

Gender Justice Initiative

Community Conversations Report

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Women & Justice Project (WJP), a project of Tides, works in deep partnership to advance the leadership and build the power of women who are currently and formerly incarcerated to transform the criminal legal system and create a just and loving world.

Background & Goals

New York's Gender Justice Initiative has three main goals:

- (1) Build power and advance leadership of women and gender expansive people who are currently and formerly incarcerated.
- (2) Nurture community among women and gender expansive people on both sides of the walls.
- (3) Shift culture and spur policy reform related to women and gender expansive people and the criminal legal system.

The Initiative uses a racial and gender justice lens and is anchored in the principle that directly impacted people are leaders and experts in transforming the criminal legal system – and to experience sharing their leadership and expertise as healing and transformative.

The Initiative's core team consists of: [Women & Justice Project](#) (WJP), which serves as GJI central coordinator; [Katie Yamasaki](#), a renowned social justice artist and author and WJP's Artist-in-Residence; and a [team](#) of dynamic women leaders who share among them more than 100 years of incarceration:



- ◇ **Miyhosi Benton**, criminal legal policy expert, advocate, and consultant
- ◇ **Judy Clark**, Community Justice Advocate, Hour Children
- ◇ **Serena Martin**, Executive Director, New Hour for Women & Children-Long Island
- ◇ **Roslyn Smith**, Beyond Incarceration Program Manager, V-Day
- ◇ **Sharon White-Harrigan**, Executive Director, Women's Community Justice Association
- ◇ **Cheryl Wilkins**, Co-Director and Co-Founder, Center for Justice at Columbia University
- **Kathy Boudin**, in memoriam, Co-Director and Co-Founder, Center for Justice

As a first step, the Initiative launched a two-pronged engagement effort with directly impacted women and gender expansive people. Throughout this work, the group has prioritized creating safe, empowering spaces where participants can build meaningful community and engage with art as a vehicle for creativity and connection.

For the in-prison component, the Initiative developed a pilot program for people in New York's three main women's prisons, consisting of an expressive arts program in general population and a creative writing program in solitary confinement. After securing approval from State corrections, the Initiative launched the program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility – New York's only maximum-security women's prison – in January 2024.

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For the community component, the Initiative organized a series of healing arts conversations for formerly incarcerated women and gender expansive people. These workshops focused on community-building and provided an opportunity for participants to contribute their insight early in the Initiative's development.

The inside and outside engagement work will guide the Initiative's identification of priorities and direction.

Community Conversations Overview

Between spring 2023 and spring 2024, the Initiative conducted four community conversations with 54 people who had experienced incarceration. Each day-long gathering was held at Women Building Up (WBU) in Brooklyn.



- May 13 & June 10, 2023: the Initiative partnered with [Hour Children](#) and [New Hour](#) to organize participants. A total of 15 and 12 people participated, respectively.
- November 18, 2023: the Initiative organized participation from 14 formerly incarcerated women with in-depth experience in criminal justice-related advocacy and/or service provision.
- March 2, 2024: the Initiative partnered with [Sylvia Rivera Law Project \(SRLP\)](#) to organize participants. A total of 13 people who identify as trans, non-binary and/or gender expansive participated.

Miyhosi Benton and Judy Clark served as lead facilitators for the first three conversations and partnered with Sasha Alexander, SRLP Director of Membership, and Grace Detvarah, Osborne Association's LGBTQ Liaison and Senior Peer Educator, for the fourth gathering. Katie Yamasaki led the arts activities with artist ShinYeon Moon. All Initiative partners were involved in the various activities and discussions.



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The Initiative carefully considered and developed every aspect of the conversations. Each conversation featured a “healing room” and a social worker with incarceration-related expertise for participants desiring more support. Participants received stipends, travel assistance, and on-site childcare with expert providers. Participants were also given gift bags with art supplies, resources, and items from partner organizations to take home along with their artwork.



Each day was filled with warmth, support, and rich conversation. Participants engaged wholeheartedly in the art activities and generously shared experiences and insights. The following is a compilation of themes that arose and issues identified by participants across the gatherings.

Superpowers

Each conversation included two arts components: a watercolor activity designed to help participants ease into the creative process and a “superpower crest” activity during which participants reflected on their strengths and designed a crest representing their superpowers. The superpower activity served as a vehicle to honor participants’ individual gifts and to begin visualizing the possibilities when individuals engage their strengths as a collective – for community-building and for change.



“Everyone has a different superpower. And everyone's superpower is crucial for us achieving what we came to do today, and what we're looking forward to do in the future.” - Miyhosi

“We often don't see ourselves as superheroes in our own lives and yet we are. Our superpowers are something that we don't often write...we have a lot of superpowers that helped us survive and [be the] resilient people we are.” - Katie

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While participants shared a diverse array of superpowers, several common trends emerged: strength and resilience, community, love, faith, and empathy and forgiveness.

Strength & Resilience

Participants spoke about perseverance, determination, endurance, and courage as superpowers.

“I think one of the greatest gifts in the journey that I’m on right now is not only acknowledging my strength but being able to see it in other people as well.”



“Regardless of how much you’re going to cover, you can’t cover me completely because I’m going to always shine through.”

Community



Participants spoke about the ability to build community and nurture belonging and healing as superpowers. Participants noted that being part of community – especially with directly impacted people – felt deeply empowering and that helping others feel cherished made them feel cherished as well.

“My superpower has always been having a community that I’m part of that I can rely on and that helps me be at my best.”

Love

Participants described love as a superpower in varied ways: as a force given unconditionally – despite not always being given that love during childhood and as adults – and as a foundational value for building community and self.

“My foundation stays built on love.”

Faith

Participants named that having a core, anchoring sense of faith was a superpower. Participants defined faith broadly, including faith in community, faith in family, faith in religion or God, and faith in the movement.



“My strengths lie in my faith...just believe and know that you haven’t seen your best days.”

Empathy & Forgiveness



Participants identified showing empathy to themselves and others, along with offering forgiveness, healing, and care as superpowers.

“My superpower: I feel empathy and forgiveness. Through everything I've gone through, I have learned to be very empathetic with the people I surround myself around. And I've learned to forgive myself for a lot of things that I felt wasn't possible to forgive.”

Group discussions & Ideas for change

After lunch and the superpower crest share-back, participants reconvened for a full group conversation about broader issues impacting women and gender expansive people in the criminal legal system. Facilitators asked participants to think about which changes feel most pressing and why. The most common themes across the wide range of topics discussed were:



- 1) Community & collective space to connect & heal.** The importance of having community and the hardship associated with its absence was the most frequent theme throughout the conversations. Participants highlighted the particular significance of creating community and spaces to heal with other directly impacted people.
- 2) Change in the criminal legal system,** especially related to trauma, mental health, reentry & parole. Participants spoke about the dehumanization and harm they experienced in the criminal legal system, the lack of trauma-informed care and mental health support, and the enormous barriers to reentry they continue to face.
- 3) Engaging in advocacy in empowering ways.** Participants spoke about the important role that advocacy can play not only in navigating reentry and making systemic change but also in healing from traumatic experiences.
- 4) Narrative change.** Participants explored the shifts needed in how society views directly impacted women and gender expansive people – from a narrative of demonization and deficiency to one of worth, value, potential, contribution, leadership, and transformation.

More on community & collective space to connect and heal

Participants felt deep gratitude for the communities that supported them inside and welcomed them home. They highlighted the particular power of being in community with others who experienced incarceration, and discussed the scarcity of emotional supports, and the difficulty of being retraumatized repeatedly by systems and people that are not trauma informed. Participants expressed a strong desire for more spaces to process the grief and trauma surrounding incarceration, including grieving loved ones lost while inside, intimate relationships, and separation from/reconnection with family.

“When I came home, I didn't give myself a chance to grieve about a lot of things that I had lost throughout the years, a lot of things that I have lost since I've been home. And we need to give ourselves space for that. Not only for the people in our lives that we lost, but for whatever it is that you have lost in life. I lost my childhood. I lost my early adulthood, I lost relationships, I lost so much that I'm still grieving for. And sometimes I had to sit back and say to myself, just breathe, you need that space. And a lot of times it is new, but we don't allow ourselves to do that. Because we're always pushing from, we're always moving, and we keep got to do the next best thing, or the next biggest thing or go with this and do this. What allows yourself to grieve?”¹

“I also think that we should start with identifying mental health, identifying trauma. A lot of times, most of the time, prison is not the answer. You know, when you're sitting in that courtroom, and you're facing these charges, the judge don't even realize like, I have something wrong with me, my family has something wrong with me.”

“I wasn't invisible inside, there's nowhere to hide...towards the end I felt like they became my family. You know, we've all went through this together. So when I got home, what the shock was I was nobody anymore. I'm on the street when I walk and no one was checking for me, you know, I had to go out and get my own resources.”

“Trauma comes in different many forms. You could be the best hustler outside but as soon as the police come, you can't speak, you can't you talk, you can't think.”

“[I] had been used in bondage, bondage created by me, bondage created by my abuser, just bondage. And when I got to Bedford, I met these wonderful women who helped break me out of bondage. I found my voice. I was confident. I never had spoken about my abuse. I had never spoken about the fact that I was HIV, and I did that because of them, you know. And I am so grateful for the life that I have today...”

“I think the community is already built. It's just a matter of nurturing it. We constantly say we're building community, building community, but every time I look around, we have community, we just need to nurture it in a way that it can continue to grow.”

¹ Some quotes included have been lightly edited for clarity.

More on changing the criminal legal system

Participants spoke about the intense harm caused at all points along the criminal legal continuum and the lack of trauma-informed care, mental health support, and healthcare in general. Participants also recounted feeling discouraged by a parole system that seems designed to entrap rather than aid people after release. In addition, participants described the inadequacy of reentry assistance, particularly while inside, and disappointment with organizations who fall short of claims to provide holistic services for people transitioning home.

“The fact is to be able to say, ‘I struggle,’ right? Because a lot of times we try to mask the things that we go through, because we don’t want people to see that we’re struggling as hard as we are, or to say that I’m battling mental health issues....So I commend you for being able to say that out loud, unapologetically. We don’t always have to be or act like we at our best because we not.”

“The whole degrading process, like I have to be raped of my wig, my bra, my hands. You can take the fucking lip gloss...it’s a whole, it’s a whole lot. And then am I supposed to come out of jail and go into a whole other life like this never happened?”

“One of the things that I was told [by my parole officer]...was that I have a better chance of getting off parole if I stopped seeing my psychiatrist.”

“The parole system is supposed to help us move forward with our lives, get a job, get us involved in the community....I went to my parole officer and I asked them, how could you help me get a job? How could you help me get housing? They was like, ‘Well, you got to figure it out yourself. I’m not here to do that.’ ”

“Reentry is becoming a numbers game. It’s like, they’re so focused on how many people got housing or how many people got a job versus like, what is it that we really need?”

“The system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. It wasn’t to rehabilitate us, it wasn’t to bring us back into the community. It’s doing what it was supposed to – to put barriers for us not to be able to move forward.”

“We want respect, fairness, and humanity.”

More on engaging in advocacy in empowering ways

Several participants highlighted that engaging in advocacy for themselves and others was a positive experience, especially when carried out with support and community. Participants named that honing and using advocacy skills can be not only useful for practical reentry issues but can also facilitate deeper healing and transformation.

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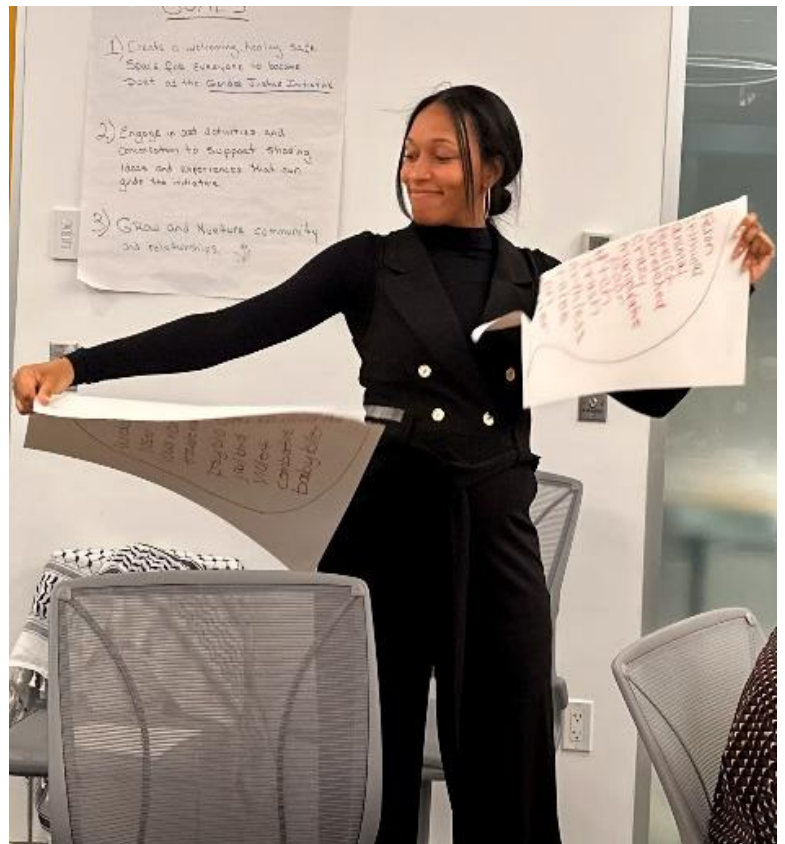
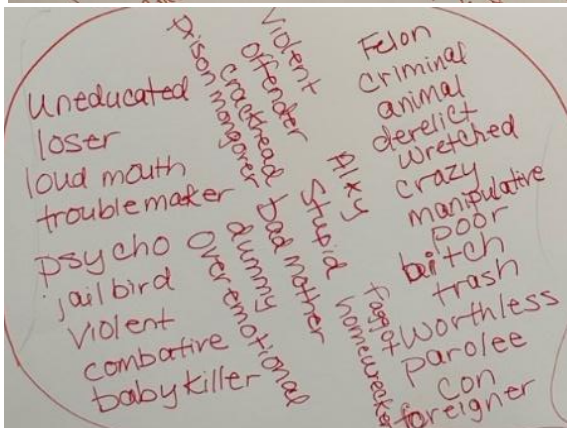
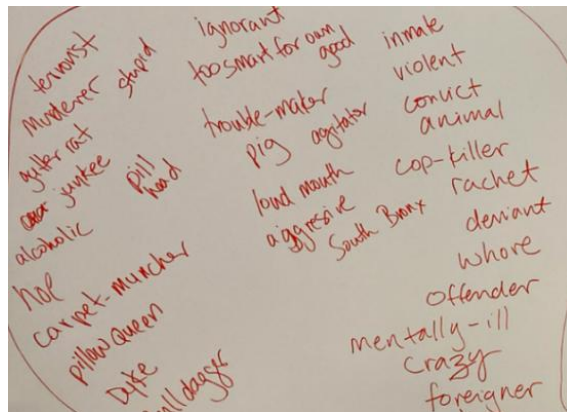
“Advocating, you know, gave me a purpose. It gave me an outlet to let out the trauma, you know... so going from being in an abusive situation and adapting to that to coming out here and adapting and just in more of a positive way, I believe it's my superpower.”

“When I fight for women, trans women, whatever process, it's still womanhood. You know, I'm not only just fighting for me, I'm fighting for all of us.”

“The tears, the years, all of that....sometimes we just need space, to just be without an agenda, without something planned, but just to be. Because there's some things that we still carry. I've been out almost 19 years, and I still carry some things...It's not easy, because we stay in the trauma every day that we want to be in this movement, we are still in the trauma, don't ever get that twisted, we still in it.”

More on narrative change

As a closing activity, participants named words that society uses to label and flatten them, and then shared words that actually capture the rich, diverse ways they see each other and themselves. Participants then ripped up the paper with the labels of “what they say,” and celebrated the “what we know” words that accurately reflect who they are. The Initiative created “what we know” word clouds for participants in recognition of each participant’s powerful gifts and qualities.



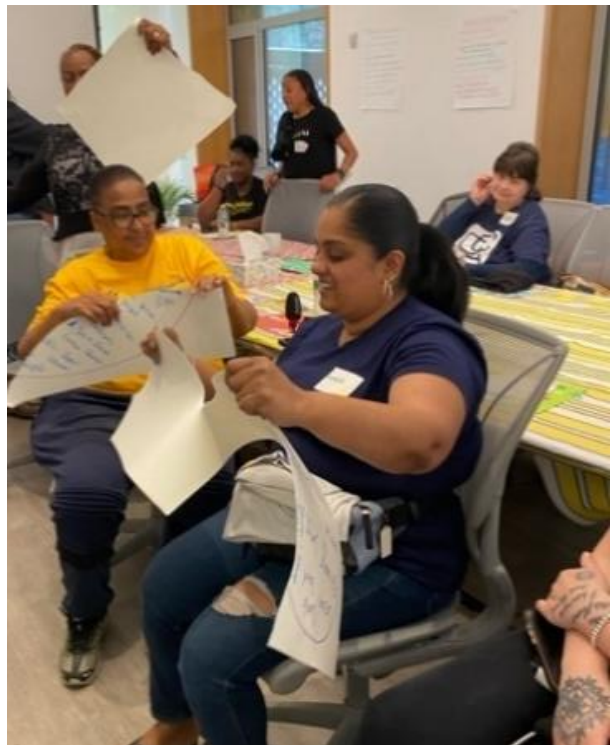
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You think you're
 abuser better than me

Weak Immigrant Needy
 racket Lazy Crazy Psycho
 narcissist Delusional Bitch
 piece of shit Neurotic Thief
 neglectful welfare mom Scammer
 You ain't going to be shit white trash Gas lighter
 Can't be rehabilitated



rugrat DIN
 Manipulator
 CRAZY NYS Property Untrustworthy
 alcoholic Nobody dangerous Trouble Maker
 loser Insane Addict
 a number Violent Nothing
 failure B Word Unstable
 worthless/unworthy C Word Bad Mother
 You'll be back Drug-addict
 Waste of time Just A Number Waste off
 Criminal Statistic
 You didn't learn anything Liar
 Felon You're A Number



Disposable Stupid "N" word
 Dishonorable Taker
 Criminal Violent Selfish
 Guilty Manipulative Bad mother
 Non-worthy Bully killer Hoe
 addict Opportunist "C" word
 loser Ignorant Dumb inmate
 convict liar



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Sunshine in here
 Existence
 Beauty in the madness
 Inspiring Unity
 Revelational Expressive
 Powerful Gratitude
 Resilient Empathy Love
 Comraderte Unique Fierceness
 Purpose Mored Slayed
 Solidarity Beautiful
 Powerful Accord
 Funny Brave Bold
 Lady's boner



Survivors
 Accountable
 Creative
 Inspiring
 Exceptional
 Steward
 Exceptionally
 Activist
 Leader
 Visionary
 Nurturer
 Selfless
 Tireless
 Community members
 Justice creators
 Creative
 Survivors
 Accountable
 Creative
 Inspiring
 Exceptional
 Steward
 Exceptionally
 Activist
 Leader
 Visionary
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 Selfless
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 Community members
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 Survivors
 Accountable
 Creative
 Inspiring
 Exceptional
 Steward
 Exceptionally
 Activist
 Leader
 Visionary
 Nurturer
 Selfless
 Tireless
 Community members
 Justice creators

Appreciative
 Good mother pioneer
 SEXY
 Courageous
 DIVA
 Passionate
 Healer
 Protector
 Lovable
 Recovered
 Survivor
 Helper
 Entrepreneur
 Worthy
 Community
 Strong
 Charismatic
 Intelligent
 Joyful
 Successful
 Sharing
 Generous
 Leader
 Resilient
 role model
 Worthy
 Charismatic
 Intelligent
 Joyful
 Successful
 Sharing
 Generous
 Leader
 Resilient
 role model
 Worthy
 Charismatic
 Intelligent
 Joyful

Phenomenal
 Curvy
 Activist
 Visionary
 Womanist
 Selfless
 Nurturer
 Healers
 Survivors
 Drivers
 Hard-workers
 Teachers
 Caretakers
 Lawyers
 Grandmothers
 Mentors
 Courageous
 Powerful
 Kind
 Role-model
 Handsome
 Responsible
 Compassionate
 Forgivable
 Considerate
 Strong
 Kind
 Role-model
 Handsome
 Responsible
 Compassionate
 Forgivable
 Considerate
 Strong

Women of the future
 Confident
 Resilient
 Amazing
 Survivors
 Inventor
 Advocate
 Strong
 Leader
 Cook
 Petty
 Forgiving
 Scholar
 Content
 Beautiful
 Walking
 Loving
 Testimony
 Entrepreneur
 Happy
 Worthy
 Committed
 Community
 Builders
 Abolitionist
 Dedicatee
 Persistent
 Joyful
 Healthy
 I am somebody
 Confident
 Graduate
 Stabilized
 Educated
 Courageous
 A Good Mother
 Protector
 Self Worth
 Authors
 Living my Best Life
 Educator
 Warm
 The sun

Educational
 Inspiring
 Impressive
 Awareness
 Astounding
 Love
 Fierceness
 Intentional
 Funny
 Gateful
 Brave
 Memorable
 Bold
 Sisterhood
 Lady-boner
 Fierce
 Constructive
 Empowerment
 Enlightening
 Together
 Inclusive

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Trans & gender expansive-specific community conversation

While similarities existed across gatherings, participants in the gathering focused on trans women and gender expansive people shared thoughts and ideas specific to their particular experiences with gender identity. Participants named the routine dehumanization, harassment, and violence they experience from law enforcement and corrections, and highlighted that these experiences compound the trauma of the criminal legal system overall.

“One time I was going out to the yard and it was these new officers coming in...the young man asked me my pronouns. Now this shocked the fuck out of me because I was like, Oh, he asked me about my pronouns. Wow, okay, so I tell him, ‘she/her.’ The older officers who’ve been working years and years had a problem with that. They addressed him about that. They coerced him into being like them....”

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“So one of the biggest issues I will say how they break you down...they make you feel less than, they let you know that you still have that male anatomy.”

“I had to pretend to be what I wasn't...I was in the box [solitary] three times because I had to show my masculinity, you know, I hit a couple guys upside the head and all that because I was trying to protect myself...I had to do what I had to do to survive.”

“For many years...I wasn't able to transition because I wasn't awarded hormones. So I couldn't look the way that society wanted me to look. So I had to wear clothes, not to make me feel comfortable, but to make the other people around me feel comfortable, so that I could be safe, and go to work and come home without getting a bullet in my head, a bottle cracked over my face.”

“I think trans women are more visible sometimes in a way that just creates a lot of violence for them. But that invisibility on trans men also creates violence for us...I'm standing on the side of bookings, all the men are on one side, they see me and they know what's going on. Officers are over there whispering like, that's one of them....I'm supposed to use the bathroom with a bunch of men, right? So it just puts us all in a lot of vulnerable situations where there is a lot of work that needs to be done.”

Ideas for change

Participants offered a variety of ideas for changing the criminal legal system and society, including:

- ✓ More opportunities for in-person, healing spaces to build community and connect, similar to those created during the community conversations.
- ✓ More supports to address trauma that are truly gender-specific and trauma-informed.
- ✓ Better supports for mental health issues, more efforts to reduce stigma around mental health, and more work to make sure people with mental illness are not criminalized.
- ✓ Better education and training on trauma and mental health for all stakeholders in the criminal legal system.
- ✓ More opportunities to advocate for change in the criminal legal system as women and gender expansive people and more support to enhance advocacy skills.
- ✓ Shifting funding from corrections to community services and supports.
- ✓ Stopping harassment, criminalization, and incarceration of women and gender expansive people especially people of color, people from low-income communities, and people who are trans and gender expansive.
- ✓ Better support for family connection inside and family reunification after coming home.
- ✓ Reforming parole and ending unfair parole mandates that undermine successful reentry.
- ✓ Better treatment inside prisons and jails and an end to the specific violence that trans and gender expansive people experience from police and correction staff.

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- ✓ Better reentry services that start inside and continue after release, including help with getting timely access to medication and important documents like birth certificates.
- ✓ More and better programs inside that offer valuable skills, especially related to technology.
- ✓ Making sure that work experience inside counts on the outside, including for unemployment and social security.

Closing & looking forward

At the end of each conversation, participants and Initiative partners took turns sharing one word about the day. The feedback from all involved was overwhelmingly positive.

The experiences and wisdom so generously shared during these conversations will ground and guide the Initiative's work in the months to come.

