

VOICE

Issue 25 / 2025

REENTRY PROFILE

James, who also goes by Jimmers, is from Contra Costa County, “specifically Bay Point, which used to be called West Pittsburg.

“I grew up in the ‘90s to two drug-addicted parents. We were all in and out of prison. My mom sold drugs. Our house got raided on every street we ever lived on. And I’ve been evicted from every house I’ve ever lived in as a child. We lived on almost every street in my neighborhood, because of that.

“I was a trouble child—me and all my brothers were. We fought a lot at school, got suspended, and expelled from school. We fought with each other. We fought in the neighborhood and other kids in prison. The gang and street lifestyle was glorified and made to seem cool. As for my stepdad, he always made it sound cool and fun. Prison and jail were like a rite of passage for the men in my family.

“I grew up in Shore Acres. It’s a small neighborhood known for trouble and poverty and whatnot. I started going to juvenile hall real young, when I was about 12 years old. I was already smoking weed by five or six (years old), but regularly by like nine or 10 (years old).

“As a teenager, I was always committing crime, like residential burglaries and robberies, and selling weed and other drugs. When I turned 17, I started selling harder drugs. The money started coming in faster. I’m from poverty; my mom was on Section 8 my whole life. So, I started having money, and all of a sudden I got addicted to that—addicted to money because we never had it—and I’d found something that brought it quick.

“The last time I was in prison, I guess I was 25. I got nine years for selling drugs and playing cat and mouse with the police and task force. I was hooked on OxyContin during that time. When I started going to **CONTINUES ON PAGE 2**



PROGRAMS

Lao Family Community Development: Providing Comprehensive Services

Lao Family Community Development, Inc. knows a thing or two about starting over. Some would even say that knowledge is baked into the organization. Lao Family, or LFCD, got its start in the living room of a three-bedroom apartment in Richmond in 1980. Everyone present then had one purpose: to help refugees from the landlocked Southeast Asian nation get resettled.

Thousands of Lao refugees had been arriving in the East Bay, fleeing war, persecution, and the social and political unrest in their homeland. All of them were starting over and needed help. In CEO Kathy Chao Rothberg’s retelling of Lao Family’s origin story, the local community came together.

“When we got our first actual office,” she said, “it was through the compassion and the support of St. Luke’s Church on Barrett Avenue in Richmond.”

When refugee families needed assistance, Lao Family was there to serve them. Many had children

under 18, members who didn’t speak English, and adults who lacked the requirements to earn a living. The organization shifted its resources constantly to assist them where they were.

Some Lao families eventually found their children getting into trouble in school, joining gangs, and getting arrested. According to one White House study, 38 percent of Laotian Americans drop out of high school. Chao Rothberg said that, by the 1990s, Lao Family had started noticing “more of the population we were serving had some connection to the justice system, whether the kids were arrested or the parents [were arrested], maybe there was domestic violence or drug use.”

Awareness of larger societal issues as well as a steady stream of referrals from local partners led Lao Family to expand its services to the wider community. From Contra Costa County, the organization branched out, opening locations in Alameda and Sacramento counties.

“We went from serving 90 percent who were foreign-born to serving almost 50 percent of the 31,000 customers we serve a year who are low-income, high-barrier, **CONTINUES ON PAGE 3**

EDITORS’ NOTES

Dear readers,
This is our 25th issue! When we ran our first in Fall 2017, our intention was to create a space for the stories in our community, the way we wanted them told. There wasn’t a space for us, and we had so many questions. How many justice-impacted individuals would be willing to share their story? How many partners and providers would be open to being interviewed about their goals and objectives, as well as their hopes and dreams? We always knew, however, that our voices matter—that we matter. So, in our eighth year, we’re excited to publish more voices in our space, and we’ll be sharing them with you in new and interesting ways. We hope you appreciate the changes. And please let us know what stories you would like us to write about in the future.



Charmaine Hoggatt
The Reentry Network



Pat Mims
Reentry Success Center

P.S. Not on our mailing list? Write and let us know where to send copies to you.

JAMES, CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

prison, there was no OxyContin or anything. All they had was heroin and meth, so I started dabbling in that stuff while I was in prison. Then I brought those habits home.

“Prison made me a worse person because, once I started heroin and then doing IV, nothing else really mattered after that. As selfish as I already was, it was amplified times a thousand. I just didn’t care. I did what I wanted, how I wanted, when I wanted to do it, no matter the consequences for myself, my ex-wife, my kids, my family—nobody. That’s how my dad did it. That’s how my mom did it. And, I thought, that’s what gangsters did. That’s what I was taught, and I lived like that my whole life up until I was released after seven years on a nine year sentence in September 2022.

“I’ve been out two and a half years, and I’m off parole. I got off parole a year early for good behavior, and I wasn’t lying or trying to trick my parole officer to get off. I was really doing good. When I first came home, my intentions were to do good, just like they always were. But I started drinking, and then drinking led to other stuff. But then I was like, ‘You know what? That’s not the plan this time.’ Because while I was in prison, I ended up going to Level 4 yards for the first time ever. I spent my last three and a half years in prison on Level 4 yards there, and it was a different experience than before.

“I’ve always known that I was a better person than the life I was living, but what I was doing was comfortable, it was familiar, and it was easy. It wasn’t until I was less than a year from getting out of prison when my oldest daughter just quit talking to me. I have other kids, but me and my oldest daughter had a special bond. She quit talking to me.

“I always told myself I wouldn’t do to my kids what my parents did to me. And yet I did the same exact thing. It’s an acceptable consequence when I’m committing crime. But I was too selfish to think of what it was doing to them. Then I was like, ‘They deserve better. I deserve better.’ And that was it. I got mental health issues and drug addiction, and it just kind of hit me: this isn’t what I’m supposed to be doing.

“I voluntarily went to drug and alcohol program on January 13, 2023, just to try to learn how to live without drugs, alcohol, and crime. To do that, I knew I had to stay off drugs and alcohol and everything. So, I went there. I’d never been to drug program before that, and I never wanted to go, but I needed to do something different. Obviously, what I’d been doing hadn’t been working.

“I went and I saw guys I knew from the streets and from prison coming up there as alumni who graduated. They’re talking about they got good jobs, careers, families, houses, and then they’re up there helping guys and they’re all talking about the 12 Steps. I got a sponsor and worked at 12 Steps, and now I sponsor other men. They always talk about that you’re going to get this life, you are going to create a life that you love so much that you don’t want to ruin it with drugs and alcohol. And I stuck to that.

“The life I have now is what continues to motivate me. I’m in the Pipefitters Union. I work at the refineries. I got a good job. I got a good girlfriend. I got a good relationship with my kids. My credit score is good. I’m saving up to buy a house. On top of that, I’m still in recovery where I sponsor other men and take them through the 12 Steps. I’ve got commitments at meetings and I’m of service to other people who are just like me, who just haven’t found a way yet.

“My oldest daughter is still a little standoffish sometimes, because I think they’re waiting for the

rug to be pulled and for me to go back to prison. I’m just showing them, with time and consistency and effort, that’s not the case.

“If I had to describe myself in one word, I would say ‘determined.’ When I was dealing drugs and stuff, I was determined to sell as much as I can, make as much money as I can. Now, I have that same mindset, that same hustle, but I’m determined to succeed in this new life I’ve found. I apply that same mindset to this new way of life and all the good things that I do. I’m not the same person, but there are still things from my previous life that drive me. I just reprogrammed them to help use them for good.

“I got connected with Lao Family Community Development through parole. I was on AB 109 (probation) and they had a resource for funding for a sober living home after I left drug and alcohol rehab. That’s all I thought it was going to be. I thought they were just going to be help me get funding to stay at this sober living environment until I got on my feet. But when I got out and I went over there and talked to them, they told me about all these other resources, which I didn’t know. I took advantage of all of them.

“They had all these workshops and seminars for credit-building, banking, saving money. I did all the workshops. One of them was on Individual Development Accounts or IDAs. Basically, every dollar I saved, they’ll match it up a thousand dollars. It helped me get into my own place later on. I also did a credit building workshop, and it taught me all about how to build credit and what factors into it. Now my credit score is 730 and rising.

“Lao Family had a seminar with Chase Bank, and they talked about credit and banking and loans and all this other stuff, and I went to that, too. After that, I went and got a bank account with Chase, and I still have that bank account. They helped me save money. When I first got out of rehab, I was working under-the-table jobs because I have a background. They didn’t care. They were like, ‘If you get a job on payroll, we will help you pay for your first month’s rent and deposit for your own place.’

“I got on payroll at the construction company I was working at. I asked [my boss] to be put on payroll, and he doesn’t do that with nobody, but he did it for me. They helped me get my first month’s rent and deposit towards an apartment. I got the apartment and moved out of the sober living home.

“What worked for me and what has helped me is that when I want something, I first make a decision that I want to do it right, because what’s a decision without action? It’s absolutely nothing. I find out what it takes to do it, then I start taking action. I put in the effort and the footwork, and I follow the steps. I break down the goals into smaller, more manageable goals, one step at a time, and chip away until I reach that goal.

“I’m used to instant gratification from being addicted. And that’s what being addicted is all about—instant gratification. I learned that’s not real life. If I put in the effort and the footwork towards what I want, and then I have a little bit of patience, it’s always going to come through. So far, so good. Not everything comes exactly how I wanted it or pictured it, but it bears fruit.

“Give yourself a chance. Give yourself one year: no drugs, no alcohol, no crime, doing the right thing. Get a job. Be patient and set some goals, and give yourself one year and see the type of life that it gives you. You already know what to do if you want to go back to your old lifestyle.

“If you’re not changing, you’re just existing. Life is about change and evolution and becoming a better version of yourself. Why stay the same if it’s not serving you?”

DID YOU KNOW

CA Proposition 6: What Led the Bill to Go to the Voters

In the most recent general election, Californians voted on a proposition that read: “eliminates constitutional provision allowing involuntary servitude for incarcerated persons,” followed by the options “yes” and “no.” How did they vote?

Most voters chose “no.”

What many might not have known then is how Prop. 6 got on the ballot in the first place, and why. It started with George Floyd.

Floyd, an African American man, was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, for being suspected of using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a grocery store. His murder was captured on video by eyewitnesses, which was then circulated around the nation and the world. It ignited protests calling for real change.

Then-California Assemblymember Shirley Weber (D-San Diego) decided to act. She introduced Assembly Bill 3121, which created the California Reparations Task Force. As a state agency, its purpose was to study and find ways to compensate African Americans whose descendants were enslaved and whose lives continue to be affected by that legacy.

The task force’s final report to state lawmakers in 2023 included a recommendation to amend California’s constitution. In the constitution, there’s an exception clause that states slavery and involuntary servitude are illegal—that is, except for individuals convicted of a crime. The task force recommended that the language be removed. (Some states have already amended their constitution, removing that clause.)

ACLU California Action and Assemblymember Lori D. Wilson (D-Suisun City) authored what became known as Prop. 6, which would have made the task force’s recommendation a reality. Wilson was the primary bill author. Prop. 6’s co-sponsors included many organizations.

Prop. 6 failed with 53 percent of Californians voting “no” and 47 percent of Californians voting “yes.” Below is the California map showing how each county voted.

CA PROP. 6 RESULTS		
Yes	6,895,604	46.7%
No	7,882,137	53.3%
Registered voter turnout		54.9%

70-80% (No)
60-70% (No)
50-60% (No)
50-60% (Yes)
60-70% (Yes)

(Map: Zack Carns, Wikipedia contributor)

Reentry Partners and Providers Training

Photos from the Contra Costa County Reentry Network and Reentry Success Center event, which brought together partner organizations throughout the county for a two-part training: the first part spotlighted best practices among partner organizations when they assist justice-impacted individuals struggling to overcome their time locked up and successfully return to their families and community; the second part offered partner organizations a glimpse of some of those struggles to help them better understand the role they play in every individual's reentry journey



vulnerable Americans,” Chao Rothberg said.

After a series of internal discussions and planning, Lao Family decided to deliver reentry services, starting in Alameda County. Chao Rothberg acknowledged that, “when you think of Lao Family, you don’t think of us as reentry specialists. You don’t think of us as housing specialists that take somebody who’s homeless towards home ownership.”

Lao Family’s focus on reentry services also helped it return to its roots in Contra Costa County, especially when funding made it possible. “We knew we were going to encounter doubts,” Chao Rothberg said, of people who didn’t know Lao Family’s history and work in the county.

“Everything we’ve learned as refugees—because that’s also what it is when you come out of prison—you’re starting over,” she said. “It’s like a new world out there.”

Wilanda Hughes, Lao Family’s reentry program supervisor, enjoys walking the organization’s talk of coming together to serve the community. She goes into Contra Costa County jails and hosts a variety of workshops that offer individuals the chance to learn about resources available to them once they are released.

Lao Family’s CARE Community Center in San Pablo offers a range of services, including career and employment services for adults, CalWORKS, AB 109 transitional to permanent housing

services (through the Contra Costa County Probation Department), homeless to transitional to permanent housing (through H3 Rapid Rehousing), permanent housing (through Rumrill Apartments), prevention and early intervention services, victim assistance programs, and educational courses for adults.

Everything we’ve learned as refugees—because that’s also what it is when you come out of prison—you’re starting over. It’s like a new world.

“When they get out and they come into the office, it makes them feel special because they know a little bit more about us,” Hughes said. “Then we can start the intake process and the orientation. We can’t start that on the inside because we can’t use a pen and only certain paper, but they get the information and their lights come on. Then they got it all planned out.”

Lao Family’s focus this year is housing—specifically, making more housing accessible and available to Contra Costa County’s reentry population. Or, as Chao Rothberg put it, “getting housing and maintaining housing as a health care.” She said the organization is in a unique position to make it all happen.

“What we want to focus on is growing our capacity in this health care arena for housing navigation and housing tenancy and a very holistic way of providing enhanced care management to our reentry population, to our unhoused population, and to our seniors and individuals with chronic health conditions. We want to be more visible to promote our work, our results, and our model. I want people to know that we have become a very comprehensive organization.”

She added: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. If somebody who’s inside now is coming out or they’re struggling, it’s okay. Come to us, and we are going to try our best to help you. And, if we can’t, we’re going to warmly hand you off to a partner. Contra Costa is a great place, and we are here to help.”

For more information on Lao Family Community Development, submit an inmate request through the Adult School Game Plan for Success. To get connected with Lao Family directly, contact Wilanda Hughes at (925) 915-5596 or go to <https://www.lfcd.org>.

EVENTS

MONDAYS (ONGOING)

Women’s Group 5:30-7:30pm, open to women interested in conversations related to everyday life, Reentry Success Center; call 800-816-4453 for details

WEDNESDAYS (ONGOING)

Restorative Circles 5:30-7:30pm, open to community, members, and drop-ins, Reentry Success Center; call 800-816-4453 for details

THURSDAYS (ONGOING)

Restorative Practices: Arts Class 5:30-7:30pm, open to community, members, and drop-ins, Reentry Success Center; call 800-816-4453 for details

FRIDAYS (ONGOING)

Forward Thinking Men’s Group 5:30-7:30pm, open to men interested in conversations related to everyday life, Reentry Success Center; call 800-816-4453 for details

OTHER

Civic Education Workshops 6:00pm-7:30pm, open to all, every third Wednesday of the month, Reentry Network at HealthRIGHT 360; call 925-732-1357 for details

Community Green Space Clean-Up 10:00am-2:00pm, open to all, every third Saturday of the month, in-person across the street from the Reentry Success Center

Monthly Workshops 6:00-8:00pm, open to community and members, last Wednesday of the month, Reentry Network at HealthRIGHT 360; call 925-732-1357 for details

Alpha Program New cohort begins May 5, Reentry Success Center; call 800-816-4453 for details

Mobile Resource App Housing assistance, employment, education, vocational training, legal services, recovery support, and family support services made accessible directly on a smartphone, through the following QR Code:



EXPLORATIONS

We want to promote your artwork, photography, and poetry. Please write us at one of the mailing addresses below. Be sure to include “Reentry Newsletter Explorations” in the subject line.

POETRY

“I, Too,” by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

GAMES

Fill in the blank squares, so each row, each column, and each block contain all digits 1 thru 9. Answers will be in the next issue.

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ANSWERS TO THE PREVIOUS ISSUE

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7	6	2	9	8	4	1	3	5
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4	5	6	7	3	9	8	2	1
9	1	3	8	2	5	7	4	6
8	2	7	4	6	1	5	9	3

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5119 Lone Tree Way
Antioch, CA 94531
healthRIGHT360.org



Contra Costa County
30 Muir Road
Martinez, CA 94553
co.contra-costa.ca.us

The following icons are included in the sections and next to specific events as a visual aid, for readers who prefer to scan our content. We hope you find them useful.



Housing



Education



Benefits



Family



Health



Legal



Financial



Employment