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**Ronald Reagan Institute Hosts “Reducing Recidivism Through Postsecondary Opportunities”
Event**

WASHINGTON, DC – The Ronald Reagan Institute’s Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity (CCEO) convened leaders in education and criminal justice reform on Thursday to highlight structural barriers faced by incarcerated Americans seeking access to postsecondary education. “Reducing Recidivism Through Postsecondary Opportunities” took place on the heels of the Biden Administration’s decision to expand the Second Chance Pell experiment. The program has provided educational opportunities for thousands of justice-impacted individuals who have previously been unable to access federal need-based financial aid.

The conversation was divided into two panels and featured a pair of formerly incarcerated individuals turned scholars as well as state leaders from Maryland and Tennessee. Speakers explained the numerous hurdles faced by those behind bars and solutions being implemented at the state level. In her opening remarks, CCEO Director Dr. Janet Tran underscored the limitations of Second Chance Pell, which she described as a step in the right direction that does not do nearly enough to prepare the formerly incarcerated as they return to the community. “We need to think of education as a tool to combat recidivism.”

The first panel, moderated by Dr. Noel Vest, discussed the benefits of providing access to higher education in prison. Dr. Vest, a formerly incarcerated scholar who now studies addiction recovery at Stanford Medicine, opened the discussion by expressing his gratitude for the college prison programs that were available to him while he served time at the Lovelock Correctional Center in Nevada.

Panelist Dr. Stanley Andrisse, an endocrinologist at Howard University College of Medicine and Executive Director of From Prison Cells to Ph.D., discussed his work providing mentoring and educational counseling to currently and formerly incarcerated men and women. For Dr. Andrisse, the issue is personal. As a young man, he was sentenced to ten years in a maximum-security prison for drug trafficking charges. “I was fortunate enough to have support systems in place to prevent a revolving door,” he said.

When asked about the importance of Second Chance Pell, Sean Addie, director of correctional education at the U.S Department of Education, lauded the Administration for reinstating the program, but noted that other barriers still exist. “Technology is a huge barrier in prison, more importantly, prisons are not classrooms,” he said. Despite access to funds to pursue an education, incarcerated individuals still lag in terms of educational equity, and should have access to those same opportunities in the classroom, Addie said.

Belinda Wheeler, senior program associate at the Vera Institute, applauded the work of certain states for using COVID-19 relief funds to provide resources such as Wi-Fi and laptops to incarcerated individuals seeking to expand their education. Panelists agreed that education is an essential investment to prepare incarcerated individuals for reentry given the fact that 95 percent of all inmates eventually return to their community. “Education increases opportunities and is transformational to that individual’s family and future generations,” said Dr. Andrisse.

The second panel, moderated by Patrice Sulton, founder and executive director of DC Justice Lab, focused on the challenges and opportunities of implementing educational programs for the incarcerated at the state level. Included in the panel were The Maryland Secretary of Public Safety and Correctional Services Robert Green, and Abigale Jasinsky, deputy director of policy for Tennessee Governor Bill Lee. Secretary Green, a former corrections officer, recently launched a new program in Maryland aimed at facilitating the transition from prison life to society. The program guarantees veterans who were honorably discharged before being sent to prison a job at a Maryland VA cemetery upon their release. Mr. Green emphasized the value of strong connections to the community which involves multiple stakeholders coming together to ensure the individuals leaving prison have the available resources to succeed.

Jasinsky noted that part of the challenge is working to get the incarcerated population at a high-school literacy level. She emphasized that the politics surrounding this issue is the most difficult aspect. “It takes a long time to get enough buy-in on this,” she said.

Defining the success of these initiatives is too often focused on recidivism instead of positive outcomes for individuals and communities, explained Jasinsky. “Everybody uses recidivism as the current measure of success, yet that is a measure of failure.” Instead, she said policymakers should focus on other variables such as individual liberty through stable employment and healthy relations.

A recording of the event is posted on the Reagan Institute’s [YouTube Channel](#).

About the Ronald Reagan Institute: The Ronald Reagan Institute (RRI), the Washington, DC office of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, promotes our 40th President’s ideals, vision, and leadership example through substantive, issue-driven forums, academic and young professional programming, and scholarly work. RRI builds on the legacy and ideas of President Reagan through our three policy centers: the Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity, the Center for Peace Through Strength, and the Center for Freedom and Democracy. Each of these centers ensure President Reagan’s legacy is advanced in our nation’s capital. The Ronald Reagan Institute’s Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity (CCEO) works at the nexus of civics and education policy, answering President Reagan’s call for an “informed patriotism” to ensure a prosperous future for America. American civic life poses many challenges to our institutions and to our faith in democratic practice to improve them. These challenges require a multifaceted approach. As such, the CCEO looks to create a collective impact on American society through partnerships that help support the three levers of change. Together, the CCEO will look to these levers to better prepare America to answer the challenges of the 21st century and “renew the American spirit and sense of purpose.”

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