



MICHIGAN RE-ENTRY ID PROGRAM: *A Case Study*

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For decades, we have known of the importance of vital documents for those leaving prison, but finding a solution proved elusive until we fully committed as an agency to the work and the partnerships necessary to solve this problem.

I'd like to extend my thanks to our vital documents staff at the facilities, as well as the team at Central Office that coordinates this work, solves problems, and supports thousands of men and women leaving prison each year by removing one of the first barriers to employment, housing, and successful re-entry.

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HEIDI E. WASHINGTON

Michigan Department of Corrections Director



Executive *Summary*

Successful re-entry requires more than release from incarceration. It requires the basic tools to return to work, secure housing, access services, and navigate everyday life. State governments need to set them up for success by implementing commonsense, cost-effective programs to aid in the re-entry process.

Free IDs for people leaving incarceration (re-entry IDs) are a gold-standard approach to reducing recidivism rates, lowering crime, and helping individuals successfully reintegrate into their communities through stable housing and employment.

A preliminary study on the impact of simply providing returning citizens with an ID shows that individuals with a valid ID upon release were at least 15% less likely to be reincarcerated.

Michigan is a national leader on re-entry IDs. Since September 2020, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) and the Michigan Department of State (MDOS) (which oversees license and ID issuance) have successfully partnered to streamline this process – increasing ID transactions for returning citizens from roughly 400 to more than 6,000 per year.

Today, Michigan boasts the highest issuance rate for re-entry IDs in the country. Over 98% of all individuals leaving state prison in Michigan have a state-issued ID in hand at the time of release. As of February 2026, over 30,000 incarcerated individuals have received IDs through MDOC's Returning Citizen Identification Program. Coinciding with Michigan's investments into this program, the state's recidivism rate has fallen to 21% — the lowest ever recorded in the state's history.

This case study explores the success of Michigan's re-entry ID program. The lessons and best practices from Michigan's success serve as a roadmap for other states to achieve the same outcomes. Already, other states are implementing many of these changes and developing their own additional best practices — ensuring a smooth re-entry for people who have paid their debt to society, reducing recidivism rates, and protecting taxpayers.

The Challenge: **Administrative Friction Stalling Re-Entry**

An Endless Identification Loop

A state-issued ID is essential to key aspects of daily life: getting a job, finding a place to live, accessing public benefits, opening a bank account, picking up prescriptions, accessing other health care services, and more. Yet obtaining a valid ID after incarceration is often an uphill battle for returning citizens. A trip to the DMV requires transportation, money to pay for the ID, and underlying proof of identity documents. These vital records — such as birth certificates and Social Security cards — may be lost or unavailable and can be time-consuming, labor-intensive, and expensive to obtain after release. These documents themselves can also require proof of identity to obtain.

This creates a procedural Catch-22: Returning citizens must present vital records to obtain a state ID from the DMV after their release from prison, yet cannot access those records without official identification. This challenge creates unnecessary administrative burdens during the critical period after release from prison, forcing individuals to navigate redundant bureaucratic hurdles at the precise moment community stabilization is most critical.

The Impact on Taxpayers

This lack of identification delays access to housing, prescriptions, medical benefits, and employment. Failing to provide state IDs to returning citizens is an administrative bottleneck; it creates substantial economic damage to the entire state. Every year, thousands of returning citizens are ready and willing to join the workforce. They not only remain sidelined by identification access issues, but the employers who want to hire them also cannot process their employment paperwork without the correct documentation.

When states fail to ensure ID access prior to release, it can create several direct economic shortfalls:

- **Exacerbated Labor Shortages:** Motivated, job-ready workers remain sidelined while local businesses struggle to fill open positions across key state industries.
- **Lost Tax Revenue:** Capable workers are prevented from joining the formal workforce, turning potential tax-paying contributors into dependents on public resources.
- **Higher Costs for Taxpayers:** Lacking an ID makes it nearly impossible to secure housing, open a bank account, or get hired — increasing reliance on state safety nets and driving up costly re-incarceration rates.
- **Growth of the Informal Economy:** Without legal documentation, individuals are pushed toward off-the-books, unregulated work that generates no state tax revenue and provides no long-term financial stability.



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One of the most important things we did when developing this process was building a system to track our work and the resulting data from Day 1. This not only allows us to know who we were helping and when, which is important in a state with 6,000+ prison releases each year, but also promotes a mindset focused on problem solving, as we know the results of each case, whether easy or difficult, will be recorded and available for others to view, including departmental leadership. I'd like to thank everyone involved in this process for their efforts and the impact they are having on those we assist.

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JAMIE MYERS*Michigan Department of Corrections Vital Documents Specialist*

How Michigan Solved The Problem

In 2020, MDOC and MDOS worked together to launch a streamlined re-entry ID process. The initiative originated within MDOC's education and vocational programs, where staff saw firsthand that valid identification was a mandatory precursor to securing employment and housing. Driven by both a strategic mandate to reduce recidivism and dedicated leadership from the MDOC Director and education staff, the agency restructured its internal programming and staffing models to prioritize ID acquisition. This internal shift allowed MDOC and MDOS to turn frontline observations into a high-impact, coordinated interagency pipeline.

The program began as a pilot in July 2020, and the agencies tested operations and worked through immediate logistical challenges before scaling the program to all state prisons. The program rolled out statewide in October 2020, despite significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as reduced releases and facility isolation. The program's successful launch despite the unique and challenging environment demonstrates that a strong re-entry ID program is feasible for all states across the country, even with limited resources to invest. As of February 2026, over 30,000 incarcerated individuals have received IDs through MDOC's re-entry ID program.

Streamlined Systems and Inter-Agency Coordination

Some agencies in states across the U.S. have historically had difficulty working with the Social Security Administration when trying to implement a re-entry ID program because SSA only allows applications to be processed 180 days out from release. How does Michigan do it differently? The state has effectively argued that a person's earliest possible release date should be the one used to trigger the 180-day timeline.

Notably, the state transitioned its re-entry ID program from an opt-in model to a default opt-out design. With the old system, individuals leaving state prison had to proactively request help to secure an official state ID or driver's license. Now unless they opt out, returning citizens automatically receive these documents. Michigan reports that 98% of eligible individuals released from state correctional facilities receive a state ID or driver's license — an outcome driven in part by shift to the opt-out system as well as the state's decision to begin the identification process well before release. Here's how it works:

- **Starting the Process at Intake:** Rather than treating identification as an afterthought, MDOC technically begins the re-entry ID process at intake by immediately initiating birth certificate applications and preparing Social Security Administration (SSA) documentation well in advance of release.
- **Preparing for Release:** As an individual approaches their final 90 days in custody, MDOC transmits completed ID applications to MDOS via secure electronic data transfers, bypassing paper processing delays and allowing a dedicated re-entry ID specialist within MDOS to serve as a unique branch office. For individuals seeking a driver's license instead of a standard state ID, MDOC and MDOS also brought licensing operations inside prisons through "Road to Restoration" mobile clinics, enabling individuals to complete written driving tests on-site. These services can assist people whose licenses have expired, whose licenses have been suspended but can be reinstated, and individuals who have never previously held a driver's license.
- **Upon Release:** At discharge, almost every returning citizen receives a comprehensive exit folder containing their birth certificate, Social Security card, and state ID or driver's license that was obtained through the MDOC and MDOS system. Those who do not receive complete exit folders or state issued IDs are the edge cases that require more individual case management.

The small share who do not receive an ID generally involve cases where Michigan cannot establish the documentation necessary for issuance — for example, people who may be missing key information such as where they were born or who had multiple name changes that make accessing vital documents more difficult. The remaining group also includes individuals who are not legally eligible for a Michigan ID.

Data Tracking

Every two weeks, MDOC sends MDOS a list of any individuals released without complete documentation, tracking exactly who was missed and why (e.g., missing birth certificate or SSN card). The Offender Success Team, an MDOC team dedicated to re-entry support, actively follows up with these individuals post-release to help them secure any missing documents.

Staff Empowerment

Michigan’s program operates with an explicit internal culture that centers outcomes over rigid adherence to standard processes. Staff are empowered to make case-by-case exceptions to successfully get an ID into someone’s hands before release, rather than defaulting to denial when a complex case doesn’t fit standard workflows. For example, after dedicated staff hustled to hand deliver a printed ID to an individual who was released from a life sentence on short notice, staff extended the re-entry ID process to individuals serving life sentences to ensure even those who are unexpectedly resentenced or released on short notice still receive identification.

Cost and Resource Allocation

To eliminate financial barriers to ID access, MDOC pays birth certificate and license reinstatement fees, while MDOS pays standard ID application costs. Michigan law requires these fees to be paid rather than waived, so the agencies allocate the costs between them through their interagency agreement. In addition to covering the individual application and identification expenses, MDOC resources a number of positions that are specifically assigned to supporting re-entry ID programming, including covering the cost of one full-time employee at MDOS whose role is dedicated to processing and issuing re-entry IDs.

The program does not rely on a separate appropriation. MDOC funds its share through its existing budget, including dollars reallocated from educational programming to support reentry ID services. According to MDOC, the annual cost of the full program is approximately \$800,000 per year. In return, it unlocks multi-million dollar savings for state taxpayers. In 2023, MDOC reported that incarcerating a single person in Michigan costs approximately \$48,000 per year.¹

To project Michigan's long-term fiscal impact, we applied findings from [a study](#) by the Virginia Department of Corrections to Michigan's operational scale. The Virginia research demonstrated that providing returning citizens with an ID at release arguably yields a 4 percentage point drop in recidivism. Applied to the 6,000 ID's Michigan issues annually, this model projects that the program prevents around 240 individuals from returning to prison each year. But given costs of incarceration, if streamlined access to identification prevents just 17 individuals from reincarceration, the program more than pays for its costs.

Given our estimates, Michigan saves anywhere from \$5 million to \$11 million annually in avoided prison operational costs — yielding a return of roughly \$6 in taxpayer savings for every \$1 spent on the program. And this analysis does not even account for the additional economic and taxpayer benefits when returning citizens are meaningfully able to contribute to the economy.

¹This is an illustrative estimate, not an evaluation of Michigan's program. It applies the approximately four-percentage-point reduction in reincarceration found in the referenced Virginia study to Michigan's annual re-entry ID volume (approximately 6,000), and assumes approximately \$25,000 in incarceration costs per person over six months. Actual savings would vary based on program outcomes and length of incarceration.



Best Practices

Successful re-entry requires more than release from incarceration. It requires the basic tools to return to work, secure housing, access services, and navigate everyday life. State governments need to set them up for success by implementing common-sense, cost-effective programs to aid in the re-entry process.

- 1 Start Securing Vital Records at Intake, Not Release:** Begin the vital records process (birth certificates, social security cards) the moment an individual enters state custody to allow ample time to resolve documentation hurdles.

- 2 Submit and Process the ID Application in the Months Before Release:** Formally complete and process the ID application 90-120 days before an individual's release date. This ensures the ID's address matches the person's home location post-incarceration, avoiding the need for burdensome address updates and streamlining service enrollment.

- 3 Implement an Opt-Out Model:** Shifting from opt-in to opt-out or mandatory processing is the highest-leverage design change a state can make.

- 4 Eliminate Costs to the Individual:** Eliminate the financial barrier for individuals by covering birth certificate fees, ID/license fees, and reinstatement fees directly at the state or agency level. Additionally, ensure that owing fines or fees would not bar a returning citizen from receiving an ID upon release.

- 5 Build a Direct Data Sharing Pipeline:** Create secure, automated data-sharing pathways between corrections departments and the DMV. Do not rely on individuals to personally and physically navigate complicated DMV processes post-release.

- 6 Bring the DMV to the Facility:** Utilize mobile DMV units or host in-facility clinics to conduct document processing and license testing on-site. For example, Tennessee has a mobile driver unit, while Indiana uses mobile branch equipment to process ID card transactions for those who receive re-entry identification through the state DOC.

- 7 **Designate Dedicated Staff and Funding:** Ensure there are specific, named staff members and dedicated funding lines established on both the corrections and DMV sides. This must be treated as a core operational function rather than an informal add-on duty. It's essential to note here that states who are interested in pursuing a program like Michigan's must invest in their re-entry ID programs in order to see a similar return on investment — states will not see high rates of success by adding the responsibility of a re-entry ID program to existing overworked staff.

- 8 **Build in Accountability Tracking:** Regularly reconcile programmatic data to track exactly who was released with or without documentation, and proactively follow up on identified gaps.

- 9 **Empower Frontline Staff:** Foster a culture of flexibility. Build in staff discretion to make common-sense exceptions to fulfill the end goal of securing an ID, rather than enforcing rigid, no-exceptions workflows that leave people empty-handed.

- 10 **Design for Durability:** Secure high-level, cross-agency leadership buy-in early (e.g., from the governor's office, corrections director, and motor vehicle leadership). More importantly, pursue statutory codification rather than relying solely on inter-agency agreements and the continuity of dedicated personnel. Systematize and automate analogous workflows to mitigate the risk of key-person dependency.

- 11 **Streamline Government Services:** Depending on state law, integrate voter registration restoration and other public benefit enrollments into the exact same transaction, minimizing the administrative burden on the constituent while making participation powerful.

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One of the most proven, commonsense ways to set people up for success after prison is to make sure they leave with the critical identification documents they need to navigate life: an ID, Social Security card, birth certificate, and more. This case study offers policymakers and corrections officials a practical roadmap for bringing these smart, effective policies to their states, and will leave you wondering why this isn't already happening in all 50 states.

LAUREN KRISAI

Executive Director of Justice Action Network



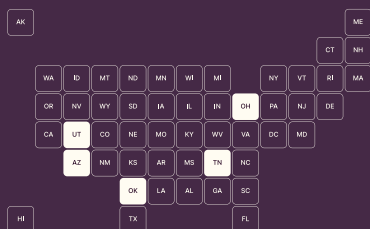
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Justice Action Network is a national bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to advancing smarter justice policies that improve public safety outcomes and create stronger communities nationwide.

Key Takeaways *and Conclusion*

Providing returning citizens with an up-to-date ID upon release requires moderate upfront cost, yet yields substantial measurable returns. States like Michigan that invest in re-entry ID programs support individuals, strengthen community safety and the local economy, and save the state significant taxpayer dollars over the long term.

Other States Making Progress



While Michigan's 98% issuance rate sets the national gold standard for proactive government delivery, states across the country are proving that this model is adaptable, scalable, and practical.

Other states that stand out include Oklahoma, Arizona, Ohio, Utah, and Tennessee.

- Oklahoma:** Through foundational initiatives like 2021's [Sarah Stitt Act](#) and [follow-up legislation in 2025](#) expanding those requirements to driver's licenses, Oklahoma has made vital record retrieval and identification restoration central pillars of its re-entry strategy. By establishing a statutory mandate for the Oklahoma Department of Corrections to gather essential documentation — including birth certificates, Social Security cards, and vocational records — prior to discharge, Oklahoma demonstrates how state policy can eliminate immediate barriers to housing and work. By fostering interagency coordination to ensure individuals re-enter society fully credentialed, Oklahoma offers a compelling example of how proactive policy sets returning citizens, businesses, and communities up for long-term success.

- **Arizona:** Arizona's [Senate Bill 1290](#) highlights the power of operational lead time in successful re-entry policy. Passed in 2023, the law directs the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry and the Department of Transportation to initiate credential verification and document retrieval nine months prior to an individual's discharge date. This extended timeline allows state officials to clear complex administrative hurdles well in advance, guaranteeing returning citizens leave facility doors with a valid state ID or driver's license, birth certificate, and Social Security card in hand.
- **Ohio:** In Ohio, broad interagency synchronization forms the backbone of effective re-entry legislation. By incorporating [Senate Bill 198](#) into the state's [2024 omnibus](#), state leaders built a mandatory pipeline across the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, and the Department of Youth Services. The statute ensures that both returning adults and justice-involved youth receive valid state identification alongside verified workforce and vocational credentials prior to discharge — demonstrating how holistic state coordination can dismantle systemic barriers to employment and housing from day one.
- **Utah:** Utah demonstrates best implementation practices by prioritizing long-term stability over temporary fixes. With the passage of [House Bill 368](#) in 2023, the state modernized its policy by eliminating short-term, temporary IDs in favor of permanent, full-status state identification cards and driver's licenses. By legally requiring the Utah Department of Corrections to assist individuals in acquiring permanent credentials and primary vital records prior to discharge, Utah removes the post-release friction with landlords and employers that frequently stalls successful reintegration.
- **Tennessee:** Through initiatives like the [Re-entry Success Act](#), 2023's [House Bill 1366](#)/[Senate Bill 814](#) providing documentation for returning citizens, [follow up legislation in 2026](#) to expand 2023's statute to driver's licenses, and dedicated coordination between the Tennessee Department of Correction and the Tennessee Office of Reentry, Tennessee has made vital record retrieval and driver's license restoration central pillars of its re-entry strategy. By fostering cross-agency collaboration and focusing on securing documentation prior to discharge, Tennessee offers a compelling example of how states can successfully adopt key lessons from Michigan — building a modern, streamlined system that sets returning citizens, businesses, and communities up for long-term success.

The Path *Ahead*

Providing a state ID at release is a commonsense policy where public safety, fiscal discipline, and economic opportunity align. By treating re-entry identification as a foundational element of public administration, state leaders can eliminate red tape, protect public resources, and ensure government operates efficiently for everyone. The roadmap exists — and as states like Michigan demonstrate, smart inter-agency coordination delivers lasting, impactful results.

For more information about re-entry IDs, please reach out to Ashley Philippsen at ashley@responsivegov.