

**Hero and Incarcerated: A Breakdown of Barriers for  
Formerly Incarcerated Firefighters in California**

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**ABSTRACT**

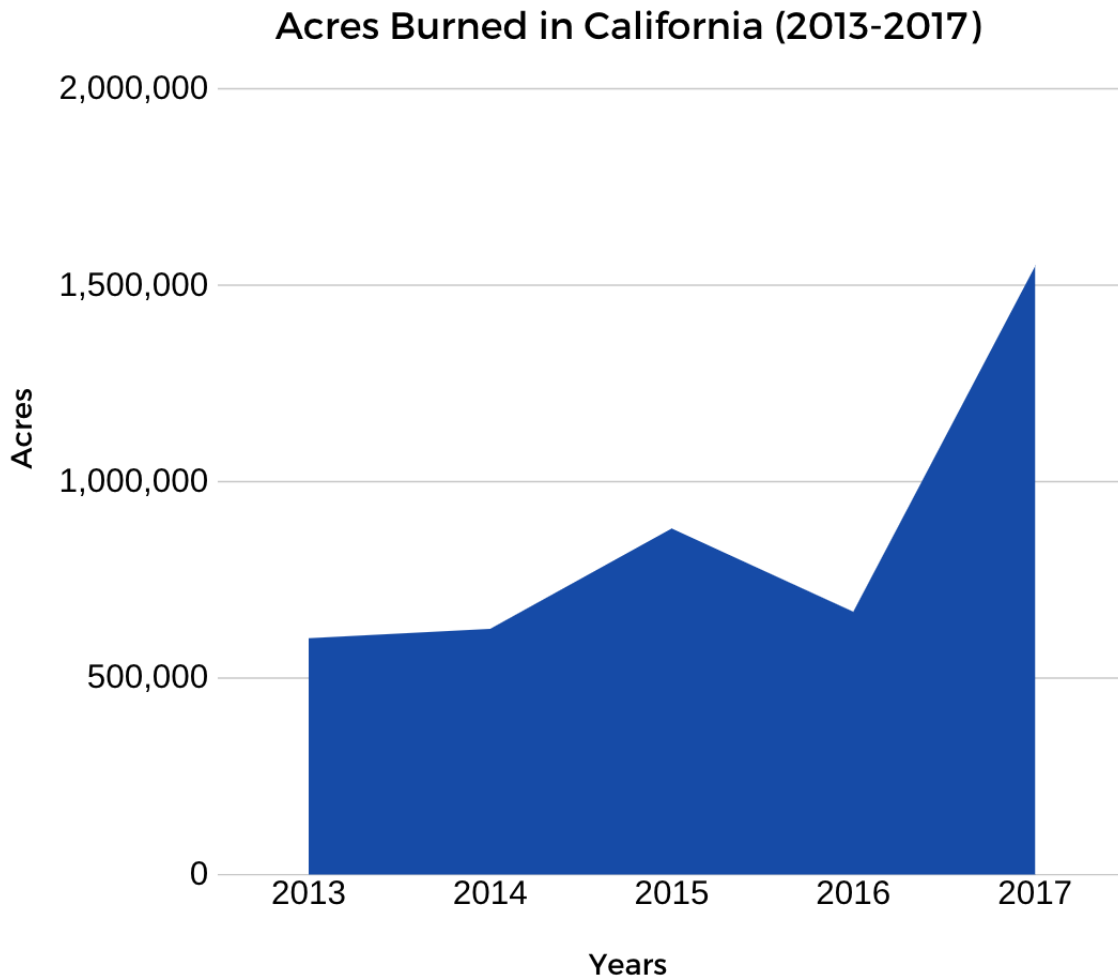
As more frequent, intense and longer wildfire seasons become standard in California, the question arises on how California will adapt to ensure there are enough resources and personnel to fight these intense fires. Studies have shown that current and future climate changes will exacerbate the need for these resources and personnel; therefore, California must be prepared to address these changes. One type of personnel California utilizes to fight forest fires are incarcerated firefighters. The California Department of Forestry and Fire (CalFire) works with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to facilitate fire camps where incarcerated individuals work in fire management jobs across California. My research focuses on the employment barriers that impact formerly incarcerated firefighters in California once they are released from the carceral system. There has been little to no research done on employment barriers for formerly incarcerated firefighters, and research fails to incorporate formerly incarcerated voices into employment barrier research. To address this, I have developed the following research and sub-research questions: Why are there so few formerly incarcerated firefighters pursuing firefighting and fire management careers following release from prison? Additionally, how has the hero and incarcerated identity dynamic changed for these firefighters as fire season grows longer and more intense? Lastly, what are the specific barriers impacting employment? Using a case study approach, I interview three stakeholders and analyze two assembly bills to understand the various obstacles and proponents impacting formerly incarcerated firefighters on their journey to obtaining fire management jobs following release. I identify eight employment barriers impacting formerly incarcerated firefighting and multiple gaps in legislation I address through recommendations. I conclude that the employment barriers impacting formerly incarcerated firefighters are complex and can begin at various stages of the employment process.

**KEYWORDS**

employment post-incarceration, professional firefighting, conservation fire camps, fire suppression, incarcerated labor

## **INTRODUCTION**

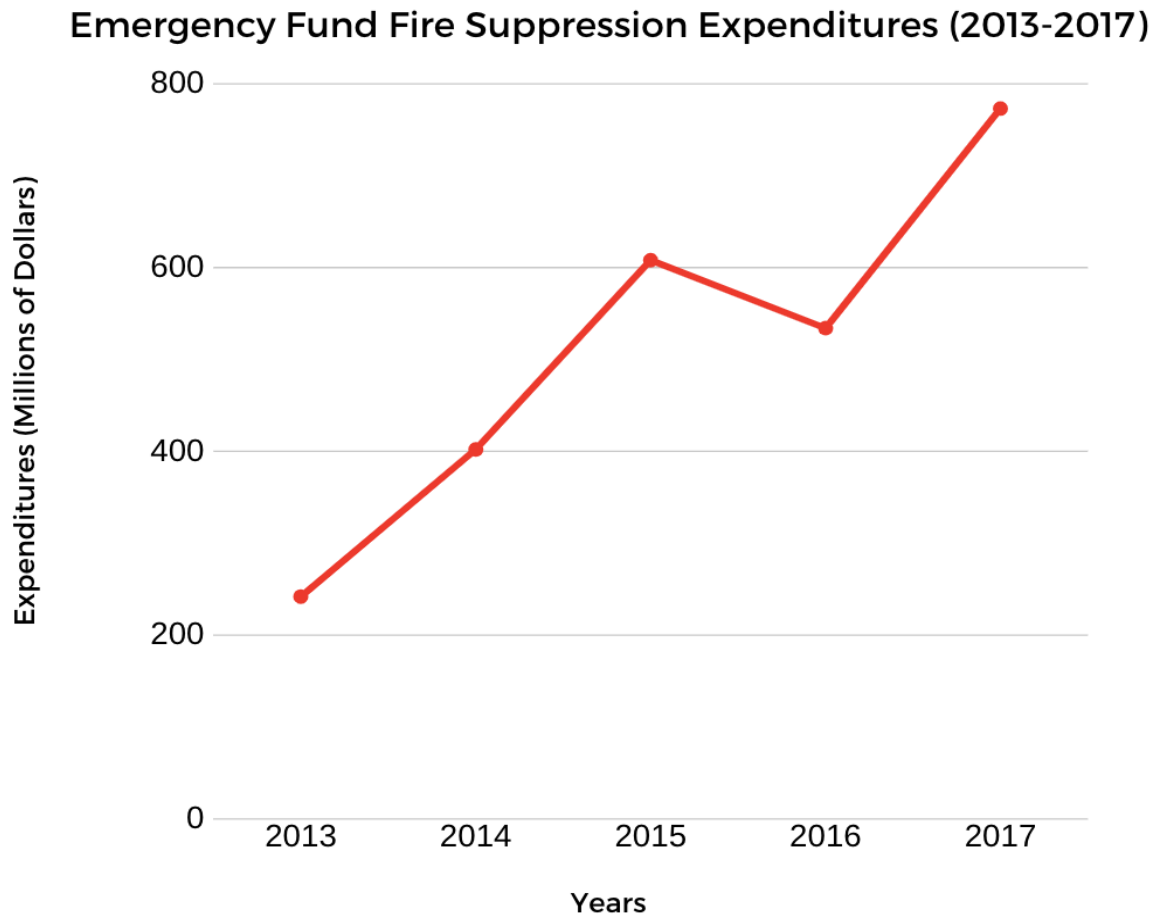
Fire management practices in California have evolved throughout history as policies, public opinions, and fire science has evolved and expanded. Fire management in California was first practiced by Native Americans who used fire to control land for the purposes of animal foraging, plant growth, clearing, and warfare. Once California was colonized and genocide reduced the population of Native Americans and the size of their land, fire management changed drastically. This began the era of fire suppression in California, led by the US Forest Service. During this time, the US Forest Service's efforts focused on suppressing all fires in order to minimize fire damage to existing trees and allow for the recruitment of new trees to increase stock and timber yields (Collins et al. 2019). Though fire suppression responses decreased the overall number of annual fires, and fire severity, the number of burned acreages significantly increased (Figure 1) due to increased fuel sources (Steel et al. 2015). For these reasons, among others, prescribed burns were introduced in fire management practices to reduce fuel source concentrations, facilitate seed germination, and improve soil nutrients. Despite these benefits, prescribed burns were controversial among policymakers and citizens alike—in fact, they were not approved until 1946 (Scott L. Stephens and Lawrence W. Ruth 2005). Today, prescribed burns are gaining more support as the public is beginning to see controlled burn projects as a healthy fire management tool. In addition, the Californian government is investing more funds into new and innovative fire management strategies to compete with growing fire impacts.



**Figure 1: CalFire Redbooks.** Graph displaying the increase in the number of acres burned in wildfires from 2013-2017 in California (Source 2013-2017 CalFire Data).

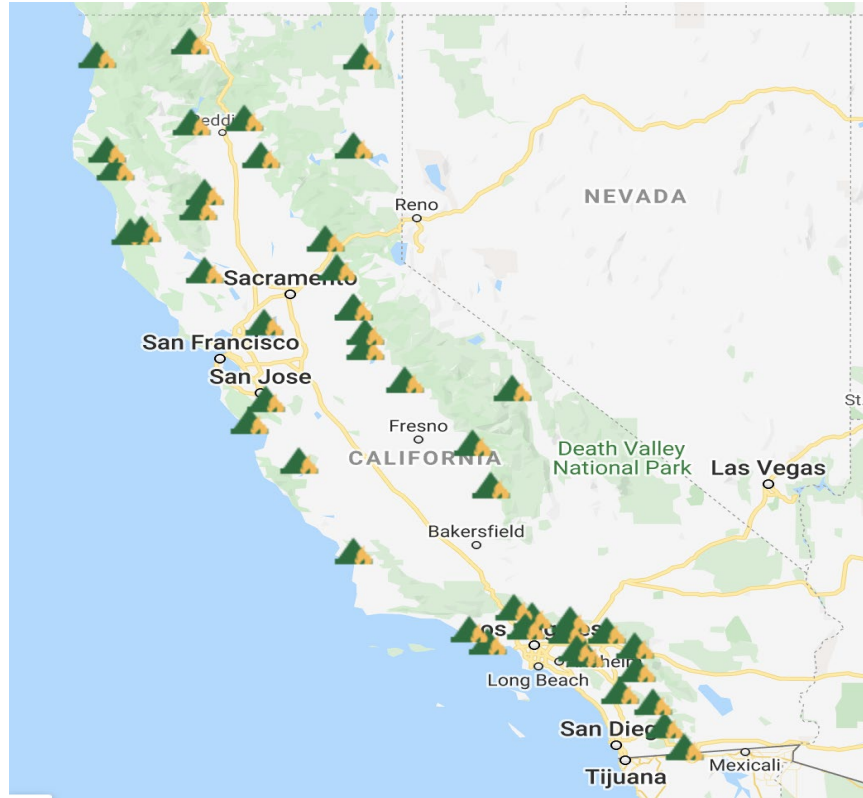
Despite the reduction in the number of fires from the early management practices of Native Americans, fires have gotten stronger and more expensive to suppress in the last decade. Across California, higher temperatures, higher surface pressures, lower cloud water content, lower precipitation, enhanced surface Santa Ana winds, and enhanced sinking air have set up favorable meteorological conditions for stronger wildfires (Li et al. 2019). Specifically, more acres of land are burning, more lives are being lost, and the cost of fire suppression is steadily rising (Li et al. 2019, CalFire Stats and Events). In 2017 and 2018 alone, California spent over \$947.4 million on emergency fund fire suppression expenditures, the largest amount to date excluding the 2019 fire expenditures (CalFire Stats and Events). Additionally, California has exceeded its fire safety and

management budget by millions in the last five years, (Figure 2) a trend predicted to continue as California is on track to exceed its 2019 fire budget (California Department of Finance 2018). On October 2nd, 2019, California’s governor Gavin Newsom signed the Catastrophic Wildfire and Safety Bill that proposed more funding for fire management technology and an increase in the number of seasonal firefighters (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom 2019). As the demand for firefighters increases, the budget, and hiring for seasonal and full-time firefighters have increased. To combat these budget restraints, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) contracts with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to hire incarcerated men and women to fight fires and maintain fire-prone lands across California.



**Figure 2: CalFire Redbooks (Data Reference).** Graph displaying the increase in Emergency Fund Fire Suppression Expenditures in millions of dollars from 2013 to 2017 (Source 2013-2017 CalFire).

California opened its first prison fire camp in 1946; today, there are about 3,700 incarcerated men and women working throughout California's 44 conservation fire camps (Goodman 2012a, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2019). To work in these fire camps, those looking for a job must request a position, be convicted of a non-violent offense, have 5 years or less on their sentencing, and be on a low point classification (Goodman 2012b). The point classification is ranked by low to high security; therefore, incarcerated persons with a low number of points are more likely to receive jobs working in fire camps. California prison fire conservation camps typically house between 80 and 125 incarcerated men or women and are staffed by approximately six correctional officers, two or three correctional supervisors, ten or more forestry crew leaders, typically incarcerated as well, and a forestry camp commander (Goodman 2012b). While employees report to their correctional supervisor, they more frequently interact with forestry crew leaders and CalFire employees for training and daily assignments. Jobs at the fire camps range from fighting fires and fire prevention through land management to working as cooks, janitors, and clerks (Goodman 2012b). These camps are thought to be sites where punishment is said to be done differently. The traditional prison concrete walls and electric fences are a stark contrast to the natural and open areas provided in California fire camps (Goodman 2012a). For these reasons, fire camps provide key insights into CDCR's goal of rehabilitation, specifically in the last few decades of a more conservative criminal justice position. While incarcerated firefighters have been fighting fires in California for many years, research surrounding these men and women lack incarcerated perspectives. Therefore, most research fails to incorporate a complete analysis of opinions about incarcerated experiences at these camps.



**Figure 3: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.** Map displaying the locations of the 44 conservation fire camps across California with the highest density being in Southern California (Source 2018 CDCR).

## BACKGROUND

### Formerly Incarcerated Employment Opportunities

Despite employment’s centrality to re-entry and the corresponding legal compulsions to find work, formerly incarcerated job seekers face an array of barriers to obtaining and keeping jobs. Some barriers include legal obstacles such as the requirement to report one’s criminal record on job applications or legal blockage from certain occupations. These obstacles exist when attempting to find work of any kind, but they become almost insurmountable when the job seeker must obtain career-oriented, on-the-books (“good”) work, rather than just any available wage-earning labor, such as temporary or “off-the-books work” (Augustine 2019). In addition, many formerly incarcerated people leaving the carceral system, and returning to their communities struggle with substance use, addiction, mental health issues, and unstable housing (Morenoff and

Harding 2014). This adds further stressors to employment searches than the average job-seeker and these factors can affect an individual prior to their search for employment. The carceral system is best understood as a comprehensive network of systems that “rely on the exercise of state sanctioned physical, emotional, spatial, economic and political violence to preserve the interests of the state” (“Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved In The Carceral System” n.d.). This includes institutions such as law enforcements, the courts, surveillance, prisons, and jails. When released from this system, formerly incarcerated groups also find themselves in an additionally disadvantaged position on the job market as a result of their time in “jail or prison because of substantial gaps in their work history, atrophied job skills, and deteriorating social and professional network” (Augustine 2019). An applicant’s criminal record serves as a type of “negative credential” that may certify the record holder “in ways that qualify them for discrimination or social exclusion” (Augustine 2019). The negative credential of the criminal record marks job applicants as unfit for hire, especially for higher-status jobs requiring greater levels of trust or security (Augustine 2019). Rejection and constant barriers lead some to return to illegal forms of making money—a decision that, though results in illegal activity, is still grounded in a desire to meet other legal and financial obligations that would ultimately free the job seeker from the legal double bind (Augustine 2019).

### *Assembly Bill 2293*

In 2018, Assemblymember Eloise Gómez Reyes passed the bill AB 2293 in the California Senate that sought to address gaps in attaining Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certifications. Emergency Medical Technician-I (EMT-I) or Emergency Medical Technician-II (EMT-II) certifications are required for all professional firefighters in California (“Bill Text - AB-2293 Emergency Medical Services: Report.” n.d.). Despite relevant experience and demand for firefighters, without these certifications, a person is automatically disqualified or put at a large disadvantage when applying to a professional firefighting department in California. Barriers to getting these EMT-I and EMT-II certifications include prior felony convictions. This bill would require each local Emergency Medical Services (EMS) agency and other certifying entities to submit year data to authorities regarding the approval or denial of EMT-I or EMT-II applicants (“Bill Text - AB-2293 Emergency Medical Services: Report.” n.d.). These submissions contain

the number of applicants with a prior criminal conviction who were denied, approved, or approved with restrictions. Despite Reyes' goal of redacting these felony restrictions, the bill was revised into a research bill to collect data on the number of EMT-I and EMT-II applicants with a prior criminal conviction who were denied, the number of applicants with a prior criminal conviction who were approved, and the number of applicants with a prior criminal conviction who were approved with restrictions on the approval or rejection. The bill also required each EMS agency to include the reason or reasons stated for denying an applicant with a prior criminal conviction in order to pass the Senate.

Opposition parties that pushed for these changes to the bill were the California Ambulance Association, California Professional Firefighters (CPF), California State Association of Counties, California State Sheriffs' Association, and the Emergency Medical Directors Association of California, among others. These groups successfully pushed the bill into the current research revised bill, as they had strong opposition to the initial intent that would allow felony convicted applicants to get EMT-I and EMT-II certifications. Statistics from EMS agencies have yet to be recovered and analyzed by the AB 2293 legislative team. Unfortunately, the failure to include a clear path of action following data collection significantly increases the likelihood that the bill will not make the process of obtaining an EMT-I and EMT-II certifications easier for formerly incarcerated applicants.

### *Assembly Bill 1668*

In October 2019, AB 1668 "California Conservation Corps: Education and Employment Reentry Program" was passed by Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo. In comparison to AB 2293, AB 1211 was a less controversial bill that was preferred by those who opposed AB 2293, such as the California Professional Firefighters (CPF) Association. This bill would authorize the Director of the Corps to establish the Education and Employment Reentry Program within the California Conservation Corps. Formerly incarcerated individuals who successfully served on a California Conservation Camp program crew and were recommended for participation as a program member by the Director of Forestry and Fire Protection and the Secretary of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation would be enrolled ("Bill Text - AB-1668 California Conservation Corps: Education and Employment Reentry Program." n.d.). The bill would authorize the Corps, subject



to the discretion and approval of the Director of the Corps, to enter into a planning agreement with undisclosed entities to develop re-entry and job training opportunities for the formerly incarcerated individuals described above who do not otherwise qualify for corps enrollment under corps policies (“Bill Text - AB-1668 California Conservation Corps: Education and Employment Reentry Program.” n.d.). Despite the goal of reintegration for formerly incarcerated firefighters, the bill does not directly address the difficulties formerly incarcerated groups face when they specifically seek employment as professional firefighters. The bill specifically supports employment in forest and fire protection but not in professional firefighting; therefore, it’s likely this program will not assist those that want to be firefighters but rather assist those that want to work in land management and fire prevention. Jobs include conservation management: forest fire prevention and control, forest and watershed management, recreation, fish and game management, soil conservation, and forest and watershed revegetation. These careers typically are not in many city regions, do not pay as well as firefighting careers, and do not receive the same medical and retirement benefits as city firefighters do. Firefighting is not mentioned as a potential job.

### *Case Study System Description*

Using the case study strategy, I sought to understand the various obstacles and proponents impacting formerly incarcerated firefighters on their journey to obtaining fire management jobs following release from prison. I also use the case study framework to understand the various stakeholders in this employment process as various groups support bills addressing the concerns for employment while actively combatting the implementation of another. Groups that I interview include CalFire officials who train and hire individuals for firefighting positions in California, formerly incarcerated firefighters and community supporters of assembly bill 2293.

### *Gaps in Research*

Research conducted on the topic of incarcerated firefighters and the fire camps they work in often fail to include the experiences and opinions of incarcerated firefighters and formerly incarcerated groups. In addition, the incorporation of incarcerated firefighters in research centers around incarcerated experiences working and living in fire camps across the United States.

Interview questions typically aim to understand their views on their position in society as both outcasts and heroes, fighting some of the United States' most dangerous fires. There has been little to no research done on what happens after California's incarcerated firefighters are released from prison and attempt to reacclimate to the outside world, specifically when they begin seeking employment. My research strives to answer the following questions: Why are there so few formerly incarcerated firefighters pursuing firefighting and fire management careers following release from prison? Additionally, how has the hero and incarcerated identity dynamic changed for these firefighters as fire season grows longer and more intense? Lastly, what are the specific barriers impacting employment? I hypothesize that there will be both legislative and informal biases that serve as barriers to formerly incarcerated firefighters entering into the fire management field. I also predict that despite a more dangerous fire season, incarcerated firefighters will still be drawn to fire management work and the appeal of heroism.

## **METHODS**

### **Case Study System Description**

I identified four stakeholders in the employment barriers for formerly incarcerated firefighters, government agency CalFire, community partner Homeboy Industries, legislators, specifically those working on policies regarding incarcerated firefighting and employment, and formerly incarcerated firefighters. Due to multiple constraints, my research focuses on three of the stakeholders I identified, though more exist. I chose the stakeholder CalFire because the organization trains and hires individuals for firefighting positions and works closely with incarcerated firefighters in California. I determined Homeboy Industries was a stakeholder because they work directly with formerly incarcerated groups in finding them employment. Lastly, I identified California Legislators, with a focus on drafting bills that target incarcerated firefighters and employment because they directly impact policy. I conducted interviews with individuals at CalFire and Homeboy Industries. In addition, I analyzed two California assembly bills, both of which have been passed in the last two years. I conducted semi-structured interviews for each target group and analyzed the two California assembly bills with guidance from conversations with legislators and by reviewing multiple assembly bill versions.

### *Policy Analysis*

Assembly bill 2293, drafted by Assemblymember Eloise Gómez Reyes, and assembly bill 1668, drafted by Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo, are the two bills I analyze. I plan on analyzing the Senate and Assembly Floor analysis and Senate Health for AB 2293 and AB 1668 as these were successfully passed in the California senate. I also plan on using the Senate and Assembly floor analysis to determine overall bill health. These bill analysis tools are used to determine the supporters and opponents of the bill in addition to the fiscal effects of the bill and the proposed data collection methods by the authors. Each of the associated organizations included support and opposition statements, therefore I also review these statements. In addition, bill analysis tools provide background on existing legislation that is being adapted or revised by the bill to provide guidance on progress. These tools define key terminology and arguments made by supporters and opponents of the bill. Lastly, through the analysis of changes to versions of the assembly bills identified, I can understand key points that were contested by opposition parties and later removed in the final version of the passed bill. This is key to understanding the concerns, opinions, and political clout of stakeholders in these policies.

### *Interviews*

I chose to conduct a semi-structured interview with CalFire's Chief of Communications. I selected CalFire because they work in conjunction with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to manage and train incarcerated firefighters. Additionally, they are a hiring source for formerly incarcerated firefighters and have knowledge of the requirements to become a professional firefighter in California. I developed my interview guide based on the information I reviewed on their website regarding incarcerated fire crews and tailored my interview guide to address gaps I found in the information and the opinions behind them.

Lastly, I plan on interviewing individuals from the non-profit Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries serves formerly gang-involved men and women with many essential free services and programs and operates multiple social enterprises that serve as job-training sites. Homeboy Industries is a supporter of AB 2293 as they are a non-profit that supports formerly

incarcerated reentry programs. They specialize in gang-member re-entry, solar panel training, tattoo removal, domestic violence prevention, legal services, substance abuse services, educational services, mental health services, and workforce development for formerly incarcerated groups. They rely on private donors and state and federal grants to fund these free services. I developed my interview guide based on this information and tailored my guide to understanding the perspective of formerly incarcerated groups and their work in policy, specifically the assembly bills I analyze. Additionally, I wanted to gain an understanding of the barriers they frequently come across in delivering the free services they offer. Using the semi-structured interview approach I was able to allow those at Homeboy Industries to be the drivers of information while maintaining a conversation-like guided interview that I believe best informed the research (Leech 2002).

### *Data Analysis Methods*

To analyze the semi-structured interviews, I conducted in this case study, I have separated and categorized questions and responses from each group. These categorizations include specific barriers and proponents, increased need for California firefighters and increasing fire resources, legislative gaps and addresses, supporters and opponents, and overall addressing of employment barriers by each stakeholder. By analyzing the assembly bills, I am able to understand the barriers the legislative team is targeting and determine the overall effectiveness of the bill. This process allowed me to identify gaps in policy making I later discuss and follow-up with recommendations.

## **RESULTS**

I interviewed three stakeholders and analyzed two assembly bills. Those interviewed include CalFire's Deputy Chief of Communications, the AB 2293 legislators, and individuals from community organization Homeboy Industries for a total of seven semi-structured interviews. The perspectives of each of the individuals interviewed varied as each understood and identified barriers they commonly came across in their work. In addition, each interviewee had a diverse background and represented various constituents, resulting in a wide-range of opinions across stakeholders. The topics interviewees focused on during these interviews differed as well as they

communicated the most pressing difficulties or opinions, they felt best represented their organization. This section will cover the results I gathered from my analysis of the two California assembly bills identified that involve incarcerated firefighters and the results of the seven semi-structured interviews conducted.

## **State Government Stakeholders**

### *Assembly Bill 2293*

Assemblymember Eloise Gómez Reyes' legislative team has begun addressing the employment barriers formerly incarcerated firefighters face in the form of assembly bill 2293 (AB 2293). Through the initial analysis of this bill, I identified multiple stakeholders in the employment process for formerly incarcerated firefighting such as community partners and non-profit Homeboy Industries. I've concluded that AB 2293 cannot be strictly enforced on Emergency Medical Service associations that conduct the reporting on EMT I and EMT II certifications. Additionally, there are no incentives for these parties to accurately record data because an effective and inexpensive method of data collection was not established or outlined in the bill. In addition to passing the bill without the establishment of a data collection timeline and method, a plan for analysis once the results were reported was not established. Furthermore, my analysis of AB 2293 identified additional legislation gaps including the lack of acknowledgment and discussion of the difficult transition incarcerated firefighters and incarcerated groups face. Specifically, they fail to address the difficult transition from wildland firefighting positions to professional firefighting positions. Continuing, the bill does not define the important distinctions between wildland firefighting and professional firefighting. These differences include pay, location, and benefits for firefighters. Professional firefighters receive better pay and benefits in addition to having more job location sites to choose from.

In doing further policy analysis, I identified supporters of the bills such as Homeboy industries and initial opponents of the assembly bill including the California Professional Firefighting Association and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) authorities. These opposition groups stated they were extremely concerned that AB 2293 would eliminate safeguards placing patients at serious risk from individuals posing a serious threat to the public's health and safety.

Additionally, they believed this bill would increase costs for local EMS agencies in the form of policy revisions and an increase in the volume of applications from individuals with serious criminal histories. They argue this increased number of applicants would require agencies to conduct a more in-depth evaluation. Ultimately, after six revisions to AB 2293, opposition opinions influenced the final draft of the bill, a research bill, that did not combat the employment barriers originally identified.

### *Assembly Bill 1668*

Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo and her legislation team sought to address employment barriers facing formerly incarcerated firefighting and other formerly incarcerated groups in the form of assembly bill 1668 (AB 1668). My policy analysis focused on the portion of the bill that introduced the Education and Employment Reentry Program targeting formerly incarcerated individuals that previously worked in a California conservation fire camp. The bill thoroughly outlines the requirements for individuals seeking to become involved in the reentry program. Formerly incarcerated individuals must have successfully served on a California Conservation Camp program crew and must be recommended for participation as a program member by the Director of Forestry and Fire Protection and the Secretary of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. In addition, the bill outlines that individuals are chosen on the basis of motivation, hard work, personal development, and public service, and without regard to their prior employment or educational background. Those in the program would receive a stipend for their work and unspecified benefits. Individuals may also be provided reentry and counseling services, though these services are not guaranteed for all individuals in the program.

From my analysis I found that the initial opposition groups such as the California Professional Firefighting (CPF) association in AB 2293 were sponsors of AB 1668. CPF states that they sponsored this bill because they acknowledge that there is a need for a workforce to manage California's natural resources and that this bill addresses that need while also offering a promising career path for those formerly incarcerated individuals who served in California fire camps ("Bill Text - AB-1668 California Conservation Corps: Education and Employment Reentry Program." n.d.). Lastly, the Education and Employment Reentry Program (EERP) operational costs are estimated to be approximately \$1.8 million per year to serve 150 to 200 former

incarcerated individuals. It's important to note that the Education and Employment Reentry Program does not mention firefighting specifically but implies fire management careers and job duties generally. In addition, the bill does not identify any employment barriers specifically, but states that formerly incarcerated individuals who have low performance, involvement, and satisfaction with school or work are more likely to recidivate than individuals who do not exhibit these characteristics. The Education and Employment Reentry Program seeks to target these realities.

### *Government Stakeholder CalFire*

CalFire is a large government stakeholder as they resource incarcerated firefighters frequently and work closely with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). CalFire Deputy Chief of Communications, Scott Mclean, describes the conservation fire camps as a successful program in which incarcerated individuals learn valuable skills they can apply to jobs once released. In exchange, Mclean confirms CalFire receives the valuable labor needed to fight and prevent wildfires throughout California. In addition to fighting live wildfires, Mclean states incarcerated firefighters perform grade-projects that include tree trimming, clearing brush, and woodworking activities within the fire camp. When asked how incarcerated firefighters perform in comparison to professional firefighters, Mclean asserts they perform well. Mclean continues, disclosing that incarcerated firefighters conduct the same training and exercises as professional firefighters. This training is mandated by CalFire and incarcerated firefighters work closely with CalFire leads.

When asked what challenges CalFire faces working with incarcerated firefighters, Mclean replied that making sure all the legalities are met is the most difficult. Examples he discussed included being alert in ensuring items like cigarettes and drugs were not brought into the fire camps by CalFire employees. In addition, CalFire employees are instructed to avoid discussing personal information with incarcerated firefighters. Despite these challenges, Scott enthusiastically stated fire camps are worth the investment as the men and women working in conservation fire camps are hardworking and are viable resources to the state of California. When asked about CalFire's stance on the employment barriers incarcerated firefighters face, Mclean expressed that successful employment depends on if the individuals are willing to put in the extra effort to pursue their

career. When questioned about his knowledge or CalFire's stance on California assembly bills 2293 and 1668 that attempt to address employment barriers for incarcerated firefighters, Mclean stated he had not heard of the bills before the interview. Mclean, however, responded that in contrast to the municipal fire departments, CalFire does not require formerly incarcerated individuals to report their previous convictions when applying to various positions including seasonal firefighting positions. In addition, Mclean stated that CalFire does not solely require EMT I and EMT II certifications but accepts other forms of certifications for their firefighters as well. These alternative certifications include the California SFM Hazardous Materials First Responder Operational Certificate, Public Safety First Aid or Paramedic (EMT-P) certificates. From Mclean's knowledge, these certification requirements do not ask questions about an applicant's previous criminal history.

### *Community Stakeholder Homeboy Industries*

In addition to government stakeholder CalFire, I conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals at Homeboy Industries, a community stakeholder. I conducted interviews with Homeboy Industries' government and policy advisor, security operations manager, and director of employment. Cesar Ulloa, the director of employment and formerly a firefighter himself, established a wildland fire crew composed of formerly incarcerated individuals in Los Angeles. When asked about the barriers formerly incarcerated firefighters are faced with, he shared that in addition to institutional barriers, many of those newly released experience additional emotional and mental health barriers as a result of involvement in the carceral system. These obstacles include depression, anxiety, homelessness, drug abuse, family strains, and overall readjustment difficulties in society. Ulloa expressed that these barriers must be addressed before the employment seeking process begins. Ulloa stated that if these issues are not addressed, they manifest in later employment pursuits and can cost many formerly incarcerated individuals their jobs and livelihood. Homeboy Industries, he says, understands these gaps, therefore, implements a 5-month readjustment program for newly released individuals to enroll in prior to seeking employment placement. Ulloa affirms this readjustment program has significantly increased the employment retention and promotion rates for those in the program. In regard to Ulloa's own wildland fire crew, he noticed that individuals in his crew who did not complete the 5-month readjustment



program were more likely to stop coming to training, and ultimately many drop out of the crew completely. This occurred even after needs such as equipment and certifications requirements were met and funded by Homeboy Industries; therefore, Ulloa concluded that other factors were at play.

George Nuñez , the security operations manager and also formerly incarcerated, successfully began training in wildland fire management, yet did not continue his training due to factors such as reduced funding and transportation to distant training sites. Nuñez ultimately decided to take a position working at Homeboy industries shared he is happy with his decision but recalls the wildland fire training he participated in and hopes to get into a career in fire management in the future. Nuñez described barriers such as access to appropriate equipment for a wildland firefighting position he was working towards and stated that without the help of Homeboy Industries, he and others in the crews likely could not have afforded the equipment. Nuñez also described the location of these wildland firefighting training sites as being far from his housing location. In addition, the training also required him to be away from his family for long periods of time. Nuñez continues by stating that wildland fire training required reliable transportation to and from the training sites that not all members of the wildland forest crew had access to every time they had training. Ultimately, Nuñez describes wildland firefighting positions and training as inaccessible to individuals with families and those with unstable transportation and housing options.

Fabian Garcia, the director of government relations, discussed employment barriers that applied to all formerly incarcerated groups. Garcia states that while Homeboy supports bills like AB 2293 that sought to address barriers specific to formerly incarcerated firefighters, Homeboy Industries' larger goal is to remove all barriers formerly incarcerated groups face. The "Time Done Movement" is one piece of pending legislation Garcia refers to. The Time Done Movement seeks to erase all criminal records for individuals after a set period of time following release. Garcia states that employment barriers are only a fraction of the barriers formerly incarcerated groups face upon release. Garcia estimates that there are over 70,000 legal barriers impacting formerly incarcerated groups in the United States; therefore, focusing on a few barriers is not enough. Garcia continues by stating that the barriers formerly incarcerated firefighters and other formerly incarcerated groups face extends to many other spheres of employment for those with previous criminal convictions. He includes examples such as housing applications, educational opportunities, and loan and grant options. Garcia believes that legislators and community members

alike must have a plan to address not one but all barriers that prevent formerly incarcerated groups from reintegrating into society and living happy and healthy lives.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, I will analyze the results of the interviews I conducted with government and community stakeholders, in addition to results of my policy analysis of AB 2293 and AB 1668. I conducted semi-structured interviews and policy analyses to address the following questions: Why are there so few formerly incarcerated firefighters pursuing firefighting and fire management careers following release from prison? How has the hero and incarcerated identity dynamic changed for these firefighters as fire season grows longer and more intense? What are these specific barriers? How are these barriers being addressed by major stakeholders in California? The interviews conducted contributed practical knowledge to my research as the stakeholders I interviewed understood multiple barriers to employment within the context of their daily work. These interviews also helped identify gaps in knowledge around policymaking as stakeholders argued that multiple barriers are not accounted for in pending and current policies. Lastly, these interviews led to my understanding of my research limitations and gave me insight into the future steps and recommendations for each of the stakeholders I interviewed. The results of my policy analysis also guided my recommendations, as I analyzed the impact legislation has on formerly incarcerated individuals seeking employment and the funding necessary to support programs that facilitate the success of formerly incarcerated individuals. In addition, in my policy analysis I identify gaps in legislation that I recommend policy-makers to address to produce outcomes that best serve formerly incarcerated groups.

### **Hero and Incarcerated Identity**

Following my interviews with those that work closely with formerly incarcerated firefighters and other formerly incarcerated groups, I was able to get a clear understanding of the various identities these individuals took on while doing their jobs. The hero identity is defined by the work done as an incarcerated firefighter to directly save lives and homes from wildfires in addition to their contributions to preventing wildfires and reducing their impact on communities.

Many felt they were paying society back for the crimes they committed and contributing to the community in a healthy way. This hero identity conflicts with the incarcerated identity as incarcerated firefighters are not treated with the same respect given to professional firefighters and much of their work goes unrecognized by the media or CalFire officials. In addition, their pay does not reflect the value of their services ranging from one to two dollars an hour despite taking on the same fire management training and duties performed professional firefighters that make more than 10 times that amount an hour (“How Much Does A Firefighter Make In California?” n.d.). Despite the difficult balancing of these contrasting identities, most formerly incarcerated firefighters reported they were satisfied with their jobs and would continue these jobs despite the longer fire seasons. Formerly incarcerated firefighters discussed how they enjoyed being outside prison walls in nature and described feeling less of a surveillance presence in comparison to standard prison environments. For many of those inside the conservation fire camps, this became an opportunity to get away from the concrete walls of prison and reclaim a tiny bit of their freedom. From these conversations, I determined that the rewards they identified such as perceived contributing to society, reduced surveillance, and payment superseded any fear or anxiety about the more intense fire seasons in California. My interview with CalFire also supports this conclusion as the number of applicants to conservation fire camps across the state has not decreased.

### *Identified Employment Barriers*

I have identified eight barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated firefighters pursuing careers in fire management and as professional firefighters. These barriers extend beyond the EMT I and EMT II certification requirements first identified but include poor mental health, drug misuse, housing insecurity, transportation, equipment access, application review, and distance from training sites. During my interview with employees at Homeboy Industries, I was able to get a comprehensive understanding of each of these barriers and how they impact employment for formerly incarcerated groups. Examples we discussed include not having reliable transportation to travel to job interviews or locations once released from the carceral system. Addiction relapses can also impact employment success if formerly incarcerated communities do not prioritize their mental health and treatment prior to seeking employment. In addition, many formerly incarcerated firefighters have been incarcerated for long periods of time and do not have

a steady employment history to include on their resumes and do not know about employment placement services and tools. From my interview with CalFire, I understand that the barriers to professional firefighting are increased in municipal fire agencies as application requirements vary while CalFire and wildfire management teams remain consistent statewide. Specifically, CalFire applicants are not asked about their criminal history and can supplement their EMT I and EMT II certifications with other certifications that are not impacted by criminal history or felony status.

### *Stakeholder Responses to Employment Barriers*

#### *Homeboy Industries*

Each stakeholder I interviewed varied in their opinion of which barriers are most important to target and they also varied in their solutions to these barriers. Homeboy Industries stated they utilize a holistic approach to employment barriers that incorporates policy reform and introduction in addition to securing funding for support services that target the barriers to employment I identified such as drug misuse, housing insecurity, transportation, and access to equipment. These services are free of cost and are funded by state grants and independent donors. Services include therapy and counseling, legal services, drug-abuse programs, and tattoo removal to reduce employer bias and overall remove any former affiliations. In addition, they offer funding for job-specific equipment and tools. With this approach, Homeboy Industries hopes to target barriers that impact formerly incarcerated communities from the moment they are released to even after they secure employment.



Figure 4: Homeboy Industries. 2018 accomplishment summary of services provided by Homeboy Industries (Source 2018 Homeboy Industries).

California Legislators

Policymakers such as the legislative team of Assemblymember Eloise Gómez Reyes aimed to target the barriers of EMT I and EMT II certification in California assembly bill 2293, yet community members such as Homeboy industries and incarcerated firefighters argue these bills are not doing enough to reduce the barriers for formerly incarcerated firefighter as only one out of eight barriers are being addressed by these policy measures. This bill demonstrates the political clout organizations such as the California Professional Firefighters (CPF) association has as they were able to vouch for revisions that completely altered the initial bill proposal. I conclude from the decision made by the legislation CPF that they had both supported and opposed the forthcoming of incarcerated firefighters. CPF does understand the general difficulties formerly incarcerated groups face when seeking employment yet do not believe such individuals should work with communities in careers such as municipal firefighting. Instead they encourage careers in fire and land management that do not involve communities and are labor intensive. In addition,

the interests of CPF are to target the success of all professional firefighters rather than specifically incarcerated firefighters.

AB 1668 outlined the goals and process of implementing the various projects better than AB 2293 but omits the concerns of a large population. Many formerly incarcerated firefighters wish to resume their career in firefighting following release and specifically wish to work for municipal fire departments that provide the best pay, benefits, and location choices. AB 1668 does not specifically create a pathway for formerly incarcerated individuals to become firefighters which is a large concern. In addition, this bill does not identify any specific employment barriers but rather acknowledges recidivism statistics that in themselves do not provide a complete analysis of the complexity of recidivism in the United States. There are numerous criminal risk factors that play a part in recidivism rates that exceed the sole factor of employment but include factors such as criminal history, relationships, drug use, and poverty that this assembly bill does not discuss (Monahan and Skeem 2014) .

### *CalFire*

CalFire addresses the disclosure of criminal history and the EMT I and EMT II certification barriers. Specifically, they omit questions on criminal history for CalFire applications. In addition, they also do not require the EMT I and EMT II certification requirements for wildland firefighters. Despite these attempts to meet the employment barriers mentioned, CalFire officials were not aware of the multiple on-going policies regarding the EMT I and EMT II certification requirements for most city firefighting positions. The Chief of Communications did state that they were aware of the restrictions of EMT certifications and city firefighting positions and hoped fire departments could come to a uniform application process that incorporated certifications that were available despite criminal convictions. Mclean also spoke very highly of the work and training performed by currently incarcerated firefighters at CalFire fire camps supporting my conclusion that incarcerated firefighters are equally qualified for the job requirements of professional firefighters as demonstrated in work ethic and training success. Though Mclean spoke highly of incarcerated firefighters it is difficult to understand if the lack EMT I and EMT II certification requirements were meant to specifically target employment barriers impacting formerly incarcerated groups or if it was created out of a formality to increase and diversify CalFire applicants that received

different certifications from prior careers. Despite this, the omission of questions regarding criminal history and the diverse selection of certification required does reduce certification and applicant review barriers.

### *Employment Post-Carceral System*

I conclude there are very few formerly incarcerated individuals pursuing fire management, specifically professional firefighting careers, due to the failure to address the eight barriers previously identified. Policymakers such as the legislative teams of Wendy Carrillo and Eloise Gómez Reyes have only begun to address barriers such as the EMT I and EMT II certification requirements and fail to target professional firefighting careers specifically. My research demonstrates that the barriers I've identified begin before formerly incarcerated firefighters seek employment such as the basic needs and mental health barriers I've identified. In addition, I've identified community partner Homeboy Industries as the stakeholder that has aimed to address the most employment barriers and best understands the multifaceted nature of the barriers I've identified. Unfortunately, the success of the resources they provide formerly incarcerated groups are limited by financial resources and political clout. Lack of stakeholder communication is also a contributor to the poor addressing of the employment barriers as each of the stakeholders understands specific employment barriers in different contexts but does not communicate these understandings. This is likely due to a multitude of factors such as unestablished connections, time, and lack of knowledge of additional stakeholders. I conclude these factors create large gaps in knowledge for each of these stakeholders that can impede the addressment of employment barriers impacting formerly incarcerated firefighters and formerly incarcerated groups.

Within the last two decades, the "tough on crime" stance embodied by law enforcers and others involved in the justice system, favored legislation such as minimum sentencing laws and restrictions on parole eligibility (Blumstein 2011). These legislation choices amongst other historically discriminatory practices, such as those used during the War on Drugs period, led the United States' to its era of mass incarceration. Despite, this California has experienced a reduction in incarceration rates and individuals are being released at higher rates than are being arrested. This ultimately will result in an influx of formerly incarcerated individuals seeking employment and entering the job market. Addressing the employment barriers I describe is key to ensuring

these individuals successfully reacclimate to society and find employment to provide for themselves and their families.

### *Legislation Recommendations*

Through my research I concluded there is a need for multiple policy development guidelines, specifically in California assembly bills. Most of my policy recommendations target the initial drafting of assembly bills, specifically those that impact formerly incarcerated and currently incarcerated groups. First, I recommend that legislators specifically outline how they are going to implement goals. This was a large issue in AB 2293 as the future directions of the bill were very unclear. Outlining future actions keep legislators and any other stakeholders in the legislation accountable and on-track to meet their goals. In addition, outlining future steps can assist in creating accurate fiscal calculations so legislators can advocate for more resources if needed. Outlining the costs of a legislative project would also be beneficial for legislators who allocate funds. Additionally, from my interviews and policy analysis I saw many of the stakeholders shared overlapping goals. As discussed, some stakeholders addressed specific barriers in more head-on approaches that could have been in conjunction with other stakeholders. I recommend that legislators reach out and seek community organizations and groups that have similar goals. Though legislation is created based on feedback from these groups, legislators do not actively seek feedback from additional community organizations. In reality, community members are often at the forefront of working with targeted populations therefore it only makes sense to involve as many community members as possible to understand the needs of these target populations.

My research demonstrates this through the stakeholders at Homeboy Industries that work directly with formerly incarcerated groups. By understanding how groups like Homeboy Industries assists their target population, legislators might opt for legislation that partners with community organizations, rather than attempt to do the same work as them. Instead of creating new policies, legislators could draft legislation that secures additional resources for these organizations. Lastly, I recommend that legislators fully understand the positions of those that oppose pieces of the bills they introduce. From my policy analysis I now understand the influence opposition groups have on policy revisions. The legislation changes implemented in AB 2293 by CPF is one example of



the influence opposition groups have on revisions. I determined this from multiple methods of analysis as assembly bill analysis does not explicitly share the opposition statements. In addition, legislation does not identify the stakeholders that these opposition parties serve. I acknowledge these recommendations may not apply to each assembly bill process, but they do apply to the assembly bills I analyzed. These recommendations can be beneficial to future bills drafted regarding formerly incarcerated groups.

### **Limitations**

My research would have benefitted from more stakeholder interviews specifically with formerly incarcerated firefighters that face these employment barriers directly. The inclusion of formerly incarcerated firefighters in my research was limited and I was not able to incorporate many of their voices into my study. Despite this, I was able to incorporate those that work very closely with these groups in addition to formerly incarcerated individuals that did not work in fire camps. In addition, as previously discussed communication between the stakeholders I identified could be drastically improved to work towards addressing all of these barriers and ensuring resources are allocated to those that can best address these barriers. Research has demonstrated that unemployment has been identified as a risk factor for recidivism (Rauma and Berk 1987).

### **Future Policy Directions**

#### *Assembly Bill 1211*

To address the gaps in AB 2293, Assemblymember Reyes introduced assembly bill 1211, in February 2019. This bill is in the initial introduction stage and has not yet been approved by California Governor Gavin Newsom. This bill would declare the intent of the Legislature to enact legislation that would provide a career pathway to individuals with previous criminal convictions who have demonstrated rehabilitation and desire to work as firefighters (“Bill Text - AB-1211 Firefighters.” n.d.). The bill recognizes that after receiving valuable training and placing themselves in danger to defend the lives and property of Californians, incarcerated firefighters face rejection when attempting to find jobs as firefighters after their release. As discussed in a previous

section, formerly incarcerated men and women are continuously faced with barriers to employment, and AB 1211, if passed, would seek to address this issue head-on. This bill directly engages with formerly incarcerated firefighters and also seeks to address the demand for more firefighters. The bill includes background such as California's prolonged fire seasons and the chronic understaffing as firefighters are left exhausted and overworked ("Bill Text - AB-1211 Firefighters." n.d.). As stated, this bill is still undergoing initial revisions and feedback but has been introduced to the California assembly.

## **CONCLUSION**

In addition to the specific barriers I identify, I acknowledge there are more barriers I have not identified in my research that impact formerly incarcerated groups' ability to seek employment. More research must be done to establish the true extent and impact of barriers on the formerly incarcerated in fields beyond fire management but also apply to fire management careers. With my research I conclude the following, the employment barriers impacting formerly incarcerated firefighters are complex and can begin at various stages of the employment process. For most formerly incarcerated groups these barriers begin prior to even submitting an application but rather begin in the forms of housing insecurity, mental illness, and addiction. If stakeholders wish to increase the success and number of formerly incarcerated firefighters in firefighting careers, they need to meet each of these barriers and investigate barriers I did not identify but likely exist for formerly incarcerated groups in a multitude of contexts.

I will be sharing and discussing my results with each of the stakeholders I identified in the hopes of facilitating these conversations. Lastly, I would like to reiterate the importance of this issue, unemployment, in conjunction with other risk factors, is closely linked to recidivism. When we provide our incarcerated community with opportunities for success, we are directly reducing the chances of re-offense and can impact the current trends of mass incarceration in America. Jobs, not Jail is a motto Homeboy Industries takes very seriously and addressing these employment barriers is a step in the right direction. In addition, climate change variables among other factors will only increase the severity of fire seasons in California and increase the need for qualified firefighters in California.

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