

OPENING DOORS

**AFTER THREE YEARS, THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS' RESTORATION PROJECT, WHICH WAS STARTED TO SUPPORT CRIMINAL JUSTICE IMPROVEMENTS AND REFORMS IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION, HAS SEEN SOME PROGRESS, INCLUDING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCES WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM. BUT THE NEED FOR THE WORK CONTINUES.
BY DEBORAH M. TODD**

Anyone who drives through the Fort Pitt Tunnel, sees the gleaming Pittsburgh skyline and then veers east on the roadway along the Monongahela River could easily mistake the Allegheny County Jail for just about any other office or even residential building. It's jarring to associate its clean lines and riverfront views with the absence of freedom.

Exterior appearances aside, there's no mistaking the jail's purpose. It was opened in May 1995 with the express intent of housing individuals pre-trial and serving as a support to the

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and its web of related institutions.

But throughout Allegheny County, covert pipelines to the criminal justice system lie in schools, neighborhoods with disproportionately high police presence, communities that lack key resources and the inner workings of the judicial system. These spaces all play roles that can nudge an individual's circumstances that much closer to incarceration.

To address the effects of a flawed criminal justice system on local residents and communities, The Heinz Endowments established The Restoration Project in 2019 after receiving approval from the foundation's board of directors the previous year. The three-year initiative invested \$13.8 million in direct grants to 40 organizations with goals to improve, support and hold accountable the region's criminal justice system.

This spring, the Endowments board agreed to invest another \$2 million to continue the foundation's support of reform efforts, including some that were slowed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and others that were more targeted to advocacy and policy work. Still, by the close of the original funding cycle, grant recipients' accomplishments included landmark legal victories, district-wide transformations of student culture, reconsideration of city policies and the exoneration of the wrongfully convicted. Some examples of these achievements follow, and while the initiative's first project timeline has ended, the work, for most grant recipients, is just starting to pick up pace.



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Greg Brown, client, Pennsylvania Innocence Project



Greg Brown

THE PENNSYLVANIA INNOCENCE PROJECT

By the time COVID-19 shuttered courthouses across the country in 2020, the Pennsylvania Innocence Project was already behind in its work due to the more than 7,000 requests it had received since its launch in 2009. Those seeking assistance included individuals in prisons across the state trying to prove they were unjustly incarcerated, in addition to requests to help those who had been recently exonerated adjust to their new lives outside of prison.

Without an electronic filing system and digitized case files, getting information to volunteers to initiate its four-step review process had become a nearly "insurmountable challenge," Director of Development Sara Nolan said.

Today, thanks in part to \$301,207 in funding from the Endowments, the Pennsylvania Innocence Project has digitized its case files, implemented a shared electronic filing system, improved staff capacity and is slowly addressing its backlog of potential clients. It also cleared the cases of clients like Greg Brown, 45, whom the organization had been working with since 2009.

Mr. Brown was accused of setting a home on fire, resulting in the death of three firefighters, but witnesses later said they were paid to make false statements against him. By 2016, the Innocence Project had gotten Brown's case exonerated in Pennsylvania courts, but, partially due to pandemic shutdowns of federal courts, an ultimate resolution didn't come until this June.

Mr. Brown accepted an Alford plea in June, which allows his conviction to stand but also lets him maintain his innocence and get on with his life without the further threat of incarceration.

"It might not be the closure I want, but it's definitely some type of closure," he told a television station after taking the plea agreement. "I won't have this hanging over my head."

LANDFORCE

After having been incarcerated on and off since 2013, Eric Givens, 32, wasn't sure what to expect when he took a job as a laborer with Landforce, an environmental restoration and workforce development organization that supports individuals who are reentering society.

But once he saw the fruits of his labor after building his first trail, he gained a sense of purpose that he felt could lead him to his first career.

"We would go into these neighborhoods and make a trail, and the next thing you know people are walking around on them and enjoying it," he said.

Ilyssa Manspeizer, Landforce's executive director, said Mr. Givens' experience exemplifies what the organization strives to do for all of its clients. It is dedicated to habitat restoration and trail reconstruction throughout the city, including in typically underserved areas where some of the workers might have come of age and also could benefit from witnessing the impact of their efforts.

"We hire people who have been excluded from the economy, returning citizens, people trapped in cycles of generational poverty, those who grew up 'in the wrong ZIP code' and may be struggling from mental health or substance abuse issues," she said.

Ms. Manspeizer said funding from the Endowments, which totaled \$450,000, helped Landforce hire for positions that allow it to increase communications and connect with potential government organizations. The support also will help the organization to expand its efforts to another social enterprise business that provides employment.

For Mr. Givens, the experience has spawned an opportunity for a job as a laborer for Pittsburgh's Department of Parks and Recreation. It's a position he never saw himself in prior to incarceration, but one where he can see a future that allows him to support himself legally and pay it forward to his community.

"I really like working in the inner city because it gives back, and inner-city kids don't get to see stuff like that. They've never seen an all-Black crew, and they're working on parks and making trails.

"They're like, 'You look just like me and this is what you're doing and what you're creating,'" he said.

Landforce workers built a new trail in 2019 that connects Hartwood Acres, a 629-acre park that is 12 miles north of Pittsburgh, to the Rachel Carson Trail, a 45.7-mile hiking trail that runs north and east of the city.

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Ilyssa Manspeizer
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Landforce

JUST DISCIPLINE PROJECT



Dickson Preparatory STEAM Academy, which serves several of Pittsburgh's eastern suburbs, was the site of a Just Discipline Project pilot program that yielded impressive results.

In 2015, when James Huguley of the Just Discipline Project completed an assessment of Allegheny County's "school-to-prison pipeline"—the connection between school discipline practices and young people cycling in and out of the criminal justice system into adulthood—the stark findings rattled the region's educators, parents and stakeholders.

"In Allegheny County, Black students [were] suspended at seven times the rate of non-Black students," Dr. Huguley said. "In urban districts, we have excessively high suspension rates compared to the state average. The average is 11 students per 100. We found districts that were over 60 suspensions per 100 students. There was one district one year [where] the Black students had more than 100 suspensions per 100 students."

The report led to connections between the Endowments and a pilot program with the Woodland Hills School District for the Just Discipline Project, an intervention program designed to place specially trained "restorative practice coordinators" in schools to improve relations between students and teachers and revitalize the overall culture. Coordinators recruit teams of 30 to 40 student leaders who are trained in conflict mediation so classrooms and hallways are soon filled with young leaders working toward the same mission.

Changes at Woodland Hills Intermediate School, now known as Dickson Preparatory STEAM Academy, were swift and significant. Over a three-year period, there was a 28 percent reduction in suspensions and a 30 percent decline in referrals, Dr. Huguley said. Students gained an extra 1,000 hours in classrooms due to those reductions, which led to increased achievement at the school. And the Endowments has been committed to the project since the beginning, awarding several grants that total nearly \$1.2 million, so far.

This fall, Dr. Huguley said the program is expected to serve more than 7,000 students in 12 schools and is conducting training in schools across the state to implement it in the future.

"It's been a seven-year journey, and we're going from writing and talking about it to serving a major portion of the youth in our region," he said.

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Julie Evans, counseling coordinator, MAYA

MAYA ORGANIZATION

The MAYA Organization is a nonprofit based in Swissvale, Pennsylvania, east of Pittsburgh, that employs teams of perinatal counselors and doulas. When the organization was about to begin individual mental health counseling services in the Allegheny County Jail, it seemed natural to start with pregnant women. However, by the time MAYA connected with the Endowments in 2016, its mission had expanded to include "any woman who has been incarcerated at any time," said MAYA's ACJ Counseling Coordinator Julie Evans. Through the Restoration Project, the organization has received \$210,000 for its work with incarcerated women.

To address "disconnection" among services for women transitioning through the criminal justice system, MAYA began offering group and individual counseling at the jail and expanded the services to women transitioning out of jail and those who were back in communities, readjusting to their new lives.

"We were trying to build relationships so people could come back and do their healing—as oftentimes people have to do it—in stages," said Ms. Evans.

Considering that as many as 94 percent of women who are incarcerated have experienced sexual or physical abuse prior to incarceration, consistent counseling can help them to address and heal from those traumas so they don't impact their futures, she explained.

"Recovery is a bumpy process and to know you can always turn to someone for help and support with your journey is very helpful," she said.

While pandemic delays briefly disrupted the programming, MAYA still provided weekly online mental health groups and self-directed programs during the lockdown that women not only utilized but also followed through with upon their release. Unfortunately, staffing shortages caused the jail to temporarily suspend the online programs.

In the meantime, MAYA has doubled down on its efforts to support returning citizens and to meet them where they're likely to find them.

"Our focus is on the reentry side of things, the discharge and release side of things, and building relationships with the clinics that people are likely to go to for support, trying to have a presence there," Ms. Evans said. "Where [do] people, when they go back to communities, tend to go for support and how can we help augment that?"



ABOLITIONIST LAW CENTER

By 2020, the Abolitionist Law Center was more than familiar with the inner workings of the Allegheny County Jail. It had resolved a lawsuit against the facility in 2017 for housing pregnant detainees in solitary confinement, reaching an agreement that prohibits the jail from housing pregnant women in solitary cells except for specific circumstances that require clearances from administrators and medical professionals.

The Pittsburgh center has received Restoration Project grants totaling \$575,000 with funding in 2020 used to support a joint class-action lawsuit against the Allegheny County Jail with several other organizations demanding the jail utilize space from a 20 percent population reduction to enforce social distancing.

The center also supported the class action lawsuit *Howard v. Williams*, which challenged common uses of force, such as restraint chairs, in the institution. A series of community listening forums highlighting former inmates who had been disciplined using these practices sparked a referendum allowing voters to decide whether or not to end the policies. The referendum passed in May 2021 with 70 percent of voters approving it.

“In 2019, ACJ had 339 people in the restraint chair. There were zero people in that chair this year,” said Lead Staff Attorney Jaclyn Kurin. “There will be zero people in that chair next year, and they no longer have the restraint chairs at the jail. This is an example of how that litigation ended up influencing legislation.”



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David Hickton,
founding director, Pitt Cyber

PITTSBURGH TASK FORCE ON PUBLIC ALGORITHMS

During a time when digital data is enabling corporations and institutions—including law enforcement agencies—to conduct real-time assessments of individuals and communities, it has become crucial to a growing number of citizens across the country to ensure that data is being used without bias and in ways that do not cause unintentional harm.

Recognizing the nature of the issue in 2020, the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security (Pitt Cyber), with the support of \$172,162 in Endowments funding, launched the Pittsburgh Task Force on Public Algorithms. Among the group's members were city and county government officials, public advocates, academic experts and criminal justice scholars. The task force was designed to provide recommendations and serve as a resource for oversight in an area not many people realized impacted their neighborhoods.

“There were certainly community activists and more engaged people who did know, but mostly it seems the public didn't have a huge awareness,” said Pitt Cyber Executive Director Beth Schwanke.

The task force assessed the processes used to put algorithms in place in systems used by Allegheny County Department of Human Services and by the Pittsburgh Police Department in a pilot project. The goal was to ensure that transparency, potential biases in data and other key issues were addressed prior to implementation. When task force members noticed they couldn't find much publicly available information about the algorithm used by police, they wrote a letter to then-Mayor Bill Peduto, who confirmed the algorithm was being suspended.

David Hickton, Pitt Cyber's founding director, said city and county officials continue to reach out to the task force for assistance, and the relationships being built were part of the overall goal.

“These [algorithms] are helpful and efficient but, if misused, can be dangerous and can exacerbate inequality,” he said. “We can't go backward on the technology curve. We need to continually leverage technology, but we don't need to have the false choice between leveraging it poorly and leveraging it well.” **h**