**Headline:** Recycling the Discarded

**Teaser:** Greenfield, Massachusetts’s Compost Co-op gives ex-inmates a living wage through meaningful work.

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

The stigma of a criminal conviction can be a major barrier to community reentry for recently released prisoners. A December 2021 [report](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/) by the Bureau of Justice Statistics highlighted the employment barrier faced by the more than 50,000 who were incarcerated, with 33 percent of them being unable to find any employment “over four years” after their release from prison in 2010.

Meanwhile, a 2002 [study](https://ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/mark-criminal-record) by the U.S. Department of Justice of employers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, found that “ex-offenders… [were] one-half to one-third as likely to receive initial consideration from employers relative to equivalent applicants without criminal records.”

In 2018, the Prison Policy Initiative [reported](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html) that more than 27 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals were unemployed—a figure “higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression.”

The challenges of finding employment and housing often create a vicious cycle. A 2021 [study](https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-24-states-2008-10-year-follow-period-2008-2018) “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008,” pointed out that 61 percent of the inmates interviewed were back in prison within a decade.

“Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration Following Prison Release,” a [report](https://typeset.io/pdf/homeless-shelter-use-and-reincarceration-following-prison-1tj3s5zd0w.pdf) of 48,424 prisoners released from New York State correctional facilities, concluded that “homelessness contributes to a higher risk for incarceration,” and “inversely, incarceration contributes to an increased risk of homelessness.”

[The Compost Co-op](https://thecompostcooperative.com/pages/about), a worker-owned service in Greenfield, Massachusetts, offers formerly incarcerated individuals an alternative to this path. Its workers collect compost from customers’ curbsides and bring them to western Massachusetts’s largest commercial composting site, [Martin’s Farm](https://martinsfarmcompost.com/). This enables staff members to earn a living wage through meaningful work.

The seeds of this co-op were planted between 2011 and 2015 when Greenfield Community College instructor and future Compost Co-op co-founder Revan Schendler taught a course at Franklin County Sheriff’s Office called Crime and Punishment in the U.S.: A Sociological Overview. “Out of the classes emerged an interest in establishing a think tank,” Schendler explains.

While speaking at a webinar organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in July 2024, Schendler [said](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FheWrTZ3PUQ),“The compost co-op was developed inside a rural county jail by incarcerated people who identified the lack of meaningful living wage work… as contributing to reincarceration” According to her, “More than 25 incarcerated and previously incarcerated people” are part of the co-op.

In December 2013, members of the Greenfield community began meeting with the sheriff’s office inmates weekly. The group, comprising people from the community and inmates, went on nature excursions, sponsored annual art and poetry shows, advocated for policy changes, and discussed alternatives to incarceration. This think tank gave rise to the idea of the Compost Co-op.

Andrew Stachiw, a think tank member and educator at the jail, developed a business plan for the co-op in 2017. The organization was incorporated the following year. It now serves more than 300 residential and commercial customers throughout Greenfield and neighboring towns such as Great Falls, Montague, and Deerfield.

Explaining the goals of the Compost Co-op during the webinar, Schendler [said](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FheWrTZ3PUQ),“The goals of the incarcerated developers included having control over your labor and not being a cog in a wheel, was one. Two, [having] flexible and nonpunitive work schedules, three giving back to the community by protecting the environment, and four helping the next person out.”

**Positive Environmental Impact**

With [30-40 percent](https://www.usda.gov/peoples-garden/food-access-food-waste/flw) of food in the U.S. going into the trash—nearly [60 million tons](https://www.rts.com/resources/guides/food-waste-america) per year—the Compost Co-op serves as a model for food waste reduction. It also promotes environmental health. As the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [notes](https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/composting#:~:text=Compost%20Aids%20Climate%20Adaptation%20and,mitigating%20the%20effects%20of%20drought.), composting reduces greenhouse gas emissions and “improves a community’s ability to adapt to adverse climate impacts by helping soil absorb water and prevent runoff of pollutants during floods. It also helps soil hold more water for longer, mitigating the effects of drought.”

By hiring formerly incarcerated workers, the Compost Co-op also promotes racial justice. In 2023, the Sentencing Project [reported](https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/one-in-five-ending-racial-inequity-in-incarceration/) that “one in five Black men born in 2001 is likely to experience imprisonment within [his] lifetime.” According to a Pew Charitable Trusts [brief](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2023/05/racial-disparities-persist-in-many-us-jails) from the same year, data from a 595-jail sample revealed that “Black people made up, on average, 12 percent of the local community populations but more than double that, 26 percent, of the jail populations.” The same data showed that “[a]s of 2022, Black people were admitted to jail at more than four times the rate of white people.”

Eli Smith, who does administrative support and operations work for the Compost Co-op, feels the group’s environmental activism is inseparable from its mission to uphold social, racial, and class justice. “Low-income communities and communities of color are the first to be affected by the repercussions of climate change,” he explains. “[These] communities have been pushed to the margins and to areas of our country that are the least desirable or are closest to rivers and bodies of water.”

The Compost Co-op’s work helps mitigate these conditions by promoting “[racial and](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FheWrTZ3PUQ) [environmental](https://thecompostcooperative.com/blogs/news/cultivating-change-compost-co-op-s-journey-from-jail-to-community?srsltid=AfmBOop1hTdhaPiHYemgpyDjh3H8npgy3657wpgtFaOQJsGuGJeO55Jf) justice.” A [blog](https://thecompostcooperative.com/blogs/news/five-years-a-bucket-of-scraps-at-a-time) from 2023 noted that since forming in 2018, this collective had “diverted almost a million pounds of compostables from the waste stream, resulting in reduced methane emission from landfills, decreased waste headed to incinerators (which contribute to high asthma rates in children), and less waste shipped from our region by rail.”

The low-income and BIPOC communities are [disproportionately vulnerable](https://www.epa.gov/ej-research/epa-research-environmental-justice-and-air-pollution) to health problems caused by air pollution from traffic, industrial facilities, and incinerators.

**Combating Housing Insecurity**

In 2024, an annual state count [reported](https://www.telegram.com/story/news/state/2024/07/17/surge-in-massachuetts-homeless-seen-in-yearly-count/74432310007/) 29,435 unhoused individuals in Massachusetts. This reflected a 54 percent increase from the 19,107 reported in 2023.

[According](https://www.affordablehousing.com/masscwl) to AffordableHousing.com, applications for affordable housing in Massachusetts can take years to come to the top of the waiting list.

This is especially destabilizing for newly released inmates, many of whom are “kicked to the street with no house, job, or money,” according to Smith. “Maybe they give you the items you [were wearing and] had in your pocket when you were arrested. In New England that can mean that if you get arrested in July and go to jail wearing a T-shirt and shorts, they let you back out [in the same clothes] in the middle of December with snow on the ground. If you don’t have family or friends to support you, you’re just homeless.”

The Compost Co-op helps individuals in this situation. In 2023, the collective [announced](https://thecompostcooperative.com/blogs/news/blog-post-2) a partnership with the design and construction company [Oxbow Design Build](https://oxbowdesignbuild.com/). A letter written collectively by the worker-owners of both co-ops described how the two organizations “transformed a dilapidated building in Greenfield into apartments that will last centuries rather than decades. Six people who collectively experienced decades of homelessness and housing insecurity now have homes.”

This initiative was taken on when “seven members with experience of incarceration” had to leave the co-op due to a lack of housing. “The worker-owners decided that the business had to find a way to address that need or it wouldn’t survive or fulfill its mission,” said Schendler during the [webinar](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FheWrTZ3PUQ).

**Economic Democracy**

Smith notes that in most workplaces, bosses and managers have dictatorial power. “Unless you’re lucky enough to be unionized or work at a worker-owned co-op, there’s nothing you can do to sway your boss’s decision about something.” He adds that exploitation increases when workers are formerly incarcerated or face other barriers to employment such as being “low income or not [being] a straight white man.”

Smith contrasts this with the Compost Co-op’s ethos of worker ownership. “I think a lot of the reason [this group’s founders] wanted a worker-owned co-op is so that you have agency and ability to make decisions in your workplace. A lot of employers like to say, ‘We value your opinion,’ and then don’t listen to anything you say. When I became a worker-owner or was close to becoming one, I learned that I actually have a say in this business, and my coworkers want to hear my opinion. It’s not just lip service.”

**Passing It On**

Smith, who feels “things have to change on a large scale to truly affect issues like incarceration and climate change,” encourages anyone interested in starting a composting co-op to bear in mind that operational methods will vary based on many factors—for example, a specific region’s physical location and political atmosphere. “Even on the local level, laws and legislation have a big impact,” he says.

Recommending the [Institute for Local Self-Reliance](https://ilsr.org/composting/) as a resource for learning to compost, Smith advises prospective composting cooperative founders to take inspiration from multiple examples. “Study how they function and take pieces that you think will work in your area versus trying to copy someone else’s community composting program exactly.”