quality of life, aligning with the conference theme of transforming systems and building equitable communities.

Second Chance Month Virtual Town Hall

April 2025

In honor of Second Chance Month, Congressman Danny Davis hosted a Reentry Town Hall. JEO Initiative Director Yaacov Delaney shared a message during this virtual event on how the Restore, Reinvest, and Renew (R3) Program is redefining what investment in public safety truly means.

Congressman Danny Davis’s decades-long advocacy for second chances, along with Yaacov’s message illustrated a critical alignment: supporting positive reentry outcomes and addressing the social determinants of incarceration are not separate goals—they are inseparable. By centering equitable community investment, R3 embodies JEO’s guiding principle that true public safety requires dismantling the systems of poverty and marginalization that drive incarceration in the first place.

Second Chance Month reminds us that redemption is possible—and that it scales when we invest in equity. Real change happens when opportunity, dignity, and resources reach the people and communities most left behind.

Second Chance Month Panel

April 2025

On April 11, 2025, in recognition of Second Chance Month, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) hosted a panel of formerly incarcerated men returned to an Illinois

correctional facility to share their reentry experiences. JEO Reentry Policy Coordinator Angel Pantoja was honored to moderate the impactful discussion at Western Correctional Center.

The panel featured four individuals who spoke candidly about mental health, trauma, and personal transformation following incarceration. They reflected on the emotional realities of reentry—the trauma of adjusting to freedom, reconnecting with loved ones, and rebuilding self-worth. Memorable quotes included:

“I don’t care if you do one year or one hundred years... that’s trauma.”

“I got to hug and make amends with my mother—and that was my second chance.”

“A second chance allowed me to feel worthy. It gave me worth.”

Audience members, including IDOC staff, were visibly moved, leaning in as the panelists shared their journeys of healing and growth. Staff emphasized the importance of continuing to create spaces where such voices can be heard and valued.

In alignment with the Lieutenant Governor’s ongoing message about the importance of second chances and providing equitable opportunities for people to thrive, the event underscored Illinois’ commitment to embracing people returning home, addressing the deep traumas associated with incarceration, and promoting healing-centered reentry practices that recognize the humanity and potential of every individual.

MacArthur Foundation Safety and Justice Challenge

April 2025

The MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge hosted a Second Chance Month panel discussion moderated by NeAngela Dixon, Program Officer at the MacArthur Foundation. Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, First Lady MK Pritzker, Willette Benford-Senior Advisor to MK Pritzker, and Dr. Kathleen St. Louis Caliento of the CARA Collective engaged in conversation centered on transformative justice and women's reentry in Illinois. The discussion included how collaborative public-private partnerships are reshaping reentry support by placing dignity, agency, and holistic healing at the center of criminal legal system reform.

The panel spotlighted the Dignity of Choice pilot, a newly launched initiative that embodies this transformative approach. Rather than a one-size-fits-all reentry model, the pilot provides comprehensive wraparound services for women exiting the Illinois Department of Corrections—including workforce development, entrepreneurial training, transitional housing, and childcare support—enabling meaningful reintegration into families and communities. With ten women currently enrolled in its first cohort, the pilot represents a concrete commitment to supporting women as agents of their own recovery and renewal.

Coordinated across state agencies and community partners including IDHS, the Department of Early Childhood, CARA Collective, Defy Ventures, Illinois Action for Children, and Saint Leonard's Ministries, the Dignity of Choice pilot demonstrates how strategic collaboration transforms systems from the inside out, centering the voices and needs of those most impacted.



JEO Initiative staff (pictured left to right: Angel Pantoja, Ariana Correa, Chelsey Varela, and Yaacov Delaney), October 2025

Conclusion

The JEO Initiative’s efforts to infuse the voices of people with lived experience continue to shape Illinois’ approach to public safety and equity. To truly reimagine these systems for the State of Illinois, Lieutenant Governor Stratton’s remains committed to representing all 13 million residents, ensuring that communities historically overlooked know they are part of our democracy and have a genuine seat at the table. As we move forward, the JEO Initiative aims to extend and strengthen our existing programs through partnerships built and fostered across state agencies, stakeholders, and community-based organizations.

There’s a saying: hurt people hurt people; healed people heal people.

The JEO Initiative’s goal is to enhance and broaden opportunities that provide safety and structure—creating pathways for hurt people to begin their healing journey. Although the fruit of these efforts will take time to grow, the seeds are continuously being planted. This is reimaging public safety.

Community Member Quote:

“Being a part of the solution as it relates to our systemic racism is one of the best decisions I’ve made. I have to TRUST the process and continue to take things one day at a time!”

Nesha Boyd