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ALACHUA COUNTY IS FAILING ITS RETURNING CITIZENS

When incarcerated people are released in Alachua County, their return to society is met with closed doors. Barriers to employment, housing discrimination, and social stigma often cause returning citizens to become homeless or cycle back through the justice system. Community Spring, however, envisions a community where returning citizens are welcomed with open arms and given the proper support to thrive in their new lives.

Gainesville, FL -- Recent data shows that Florida has an incarceration rate of 833 per 100,000 people, nearly 20% higher than the national rate. Approximately 30,000 people are released from Florida prisons each year with the number leaving county jails exponentially higher. For those coming home to Alachua County there is practically no support to rebuild their lives and rejoin the community. Most returning citizens have few resources at their disposal to meet even their basic needs and are therefore more likely to face reincarceration. Relative to other parts of the criminal justice system, support for re-entry receives far too little attention in the state budget.

Formerly incarcerated people are **unemployed at a rate of over 27%** — higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during the Great Depression. They are **almost 10 times more likely to be homeless** than the general public. Severe homelessness and housing insecurity increase recidivism and cost taxpayers millions. Several cities, including Seattle and Washington, D.C., have already taken steps to limit unfair housing discrimination based on criminal history and instead encourage landlords to conduct individual assessments that can promote family reunification and prevent homelessness.

“We’ve become all too well-adjusted to this revolving door of incarceration. What returning citizens need is a chance to prove their hearts and minds. They need advocacy and solidarity.”

-Kevin Scott, Community Spring Fellow

The U.S. represents about 4% of the world’s population yet houses around 22% of the world’s prisoners. *Soul murder* is a term that Dr. James Gilligan of NYU uses to describe incarceration. This “destroying of someone’s personality, the sense of their own aliveness,” is a condition most of the 2.3 million people in prison will bring home with them. **About 650,000 men and women are released from incarceration each year with some form of PTSD.** While focusing on their basic needs such as housing and employment, returning citizens seldom have the money or the time to find effective therapy for trauma. This all results in a staggering number of people in need of support.

Community Spring is launching an initiative to get Alachua County up to speed on the issues facing returning citizens and how they impact the broader community. Comprised of affected community members, they will focus on building a grassroots network to support formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones by sharing experiences and resources. They will also be working to break down the many barriers returning citizens face as they try to find adequate housing and employment. This campaign, along with its partners and allies, stands ready to bring those on the fringes into the center to heal our fractured communities. Bridge building is hard work and Community Spring welcomes it. If you or a loved one have been affected by incarceration, or if you just want to help create a more supportive and inclusive community, please contact them to get involved.