



PRESS RELEASE

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CONVENING FEATURING FORMERLY INCARCERATED NATIONAL LEADERS HELD AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

New York, NY, April 6, 2017 – Formerly incarcerated leaders, policy-makers, academics, and advocates will gather today at Columbia University for a convening, “Leading with Conviction in the Era of Trump.” The event is hosted by JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA), Columbia Law School’s Center for Institutional and Social Change, the Center for Justice at Columbia University, College and Community Fellowship, and the Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice.

A centerpiece of the event is the release of the report, “Leading with Conviction: The Transformative Role of Formerly Incarcerated Leaders in Reducing Mass Incarceration.” The report details findings from interviews with 48 “leaders with conviction” over a 14-month period which indicate that such leaders are uniquely positioned to serve as organizational catalysts to mobilize change. They bridge the gap between communities and systems that typically do not interact.

“The experience of researching and writing this report has shown the effectiveness of ‘leaders with conviction’ in building the movement to reduce incarceration, invest in people, and build communities,” said **Susan Sturm, Director of the Center for Institutional and Social Change** and lead author of the report. “Leader after leader revealed the capacity to connect silos, reduce stereotypes, ‘ground truth’ in public policy, inspire hope, and mobilize cross-cutting support for change. We need this leadership if we are to bridge the worlds that have to be connected to achieve the kind of transformation our criminal legal system requires.”

The report culminates in policy recommendations to meaningfully encourage and support the leadership of formerly incarcerated people. Central to this goal is an investment in higher education for people while they are incarcerated and upon their return to their communities.

“The key to creating capable leaders is to increase access to education,” said **Vivian Nixon, Executive Director of College and Community Fellowship**. “As a country, we’ve created a system where people of color are disproportionately undereducated and overcriminalized. If we want to see a new generation

of leaders who have direct experience with the criminal justice system and who are also adept at leading reform efforts, then investment in education is the first step toward that vision.”

Performances, panel discussions, and interactive exercises at today’s event will bring to life the themes from the report. Panelists include prominent formerly incarcerated leaders including Deanna Hoskins, Senior Policy Advisor with the Department of Justice, as well as Bill Cobb, Deputy Director of the Campaign for Smart Justice at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Louis L. Reed, Program Manager for the Mayor’s Initiative for Reentry Affairs in Bridgeport, CT. All three are JustLeadershipUSA Leading with Conviction Fellows.

“In the fight for smarter criminal justice policies, directly impacted people have always known what needs to be done,” said **gabriel sayegh, Co-Director and Co-Founder of the Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice**. “Policy-makers and advocates have just recently started catching up and taking their perspective seriously. The panelists today are proof of the meaningful change that can occur when leaders with conviction are incorporated into policy discussions as true decision makers and not just symbolic tokens.”

Leaders with conviction will be joined by other accomplished panelists including Amy Solomon, former Executive Director of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, Karol Mason, former Assistant Attorney General, and Michael Thompson, Director of the Council of State Governments Justice Center. The panels provide a unique opportunity to hear about the power that leaders with conviction have to influence policy decisions from within government and other institutions as well as on the ground through community mobilization.

“JustLeadershipUSA was founded on the principle that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from power and resources,” said **Glenn E. Martin, President and Founder of JustLeadershipUSA**. “This report and today’s event bring us one step closer to changing that dynamic. This is a celebration of what is possible when investments are made in formerly incarcerated leaders. It’s also a reminder that we need to double-down on criminal justice reform efforts in the era of Trump. We cannot relive the destruction of decades of ‘tough on crime’ policies that devastated black and brown communities across the country. Now more than ever, we need directly impacted people leading the way.”

About JustLeadershipUSA:

JustLeadershipUSA (JLUSA) is dedicated to cutting the U.S. correctional population in half by 2030 while reducing crime. Formed in 2014, JLUSA works to empower people most affected by incarceration to drive policy reform in order to change the nation’s prison systems. Through its trainings and programs, JLUSA trains and supports formerly incarcerated people to become stronger and more effective leaders in their communities. It also organizes and supports decarceration advocacy campaigns on the local, state and federal levels and engages members to help build support and raise awareness through advocacy and activism. JustLeadershipUSA, in partnership with other criminal justice reform organizations, started the #CLOSErikers campaign in 2016 to break the political gridlock and achieve real solutions guided by directly impacted communities. Visit www.justleadershipusa.org for more.

About the Center for Institutional and Social Change:

Founded in 2007, the Center for Institutional and Social Change (the “Center”) has become a facilitator of innovation and collaboration for scholars, practitioners, and students striving to address structural

inequality through institutional transformation. Housed at Columbia Law School and begun as a pilot collaboration with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF), the overarching goal of the Center is to develop new frameworks, strategies, roles, and institutions for effective institutional and social change directed at addressing structural inequality and achieving inclusive institutions. The Center grew out of a shared recognition that the existing frameworks and strategies for advancing equality need to be rethought, and that institutional change should be a central focus of that rethinking project. Its work is designed to build this capacity to address structural inequality through strategic analysis, empirical and field research, and brainstorming by researchers, students, and innovative practitioners. Its work proceeds primarily through collaborative projects focused on addressing structural inequality in different institutional settings. Visit www.changecenter.org for more.

About the Center for Justice:

The Center for Justice at Columbia University is committed to reducing the nation's reliance on incarceration and advancing alternative approaches to safety and justice through education, research and policy. Its mission is to help transform a criminal justice system from one that is driven by punishment and retribution to one that is centered on prevention and healing. The Center is interdisciplinary and built around community collaboration. It works in partnership with schools, departments, centers and institutes across Columbia, other universities, government agencies, community organizations, advocates and those directly affected by the criminal justice system. Visit www.centerforjustice.columbia.edu for more.

About College and Community Fellowship:

The mission of College and Community Fellowship is to eliminate individual and structural barriers to higher education, economic security, long term stability, and civic participation for women who have criminal convictions (including those currently and formerly incarcerated) and their families. The services, programs and projects of CCF exist to eliminate individual and structural barriers to higher education, economic security, long term stability, and civic participation for women who have criminal convictions (including those currently and formerly incarcerated) and their families. CCF guides women seeking to reclaim their lives through the stages of higher education while promoting their leadership, self-advocacy, artistic expression, and long term success. Visit www.collegeandcommunity.org for more.

About the Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice:

The Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice is an organization with big ideas and bold, visionary goals. We're focused on: Ending mass criminalization, mass incarceration, and the war on drugs; promoting justice, equity, and community safety; advancing health-based approaches to drug policy; and building leadership and organizing capacity of organizers, advocates, and community organizations. Katal is a growing team of professionals with decades of collective experience in community organizing, policy advocacy, strategy development, training, political campaigns and communications. We collaborate with our partners to build powerful, research-based campaigns to dismantle mass incarceration, end the war on drugs, and advance health, equity, and justice. Visit www.katalcenter.org for more.