

Centering People Directly Impacted by Incarceration: The Power of Lived Experience

Lessons from Illinois | Fall 2023

The movement to end mass incarceration is strengthened when the groups and coalitions involved include or center people who themselves have been incarcerated. Listening to individuals with lived experience helps to change the narrative around incarceration, making it harder to ignore the injustices of the system and the humanity and talents of people within it. Meaningful, sustainable changes require a deep understanding of how the criminal justice system fails to generate a safe and fair society—an understanding that people with carceral experience uniquely possess.

This case study explores how centering the leadership of those directly impacted by incarceration is central to meaningfully changing the narrative of mass incarceration. It is based on lessons learned from grantees and partners of the Art for Justice Fund (A4J). As examination of structural racism broadened across the nation in recent years, A4J funded policy change efforts that challenged existing power dynamics by recognizing as essential the roles of formerly incarcerated people reframing ideas about whose voices and knowledge offer constructive contributions. Perspectives from grantees and partners working in Illinois speak to the process and value of centering the voices and leadership of people directly impacted by incarceration as a way to achieve more effective change.

Centering directly impacted people takes different forms.

What does it look like to center people with direct experience? A4J funded some organizations focused on ensuring that formerly incarcerated people have a seat at the table or greater access to sharing their stories and ideas in advocacy work. A4J also supported organizations founded or led by people with direct experience, as well as funded formerly incarcerated artists. A few A4J grantee organizations in Illinois included the following:

The [Fully Free Campaign](#) is a program of the [Heartland Alliance](#) that is led by formerly incarcerated people. Its leaders note that at the community level, figuring out how to center formerly incarcerated people in practice has been challenging for many groups. As a leader of the campaign explained, “We would hear a lot of organizations talk about centering people with lived experience but when you would ask, ‘Well, what does that mean?’ No one could articulate an answer. With [our] governing board, it’s all directly impacted individuals who are overseeing the campaign and helping us strategize. We’re modeling what it means to center people with lived experience.” Not only do directly impacted people lead and govern the Fully Free Campaign and its ambitious legislative agenda, they center stories of direct impact to engage others in countering mass incarceration. “When we walk into

At a Glance:

A4J Grantees Focused on Centering Formerly Incarcerated People in Illinois

- [Heartland Alliance’s Fully Free Campaign](#) has been led by two formerly incarcerated people. It offers a concrete model for how to include directly impacted individuals in the governance of a community organizing and legislative campaign.
- [Zealous](#) is a national organization that has played a key role in supporting on-the-ground efforts in Chicago, using creative media and storytelling to highlight experiences of those impacted.
- [Illinois Humanities’](#) Envisioning Justice initiative leverages the arts and humanities to envision alternatives to mass incarceration. Through projects like [RE:ACTION](#), this initiative works with communities and people impacted by mass incarceration to spark conversation and illuminate community-based strategies that address the racist and unjust legal system.
- [Laurie Jo Reynolds](#) is an Associate Professor at the School of Art & Art History at the University of Illinois Chicago. She coordinates the [Chicago 400 Alliance](#), a grassroots campaign led by people experiencing homelessness to challenge housing banishment laws and public conviction registries—extreme policies that force people with past convictions into homelessness.

“We’re not doing programs about how much crime there is in Chicago or all the stuff you see on the news. [Instead, we’re] making more visible the work of often grassroots or marginalized individuals and communities that are devising solutions, that are doing incredible work, that are paving pathways toward a more just future, that do have answers to what it could look like instead.”

-Illinois Humanities

these spaces and we begin to present,” the leader went on, “people don’t know [that we were previously incarcerated] until we tell them, which I love. When people look at us and say, ‘Whoa, you guys?’ what’s happening is people are starting to open themselves to listen and to see that no two people are alike and every situation is different.”

Zealous is a national organization with staff who have direct experience with the legal system and who are formerly incarcerated. Zealous focuses on giving access to directly impacted people to voice their powerful experiences through arts and media, providing trainings and support on media, storytelling, and narrative shifting. For an example of Zealous’s work in Illinois, see the *One Experience* box.

One Experience: Creating Media and Leadership Access for a Directly Impacted Person

Scott Hechinger, co-founder and executive director of Zealous, offered an anecdote illustrating the positive effects of providing opportunities for a directly impacted individual to share her story more broadly:

“This was the beginning of COVID and we were trying to get people out of jail because the life and death nature of jail was even more life and death. We were introduced to a public school teacher, Cassandra Greer-Lee whose husband was caged in Cook County Jail. He was one of the first people to die in Cook County Jail from COVID. She called 132 times to the sheriff’s desk, to the jail, to anyone. She couldn’t get a response and he kept getting worse and ultimately died. She was protesting every day in front of the jail.

“We thought: What might it look like for us to support her in telling her story in a way that could reach more people? Based upon this conversation we had with her, we helped produce a three-part series drawn by local artists in a very simple chalk on black format called 132 Calls. It was such a key piece to not only share her story to more people, but to drive a call to action to support pre-trial fairness and immediate calls to decarcerate.

“There were multiple successes. We developed the model of local artists working with people with direct experience and seeing this powerful product come out of it. She was in the driver’s seat the entire time and not only did she get more attention to the cause, she said she felt heard and listened to in a way she had never before, and she’s continuing to work with us and is engaging even more in the work ongoing in Illinois.”

Greer-Lee’s call to action earned widespread press coverage and contributed to a strong coalition’s advocacy for a justice reform bill. **In January 2021, the Illinois legislature passed the Pretrial Fairness Act**, which, among other successes, prevents pretrial jailing simply because of an inability to pay cash bail.*

*For further information on the content and story of the Pretrial Fairness Act, see <https://endmoneybond.org/pretrialfairness/>

Illinois Humanities regrants A4J funds to directly impacted artists and humanists as part of its Envisioning Justice initiative. For example, one artist, Renaldo Hudson, who gained expertise through 37 years in prison, uses art, performance, and speaking events to change people’s hearts and minds about incarcerated people and perpetual punishment. His work aims to make people feel good about rethinking the system. “I don’t want to be an advocate ever where something was done because of white guilt,” he remarked. “We have to eradicate the idea of the importance of white guilt. Let’s deal with right hearts. You can’t guilt anyone into change, much like you can’t threaten people to change.” Combining art and activism, he referred to himself as “an activist,” commenting, “It is really important that [Illinois Humanities] gives me autonomy to say what I need to say without the restraints of someone saying, ‘But don’t you say anything that may be offensive.’”

“Any funder interested in building relationships with artists for the purpose of confronting social issues must give the artists the license to freely create. There must be space given, period.”

-Artist

Another contributor to Illinois Humanities’ Envisioning Justice initiative, Brandon Wyatt, is an artist working from prison. Wyatt’s contributions to exhibitions and forums, he related, are “all aimed at challenging and dismantling the present state and structure of mass incarceration.” His collaboration with Illinois Humanities has enabled him to grow and share his work. “Being aligned with Illinois Humanities has given me the space to think bigger and imagine larger ventures... They have provided access to resources and incentivized us to create meaningful works by giving us a canvas or stage to reveal much needed thoughts on the ill-effects of mass incarceration.”

Creating collaborative opportunities with formerly incarcerated people requires intentional, local work to build trust where the system has badly eroded it.

The culture of criminalization dehumanizes people in the carceral system. In contrast, centering individuals with direct experience gives them authority, respect, and trust. Building trust in this context takes time and care. Grantees spoke of their approaches to establishing genuine partnership and collaboration with directly impacted people. For instance, a local advocate and artist who coordinates the [Chicago 400 Alliance](#) told of how she leveraged her A4J fellowship to support her artist and advocate community building practice and conduct the gradual, individual-level work required to build connections with formerly incarcerated people experiencing homelessness:

“I decided, politically and from an organizing perspective, to focus on people experiencing homelessness who are on [public conviction] registries. I used the funding to go on the sidewalk and meet people who were homeless on registries. I could not have done that without this grant. I spent hundreds of hours in front of the police station, meeting people, talking to them about this project, talking to them about the registry, talking to them about their lives, the laws, their expectations for their lives, etc. After meeting more than 200 people, they were clear that they wanted to do something about these laws. So we were able to pay for people to get transportation to meetings, to pay for food at meetings, and we started a campaign. We’re now in our fourth year and have come a huge, long way, but that first year was the year of building something from nothing, and I was trusted to do that.”

Establishing local connections, trust, and authentic partnership has been essential for others as well. The leader of [Zealous](#) indicated that because the carceral system devalues people, Zealous must take extra care to ensure that the storytelling opportunities they offer are not exploitative. “There’s a power dynamic to asking folks to share their stories, a high potential for extractiveness and exploitation even if inadvertent or well-intentioned,” the leader said, continuing, “How can we have conversations with people with direct experience to ensure that they feel like true partners, to feel like there’s mutual aid? With our work with folks that are currently incarcerated, before even having the conversation, we endeavor first to work with local organizations or organizers, the people who already have built relationships of trust. We take the lead of local partners.” Indeed, an [Illinois Humanities](#) representative noted that their process to establish collaborations with directly impacted people did not have appropriate trust-building measures built in at the start, saying, “It didn’t acknowledge the time that it actually takes to move into these kinds of spaces with integrity... Once we got past that point [we] had the institutional learning curve to never commit ourselves to doing something with that quick of a turnaround again.”

Key Policy Win

Among policy work A4J grantees in Illinois, a campaign led by [Alliance for Safety and Justice](#), [Heartland Alliance](#), [Illinois Humanities](#), and others achieved a policy win in early 2021. Illinois lawmakers overhauled the state’s criminal justice system, including ending cash bail and requiring police officers to wear body cameras.

Despite progress, more work is needed to further integrate people with lived experience throughout the various stages of change efforts, from organizing to implementation, to fully realize systems change. For example, one directly impacted advocate observed that while the broader coalition of advocates successfully fought for the Pretrial Fairness Act, community representation was not embedded into implementation efforts: “You may have organizations that serve communities at the table, but the actual voices of community are not present... You can’t just look at Chicago and be like, ‘How’s Chicago going to implement it?’ Chicago will figure a way out. They have resources and services on a level that some of these rural towns just don’t have.” The same advocate shared, “I tell people, ‘Where’s the grandma that’s leading the community?’ That woman who has probably bonded out more people’s kids before the bond funds and everything else was set up... Their voices should be at these tables from across the state, not just Chicago.”

A4J grantees’ experience is now in demand, contributing to a growing trend.

The movement is gaining traction on integrating the voices and stories of people directly impacted by mass incarceration. Time will show how this growing interest in centering formerly incarcerated people helps to shift the narrative, change policy, and impact the decarceration movement in other ways, but grantees see clear progress in laying the groundwork by lifting the value of lived experience. Specifically, grantees’ work to center people with lived

experience is increasingly recognized as an asset and a model for others. An [Illinois Humanities](#) leader shared, “Recently we’ve been called in to advise a statewide coalition that includes the public defender’s office and folks from one of our partners and all kinds of really badass organizers and advocates throughout Illinois. They are working on the first-person youth driven narratives around gun violence, and they wanted our advice on how we infuse the arts into that effort or how we make this a storytelling effort.” [Heartland Alliance’s Fully Free Campaign](#) also has found that others are interested in adopting their model. “Fully Free has really demonstrated what it looks like to allow directly impacted individuals to lead. A lot of these different coalition tables are coming to us to ask us to help them to do the same,” a leader of that effort commented.” As demand for these models grows, grantees and partners agree that people with direct experience are being centered more across efforts to end mass incarceration, as illustrated in the box below.

Expanding Movement Leadership

Grantees observed that leadership by directly impacted people is increasingly seen as essential in the decarceration movement.

“I’ve been in this work now for almost ten years and I see more directly impacted people moving into leadership and leading these campaigns and advocacy efforts.”

-Heartland Alliance

“There are now several coalitions dedicated to criminal justice reform and doing it with people who have direct experience and knowledge and doing it in a democratic fashion.”

-Laurie Jo Reynolds

“You’re seeing philanthropy invest a lot more in organizations led by people of color and led by people who have been directly impacted by justice... That’s a very good development.”

-Alliance for Safety and Justice