

Gov. DeSantis Aims To Reduce Florida's Recidivism Rate With New Foundation

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Gov. Ron DeSantis speaking at Operation New Hope in Jacksonville.

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Governor Ron DeSantis announced Friday that he has created a new organization to help reduce the state's recidivism rate through increased investment in career readiness training and community re-entry programs for inmates.

The state has about 95,000 inmates in custody right now and about 85% of them will eventually be released, according to the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC). Over the next year alone, around 30,000 inmates are expected to reenter society. But if the state maintains its recidivism rate of 25.7%, nearly 7,710 of those returning citizens could end up back behind bars.

"I think the vast majority of these folks are people who would not like to go back [to prison]," Gov. DeSantis said on Friday at Operation New Hope in Jacksonville. "But if they don't have any opportunities, then they're likely to be pushed back into making some of the poor choices that landed them in prison in the first place."

The current state budget includes more than \$92 million for reentry programs like [Operation New Hope](#), a Jacksonville-based nonprofit that provides support as well as life and job skills training for people who have a history of involvement with the criminal justice system.

People like Terrance Platts, who after serving a 20-year sentence for attempted robbery with a firearm, possession of cocaine, and aggravated battery, came to Operation New Hope through the Baker Correctional Institution in Sanderson.

Platts had trouble transitioning back into society. He didn't know how to use things like computers, tablets and search engines, and he had trouble trusting people. But after graduating from Operation New Hope's [Ready4Work](#) reentry program, Platts got a full-time job and was making \$11 an hour. After just one month on the job he was promoted and given a \$2 an hour raise. Within 60 days, he was eligible for overtime and benefits.

Since then he has enrolled in business classes at Florida State College at Jacksonville, resolved fines to get his driver's license, and bought his first car.

"This time I have to do this right," Platts said.

Operation New Hope boasts a recidivism rate of just 8.64% and 75% of the organization's Ready4Work graduates find jobs and make an average of \$11.01 an hour.

DeSantis said his proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year includes an additional \$9.3 million for organizations like Operation New Hope. But he says state funding isn't the only solution.

"We have to have the private sector engaged. The communities need to be involved - they need to have skin in the game," he said.

"It is incumbent on us in the Florida Department of Corrections to provide access to communities, to businesses, to faith based organizations, to build relationships while the men and women are still under our care and custody," said FDC Secretary Mark S. Inch. "With relationships already built prior to release, it takes away that uncertainty for the inmate of wondering, 'What am I going to do when I leave the gate?' Because there's already somebody on the other side. There's going to be a community organization, there's going to be a business ready to hire, there's going to be a house of worship that has invited him to sit in their pew."

That's why DeSantis is creating, in conjunction with the FDC, a new direct support organization called the Florida Foundation for Correctional Excellence (FFCE), which will have an independent board that will be tasked with raising private funds and establishing partnerships with corporate and nonprofit entities to help improve the lives of inmates who are trying to reenter society and the workforce.

This board will make decisions about things like who's eligible for aid through the FFCE.

"There will probably be some blanket exclusions for people like sexual offenders, obviously people who commit really heinous crimes, but if somebody gets into a fight at a bar and then they end up with an assault and battery and they have to do some time, that would be somebody that we would not want to just turn our back on. I think, and hope, that they can be rehabilitated," DeSantis said. "But I think all that will be worked out once we get the board in place."

The initial founding board members, appointed by DeSantis, are:

- Ken Armstrong, President of the Florida Trucking Association
- Erik Dellenbeck, Director of the Florida Faith-Based and Community-Based Advisory Council
- Mark Reynolds, National Director of the Trinity Broadcasting Network
- Denver Stutler, CEO of U.S. Submergent Technologies
- Doug Deason, a philanthropist from Texas
- John McGavin, Area General Manager for the JW Marriot and Ritz-Carlton at Grande Lakes in Orlando
- David Hart, Executive Vice President of the Florida Chamber of Commerce

"People are looking for good dependable workers and I would much rather dedicate our resources to taking people who are Floridians and giving them a chance, then having people come in from a foreign country, oftentimes illegally," DeSantis said.

"The businesses who have worked with people getting out of prison, who provided the right training and skills, have found that a lot of these folks are very dependable employees. And there have been pockets of really good success throughout the state. So what we want to do is expand that through this foundation."

[According to estimates from the Pew Research Center](#) based on 2016 Census data, Florida has about 775,000 unauthorized immigrants, which is about 18% of the state's total immigrant population. Unauthorized immigrants make up about 5.6% of the state's labor force.

Meanwhile, Gov. DeSantis and the Republican-dominated state legislature are arguing that the estimated 800,000 Floridians with felony convictions who have rejoined society should not be allowed to vote until they pay all the fines, fees, and restitution that they owe related to their conviction, despite the passage of Amendment 4, overwhelmingly approved by Florida voters in 2018, which aimed to restore voting rights to former felons who had completed their sentences.

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