

## **The Governance Deficit**

### *Fraud, Self-Dealing, and Accountability Failures in the Nonprofit Ecosystem Surrounding Reentry*

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The reentry industry does not exist in isolation. It exists inside a broader nonprofit ecosystem: community organizations, anti-violence programs, social services intermediaries, and government-funded community development entities that together form the infrastructure through which public money flows toward justice-involved populations. That ecosystem shares a common vulnerability. When governance fails anywhere inside it, the people who depend on it pay the price. And across a documented span of cases between 2022 and 2026, governance has failed with regularity, in ways that are neither random nor isolated. They reflect structural conditions that the reentry field, and the broader justice nonprofit sector, have not yet been honest enough to confront.

Reentry organizations, most of which are nonprofits, run on small budgets. When they are not competing for grants, they are trying to fundraise against causes that many donors see as more compelling. As one criminal justice scholar put it, "600,000 people are released from correctional facilities every year, but it's a part of the criminal justice system that's being funded at no guarantee. We run the programs on borrowed money with scotch tape and sealing wax."<sup>1</sup>

That chronic underfunding, combined with more than \$600 million awarded to state, local, tribal, and nonprofit reentry programs under the Second Chance Act since 2009, creates a landscape where organizations are simultaneously cash-starved and grant-flush.<sup>2</sup>

They are stretched thin on operations while managing substantial public dollars with minimal oversight infrastructure. That combination is exploitable. And across the cases documented below, it has been exploited.

#### **PART ONE: REENTRY ORGANIZATIONS — THE DIRECT CASES**

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<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Ortiz, quoted in "The U.S. Spends Billions to Lock People Up, But Very Little to Help Them Once They're Released," PBS NewsHour, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/the-u-s-spends-billions-to-lock-people-up-but-very-little-to-help-them-once-theyre-released>.

<sup>2</sup>National Association of Counties, "Increase Funding for the Second Chance Act to Support Local Reentry Programs that Reduce Recidivism Among Formerly Incarcerated Individuals," accessed April 2026, <https://www.naco.org/resources/increase-funding-second-chance-act-support-local-reentry-programs-reduce-recidivism-among>.

The most direct evidence of governance failure in the reentry sector comes from two federal cases, both arising in 2025, both involving founders with personal histories of incarceration who built reentry organizations around their own lived experience and then allegedly turned those organizations against the communities they served.

### ***DeAndre Brown, Memphis, Tennessee***

No case captures the full scope of this failure more precisely than that of DeAndre Brown in Memphis. Brown was the founder of Lifeline to Success, a Frayser-based nonprofit providing reentry services to former offenders, and simultaneously served as Executive Director of the Shelby County Office of Reentry, a county government post to which he was appointed in August 2021. Brown was himself formerly incarcerated, a fact central to his public identity and public standing. In December 2023, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee pardoned him for prior state convictions, citing his reentry work. A county commissioner celebrated him publicly that same year. Within two years of that pardon, a grand jury had indicted him on twelve felony counts.

An investigation by the Tennessee Comptroller's Office found that Brown and his wife Vinessa Brown received at least \$285,600.93 in improper compensation drawn from government grants. Vinessa Brown served as Lifeline's Executive Director overseeing day-to-day operations including payroll and finances. They used Lifeline debit cards for personal purchases including meals, retail stores such as Coach and Barnes and Noble, payments to a hair stylist, monthly charges to a fitness club and a car wash service, and lodging and travel including a trip to Jamaica. They also diverted nonprofit funds to a church that Brown founded, whose only documented connection to Lifeline was that it held Sunday services in the Lifeline building.<sup>3</sup>

The Comptroller's investigation also found that Lifeline violated the conflict-of-interest clause in a county grant contract, given that Brown simultaneously held his role as a county employee while his organization received county funding. The dual structure placed Brown as founder while his wife served as day-to-day executive director, with both drawing compensation from the same grant dollars and no independent check on either.<sup>4</sup>

When confirmed misappropriations and questionable disbursements without supporting documentation were totaled, the amount of public money at issue reached \$1.38 million.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, Lifeline to Success Investigation Report, August 28, 2025, <https://comptroller.tn.gov/content/dam/cot/ia/advanced-search/2025/non-profit/LifelinetoSuccessReport.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>WREG Memphis, "Couple Accused of Using Nonprofit Funds for Personal Use Face Judge," August 29, 2025, <https://wreg.com/news/local/couple-accused-of-using-nonprofit-funds-for-personal-use-face-judge/>.

<sup>5</sup>Bill Dries, "Former Memphis Public Official and Lifeline to Success Nonprofit Founder DeAndre Brown and His Wife Vinessa Brown Were Charged with Misusing \$1.38 Million in Public Money," The Daily Memphian, August

In August 2025, the Shelby County Grand Jury indicted both DeAndre and Vinessa Brown on counts including three charges of theft over \$250,000, two counts of theft over \$60,000, two counts of computer fraud, two counts of money laundering, and one count of official misconduct. Brown was released on a \$500,000 bond in November 2025.<sup>6</sup>

No trial date had been set as of this writing. What makes this case instructive is what did not happen before the indictment. No board raised an alarm. No audit caught the diversion during the years it was occurring. No grantor flagged the conflict. It took the Tennessee Comptroller's Office, a state-level external auditor, to surface what internal governance never found, or never looked for.

### ***Javan Tooley, Boston, Massachusetts***

The case of Javan Tooley moves the scandal from financial self-dealing into something more predatory. Tooley was the founder and CEO of Adapt and Evolve LLC, a Boston-based nonprofit that provided community reentry support services and specialized in criminal records expungement. On September 18, 2025, a federal grand jury indicted Tooley for distribution of 28 grams or more of cocaine base. According to court filings, he had an extensive track record of drug trafficking including a prior federal conviction for drug distribution and alleged engagement in sex trafficking activity.<sup>7</sup>

On September 10, 2025, Tooley allegedly distributed 100 grams of crack cocaine near Fields Corner in Dorchester, steps from his nonprofit's office, while a young child approximately six or seven years old was in the back seat of his car. He was arrested thirteen days later near Roxbury District Court while allegedly carrying approximately 160 grams of crack cocaine for another planned transaction.<sup>8</sup>

What elevates this beyond a simple drug case is what prosecutors allege about the nonprofit's function within the operation. According to the FBI, Tooley allegedly created a climate of fear among victims by claiming he had connections to law enforcement and other influential officials through his nonprofit, and allegedly coordinated drug transactions using the nonprofit's

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31, 2025, <https://dailymemphian.com/article/54659/deandre-brown-lifeline-to-success-history>.

<sup>6</sup>Action News 5 Memphis, "Pastor, Ex-Reentry Director Released on \$500K Bond in Non-Profit Theft Case," November 4, 2025, <https://www.actionnews5.com/2025/11/04/pastor-ex-reentry-director-released-500k-bond-non-profit-theft-case/>.

<sup>7</sup>U.S. Department of Justice, District of Massachusetts, "Founder and CEO of Non-Profit for Re-Entry Support Services Indicted on Drug Distribution Charges," September 24, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/founder-and-ceo-non-profit-re-entry-support-services-indicted-drug-distribution-charges>.

<sup>8</sup>Boston 25 News, "Founder of Boston Non-Profit Charged with Distributing Crack Cocaine," September 25, 2025, <https://www.boston25news.com/news/local/founder-boston-non-profit-charged-with-distributing-crack-cocaine/CAJIHHYVSBG55KMF5BJWN2DAWU/>.

phone. The organization built explicitly to help people navigate the justice system was allegedly deployed as a source of institutional credibility to intimidate victims and facilitate crime. The nonprofit's 501(c)(3) status and community reputation became operational tools in a predatory scheme.<sup>9</sup>

Tooley had previously served five years in federal prison following a 2010 cocaine distribution conviction and subsequently violated the terms of his supervised release on at least five separate occasions, resulting in approximately 22 additional months of incarceration. Because of that prior conviction, he faces a mandatory minimum of ten years and up to life in federal prison. Tooley pleaded not guilty in late September 2025. The case is pending in U.S. District Court in Boston.<sup>10</sup>

## **PART TWO: THE BROADER ECOSYSTEM — GOVERNANCE FAILURE IN THE JUSTICE-ADJACENT NONPROFIT SECTOR**

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The governance failures documented in reentry organizations do not stand alone. They exist inside a wider pattern of accountability collapse affecting nonprofits across the justice-adjacent sector, including anti-violence organizations, juvenile justice intermediaries, community development entities, and the political infrastructure that directs public funding to them. Understanding these broader cases matters for the reentry field because reentry organizations operate within this same ecosystem, compete for the same funding streams, depend on the same governmental relationships, and are governed by the same absent oversight frameworks.

### ***Monica Cannon-Grant and Violence in Boston, Boston, Massachusetts***

In Boston, the city where Tooley operated his reentry nonprofit, Monica Cannon-Grant built Violence in Boston Inc. into one of the city's most celebrated community organizations. VIB was an anti-violence and community organizing nonprofit, not a reentry organization, but it drew from the same philanthropic and governmental trust that sustains the broader justice nonprofit sector. It received grant funding from the City of Boston and the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office. It was named a worthy recipient of COVID-19 pandemic relief. And it was built, in significant part, on Cannon-Grant's own narrative of personal hardship and community commitment, a narrative that earned her the title of Bostonian of the Year in 2020.

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<sup>9</sup>U.S. Department of Justice, Detention Affidavit, United States v. Javan Tooley, Cr. No. 25-10374-PBS, September 23, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/media/1414996/dl?inline=>.

<sup>10</sup>U.S. Department of Justice, District of Massachusetts, "Former Director of Boston Nonprofit Pleads Guilty to Fraud Charges," September 22, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/former-director-boston-nonprofit-pleads-guilty-fraud-charges>.

Cannon-Grant and her late husband Clark Grant raised more than \$1 million through fundraising, then diverted thousands of dollars in donations to pay for personal expenditures through cash withdrawals, wire transfers to personal bank accounts, and debit purchases. She conspired to defraud the Boston Resiliency Fund, a COVID-19 pandemic relief fund established by the City of Boston, and defrauded the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office out of Community Reinvestment Grant funds. A grant from the District Attorney's office specifically intended to take at-risk young men on a structured retreat in Philadelphia was instead spent on a personal vacation to Maryland, meals at chain restaurants, car rentals, and other personal expenses.<sup>11</sup>

Federal prosecutors portrayed her as a fraudster who stole from people "under the calculated guise of charity," arguing in sentencing proceedings that "you don't get to steal if you do good things. You don't get a pass if you help the community."

In September 2025, Cannon-Grant pleaded guilty to 18 federal counts including wire fraud conspiracy, ten counts of wire fraud, mail fraud, and tax violations. In January 2026, U.S. District Judge Angel Kelley sentenced her to four years of probation and six months of home detention, telling her: "You started your activism with noble intentions, but somewhere along the way, you lost your way."<sup>12</sup>

In March 2026, Judge Kelley ordered Cannon-Grant to forfeit \$224,063, including roughly \$181,000 in donations diverted from Violence in Boston, plus fraudulently obtained pandemic unemployment benefits and rental assistance funds. The sentence drew criticism from federal prosecutors who had sought 18 months in prison, underscoring the ongoing tension between accountability and public sympathy for community figures whose stated mission once aligned with genuine need.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Southwest Key Programs: When Scale Becomes a Shield***

The Southwest Key Programs case stretches the pattern to its most consequential scale. Founded in 1987 by Juan Sanchez in Brownsville, Texas, Southwest Key began with roots in juvenile justice, housing youth offenders on parole as an alternative to incarceration. The organization's first-year operating budget was \$200,000 in state grants serving 21 juvenile

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<sup>11</sup>Maria Cramer, "Activist Monica Cannon-Grant Sentenced to Probation, Home Confinement for Slew of Fraud Charges," The Boston Globe, January 29, 2026, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/01/29/metro/monica-cannon-grant-sentencing/>.

<sup>12</sup>Abby Patkin, "Monica Cannon-Grant Ordered to Pay More Than \$224K over Fraud Charges," Boston.com, March 24, 2026, <https://www.boston.com/news/crime/2026/03/24/monica-cannon-grant-ordered-to-pay-more-than-224k/>.

<sup>13</sup>Southwest Key Programs Wikipedia Entry, citing New York Times, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southwest\\_Key](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southwest_Key), accessed April 2026.

offenders on parole, and Sanchez's salary was \$35,000. Over the following three decades, Southwest Key expanded into unaccompanied immigrant minor shelters, ultimately becoming the largest provider of such facilities in the United States. The mission language never changed. The money did.<sup>14</sup>

According to the New York Times, the organization received nearly \$6 billion in federal funds since 2007. As the federal dollars grew, so did executive compensation, in ways that directly violated the rules governing those dollars. Federal law capped the pay of executives at nonprofits receiving federal grants for migrant sheltering at \$187,000. In 2017, Sanchez earned \$1.5 million as CEO. His wife Jennifer, serving as vice president, earned \$500,000. The chief financial officer earned \$1 million. In total, eight Southwest Key employees earned more than the federal salary cap, and the organization had allegedly circumvented the cap through its for-profit subsidiaries and charter school network.<sup>15</sup>

The compensation picture became significantly worse when full tax records became public. Tax records revealed Sanchez received \$3.6 million in total compensation in 2017, including a base salary of approximately \$784,000, a bonus of \$238,500, and \$2.5 million paid through a cash-value life insurance and retirement policy. The board had approved these arrangements. No external body caught them until investigative journalists did.<sup>16</sup>

The compensation scandal was compounded by self-dealing in the organization's real estate operations. A New York Times investigation found that Southwest Key had lent millions to developers to buy shelters and had enriched investors who rented facilities back to the nonprofit, including Sanchez and the chief financial officer, who were part-owners of one shelter site. The organization had also stockpiled more than \$61 million in cash. The DOJ opened an investigation into possible misuse of federal money. In March 2019, both Sanchez and the CFO resigned.<sup>17</sup>

The organization did not collapse. It continued operating, continued receiving federal contracts, and continued housing children. Then, years later, a second and far graver dimension of

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<sup>14</sup>InfluenceWatch, "Southwest Key Programs," citing IRS tax records, <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/southwest-key-programs/>, accessed April 2026.

<sup>15</sup>Caitlin Emma, "Ex-CEO of Nonprofit That Houses Migrant Children Earned Over \$3.5 Million: Report," The Hill, July 14, 2019, <https://thehill.com/latino/452973-ex-ceo-of-nonprofit-that-housed-migrant-children-earned-over-35-million-in-2017-report/>.

<sup>16</sup>Nicholas Kulish, Kim Barker, and Rebecca R. Ruiz, "Southwest Key, Leading Migrant Shelter Provider, Orders Internal Inquiry," The New York Times, December 5, 2018, reprinted WRAL, <https://www.wral.com/southwest-key-leading-migrant-shelter-provider-orders-internal-inquiry/18041273/>.

<sup>17</sup>U.S. Department of Justice, "DOJ Files Lawsuit Against Southwest Key Programs over Alleged Sexual Abuse of Unaccompanied Children," July 17, 2024, <https://www.krgv.com/news/doj-files-lawsuit-against-southwest-key-programs-over-alleged-sexual-abuse-of-unaccompanied-children>.

the failure became public. The DOJ's 2024 civil lawsuit alleged that Southwest Key violated the Fair Housing Act by permitting employees to engage in systemic sexual abuse and harassment of more than 100 unaccompanied children in the nonprofit's care, with incidents dating back to at least 2015. Among the specific allegations: one employee repeatedly sexually abused three girls ages 5, 8, and 11, with investigators reporting the 8-year-old told them the worker entered their bedrooms in the middle of the night to touch their private area. At least two employees were indicted on criminal charges related to the allegations.<sup>18</sup>

In March 2025, the Trump administration halted all placement of unaccompanied children in Southwest Key facilities and moved all children to other shelters. The DOJ simultaneously dismissed its civil lawsuit, citing the end of the placement relationship. Critics, including attorneys representing children in related cases, called the dismissal a decision to turn a blind eye to the organization's own contractor's documented conduct.<sup>19</sup>

Southwest Key is not a reentry organization. But it was born in the juvenile justice and alternative incarceration space, and it illustrates at the largest possible scale the failure mode that runs through every case in this section. An organization with a legitimate founding mission accumulated federal grant revenue far beyond its original scope, developed compensation and financial structures that enriched insiders in violation of the rules governing those funds, failed the most vulnerable people in its care over an extended period, and did all of this while boards approved the arrangements and funders kept the contracts flowing. The children in Southwest Key shelters, like the returning citizens served by every other organization documented here, paid the price for governance that existed on paper and nowhere else.

### ***The Blue Hills Civic Association, Hartford, Connecticut***

The Connecticut case represents the political dimension of the same problem: what happens when elected officials use nonprofit infrastructure as a personal funding mechanism, with no board oversight capable of stopping them. The Blue Hills Civic Association was a 60-year-old Hartford community development nonprofit, not a reentry organization. But it administered state funding that flowed through the same legislative appropriations process that funds reentry programs, homeless services, behavioral health providers, and other community organizations across Connecticut.

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<sup>18</sup>Patrick Svitek, "DOJ Drops Southwest Key Lawsuit over Alleged Abuse at TX Child Migrant Shelters," KVUE / Texas Tribune, March 12, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/03/12/texas-migrant-child-shelters-lawsuit-southwest-key/>.

<sup>19</sup>Connecticut Public Radio, "Connecticut Freezes Funding to Hartford Nonprofit after \$300K Wire Fraud," April 24, 2025, <https://www.ctpublic.org/news/investigative/2025-04-24/connecticut-freezes-funding-to-hartford-nonprofit-after-300k-wire-fraud>.

BHCA's revenue rose from around \$2 to \$3 million per year before the pandemic to more than \$7 million during the 2024 tax year as it became a vehicle for grants directed by State Senator Doug McCrory. The forensic audit conducted by CliftonLarsonAllen found that funding allocations were largely determined by McCrory, with BHCA executing disbursements without consistent adherence to required procedures. Documents from a January 2024 board meeting explicitly state that McCrory identified the recipient organizations and determined the allocated dollar amount for each. The nonprofit's board was not governing the organization's spending. An elected official with an alleged personal relationship with a primary vendor was doing it instead.<sup>2021</sup>

BHCA received \$11 million in legislative grants in fiscal years 2024 and 2025, plus additional funding totaling more than \$15 million over multiple years. SHEBA Consulting, led by Sonserae Cicero, who has an alleged personal relationship with McCrory, received \$1.7 million in direct and indirect payments from BHCA. The audit found Cicero billed \$84,000 for 300 hours of work updating BHCA's employee handbook, but the organization continued using a 2007 handbook through 2024. She billed \$42,000 for staff training that consisted of showing employees a 13-minute YouTube video and a four-slide PowerPoint presentation. Board members told auditors they never received any training from Cicero despite \$14,000 being billed for that purpose.<sup>22</sup>

BHCA ceased operations in March 2025 after state funding was halted. A federal grand jury subpoena was issued to the state in July 2025 requesting documents related to McCrory and his connections to BHCA and SHEBA. As of April 2026, Cicero had not provided auditors with financial records showing how her businesses spent the \$1.7 million they received, and the audit's second phase examining BHCA's subrecipients directly remains ongoing. Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont publicly called for McCrory to step back from his legislative leadership positions. No criminal charges had been publicly announced as of this writing, but the federal investigation is active.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Andrew Brown and Dave Altimari, "Audit: McCrory Controlled How Hartford Nonprofit Spent State Money," CT Mirror, January 20, 2026, <https://ctmirror.org/2026/01/20/audit-mccrory-controlled-how-hartford-nonprofit-spent-state-money/>.

<sup>21</sup>WFSB Hartford, "Forensic Audit Reveals \$208,000 in Unsupported Payments by Nonprofit Tied to Sen. McCrory," January 20, 2026, <https://www.wfsb.com/2026/01/20/forensic-audit-reveals-208000-unsupported-payments-by-nonprofit-tied-sen-mccrory/>.

<sup>22</sup>Inside Investigator, "Blue Hills Auditors Have Not Received Key Financial Documents," CT Mirror, April 2, 2026, <https://ctmirror.org/2026/04/02/blue-hills-auditors-have-not-received-key-financial-documents/>.

<sup>23</sup>U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Inspector General, "Audit of the OJP BJA Second Chance Act Grant Awarded to Center for Self-Sufficiency, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin," Report No. 25-097, 2025, <https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/25-097.pdf>.

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### **PART THREE: THE DOJ AUDIT RECORD — COMPLIANCE FAILURE IS NOT EXCEPTIONAL**

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These individual cases are not exceptions to a well-functioning oversight system. The DOJ's own Office of Inspector General has documented a broader pattern of Second Chance Act grant recipients failing to meet basic compliance standards, suggesting that what surfaces in criminal cases may be only a fraction of what exists in audit findings that never reach a courtroom.

A 2025 OIG audit of a Second Chance Act Community-Based Adult Reentry Program grant awarded to the Center for Self-Sufficiency in Milwaukee found that the organization did not demonstrate compliance with federal financial management requirements, could not provide necessary documentation despite multiple requests, and began dissolution proceedings in July 2025 while still drawing down federal funds. The OIG questioned the entire \$748,998 drawn from the grant as unsupported costs.<sup>24</sup>

This is the oversight infrastructure working as intended, and it is still surfacing hundreds of thousands in unaccountable spending. The question the cases above force the field to ask is how many organizations are never audited at all, how many are audited only after the money is gone, and how many operate for years under the protection of compelling mission narratives that discourage anyone from asking hard questions.

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### **CONCLUSION: THE PATTERN AND WHAT IT DEMANDS**

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Across all of these cases, a consistent structure emerges. An organization is built around a compelling personal or community narrative. That narrative generates public trust, governmental legitimacy, and access to grant funding. The governance infrastructure that should operate independently of any individual's credibility is absent, captured by insiders, or simply never built. And the people most harmed are the communities these organizations claimed to serve.

As one formerly incarcerated reentry worker wrote plainly: "The reentry industry generates billions of dollars every year. Billions. And yet, within days of release, many people come home from prison and find themselves sleeping on concrete, in bushes, on couches, or in someone's car. That is not a breakdown in the system. That is the system."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Bill Kissinger, "The Re-Entry Industry," Death Penalty Corner (Substack), April 2026, <https://williamkissinger.substack.com/p/the-re-entry-industry>.

The argument here is not that lived experience disqualifies anyone from leadership. It is that lived experience does not constitute governance. It does not replace an independent audit committee. It does not substitute for a conflict-of-interest policy with teeth. It does not compensate for a board structure where the founder's spouse controls the finances, where the county employee's organization receives county grants, or where the political patron decides who gets funded and in what amounts.

The reentry sector's vulnerability to these failures is, in a painful irony, partly a product of its own advocacy success. The movement to center lived experience in criminal justice reform, a necessary and correct push, created political legitimacy for a class of organizations whose credibility rested largely on the biography of their founders. Funders, governments, and communities extended trust based on that biography. The governance frameworks that should have operated alongside that trust were frequently never built. And when they were absent, those with the access and the motive to exploit them did.

Demanding rigorous governance from reentry and justice-adjacent nonprofits is not skepticism toward formerly incarcerated leaders. It is protection: for the communities they serve, for the public dollars they steward, and for the sector's long-term ability to make the case that investment in returning citizens produces results. Every case of fraud in this space becomes ammunition in the hands of those who have always argued that such investment is wasted. The sector cannot afford to hand them that ammunition. It cannot afford to keep choosing mission language over financial infrastructure. And it cannot afford to mistake redemption for accountability.

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