



THE 2021 CEO BLUEPRINT FOR RACIAL EQUITY: COMPANY PROFILE

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WITHIN THE COMPANY

WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

WITHIN SOCIETY

**RESPONSIBLE
BUSINESS INITIATIVE**
FOR JUSTICE

Strategies for Businesses to Support Criminal Justice Reform

Businesses can have a substantial impact on local, state, and national policies that advance racial justice. They can do so by plugging into existing campaigns at strategic moments through both public and private advocacy. Recognizing this, the Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (RBIJ) educates and instructs companies on how to support criminal justice reform (CJR) campaigns, and how to use their resources and influence to promote equity.

The criminal justice system disproportionately targets communities of color, reflected in everything from higher rates of arrest and citation to higher sentences for equivalent charges. The [disproportionately high percentage of people of color](#) in today's prison population is a reflection of the lingering legacy of slavery and RBIJ works with businesses to support CJR campaigns and fight the racism, cruelty, and ineffectiveness that pervade criminal justice systems. Working collaboratively with other partner organizations, these campaigns have already helped to reduce the number of incarcerated individuals in an effort to prevent the spread of Covid-19, ended juvenile life-without-parole sentencing in Ohio and Maryland, and expunged criminal records across America – to name just a few key impacts.

RBIJ recognizes that companies have remarkable power – even influencing legislation – by signaling their stance on urgent justice issues. In its Ohio campaign, RBIJ worked with criminal justice advocates on the ground who were trying to pass Senate Bill 256, which called for an end to juvenile life imprisonment without parole in the state. The campaign had been running for several years and always hit insurmountable hurdles in the state legislature. RBIJ activated companies in the state, amplified influential business voices in local media, and engaged companies (and their leaders) in public advocacy through a sign-on letter. In January 2021, Ohio Governor Mark DeWine signed the bill into law. The hurdles had been overcome, and businesses were an essential component of making that happen.

How companies are influencing local and state policy – and how you can too

Acknowledge that there are many motivations for taking action. The decision to advocate for policy change may stem from a variety of motivations. As Lena Patel, director of strategic engagement at RBIJ, explains, “Sometimes the business case is clear cut. Other times, it is a social justice issue, a race issue, rather than meeting a bottom line.” She added that some companies that engage in advocacy as a moral imperative later realize there are financial benefits. Regardless of their starting point, companies can have the most impact through sustained action.

Consider the different ways to incorporate CJR into your business. A starting place is learning how people of color and other disenfranchised communities in your region are impacted by the criminal justice system and how this impacts your business – whether directly or indirectly. RBIJ’s [Criminal Justice Toolkit](#) offers strategies for addressing these injustices both within a company’s operations and through public advocacy. For example, second-chance employers seek to break the cycle of poverty associated with incarceration by hiring people who were formerly incarcerated. Corporate leaders can refrain from investing in companies that support mass incarceration and, looking inward, designate team member(s) to carry out criminal justice reform work – and provide them with the operational support to expand engagement. As the story of SB 256 in Ohio illustrates, businesses can also effect change by partnering with CJR campaigns at critical moments when business voice will be most influential. By staying involved over the long term, companies will equip themselves with the knowledge to take action when the time comes.

PolicyLink

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