

Safe & Just
Michigan

Formerly Incarcerated CEOs Show How They Overcame Barriers to Find Success

Webinar highlights the untapped potential of justice-involved people

LANSING — Faced with unemployment rates the nation hasn't seen since the Great Depression, employer policies tilted against hiring people with a criminal record, thousands of formerly incarcerated people are turning to entrepreneurship to attain financial security. While entrepreneurs who have been involved in the justice system face unique challenges, a panel of CEOs and business owners who were previously incarcerated managed to find success despite facing all of those barriers and their stories of success stand in stark contrast to the usual narrative shared about formerly incarcerated people across the United States.

"Business Beyond Barriers: Formerly Incarcerated CEOs Pave the Way" was hosted by Safe & Just Michigan, a Lansing-based nonprofit working to end Michigan's over-reliance on incarceration and to build safe communities throughout the state, and co-sponsored by Nation Outside, a Michigan nonprofit led by justice-impacted people, on Wednesday. It featured Catastrophic Creations Founding Partner **Gabriel Blauer**, 70 Million Jobs and Commissary Club CEO **Richard Bronson**, Flikshop Founder and CEO **Marcus Bullock**, Safe & Just Michigan Outreach Director **Troy Rienstra** as moderator and Washington state representative candidate **Tarra Simmons** as convener.

"Too often, people have the idea that people who were incarcerated are a drag on society and destined to return to prison. That's absolutely not the case," Rienstra said. "People who were incarcerated have gone on to become successful social workers, educators, legislators and entrepreneurs. It's vitally important to showcase what formerly incarcerated people are capable of — not just to inspire others with a criminal record, but to show the rest of America of the good things they can do."

"People who have the professional and lived experiences to bring the needed transformational changes to the criminal legal system should be given the opportunity to do so. In addition, people who are just starting their re-entry need to hear stories of those who have found success after incarceration so they know the possibilities for their own journeys," said Simmons, who was

sentenced to 30 months in prison in 2011 for theft and drug charges, then went on to earn a law degree with honors from the Seattle University Law School in 2017.

People who have been incarcerated routinely struggle with employment barriers, including a jobless rate that hovered around 25 percent¹ before the COVID-19 crisis hit, according to the Prison Policy Institute.

"Seventy million Americans have completed their sentences, yet continue to bear the burden of mistakes often made many years ago," Bronson said.

Employer policies — such as check-boxes that screen out people with criminal records, and state laws precluding people with a criminal history from obtaining requisite licenses — keep many formerly incarcerated people from finding good-paying jobs. Because of those kinds of policies, "In truth, those of us with records are serving life sentences, with no chance of parole," Bronson said.

Several people who have been incarcerated look to entrepreneurship as a way to overcome the barriers between themselves and good jobs. For others, starting their own business has been a lifelong dream — just as it is for countless other Americans.

"When I was released from prison, I had the constant expectation that success would come after I cleared the next hurdle: complete parole, earn my associate degree, earn my bachelor's degree," Blauer said. "But it was never enough; my record always stood between me and the kind of job that would equal success. Going into business with an old friend was never something I planned, but it turned out to finally be the key to success for me."

But for those who have a criminal record, starting a business can present some unique challenges. Lending institutions can be hesitant to extend credit to someone with a criminal record. States might decline liquor licenses, occupational or professional licenses needed to start a business. Government programs, such as the recent small business loans through the federal coronavirus CARES Act, were unavailable to people with a criminal record. Those hurdles don't stop people determined to start a business, but they do require determination to overcome.

"I'm excited about this conversation. It's hard for a grad student that stands at the top of their class at Harvard Business School to launch and grow a scalable business — imagine how hard it is for someone that is leaving prison," Bullock said. "You can't be what you can't see. I'm pumped to be a part of a conversation that shows the world what is possible after someone leaves prison with the right support."

A recording of the webinar will be available on Safe & Just Michigan's YouTube channel later in the week at <http://bit.ly/YouTubeSJM>.

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¹ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

Safe & Just Michigan (www.safeandjustmi.org) works to advance policies that end Michigan's over-use of incarceration and promote community safety and healing. We partner with Michigan organizations and leaders from across the political spectrum, including business and community leaders, faith communities, crime survivor organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals, prisoners and their families, as well as Michigan taxpayers statewide.