

## COMING HOME: A SERIES OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

In 2005, CSS formed the New York Reentry Roundtable - a monthly discussion group for community-based advocates and the formerly incarcerated - to address the obstacles faced by those who are released from prison. The Roundtable, which represents more than 50 organizations, provides a unique forum for information gathering, including best practices and lessons learned, as well as an opportunity to build alliances and develop outreach initiatives that lead to more effective strategies.

The Roundtable focuses on impacting systemic change at the state level through a legislative agenda that advocates for critical reform in education, employment, health care, family connections, child support, housing, and voting rights.

On May 22, 2007, more than 100 Roundtable participants traveled to Albany, New York, for Albany Advocacy Day. The agenda - formulated by the Roundtable's legislative committee - was presented to 23 key legislators to advocate for issues that eliminate obstacles confronting the formerly incarcerated. Assemblymen Jeffrion Aubrey, chair of the Committee on Corrections, and Assemblyman Darryl Towns, chair of the Legislative Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, and Asian Caucus, were but two of the legislators in attendance. There has been some success already. Governor Spitzer recently signed two bills on the Roundtable's legislative agenda.

- The Medicaid Suspension Bill reinstates Medicaid benefits to the incarcerated upon their release.
- The Family Connections Bill eliminates excessive fees associated with collect calls from inmates to their families.

To compliment the Roundtable, the CSS Legal Department brings affirmative litigation to vindicate the civil rights of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. CSS is co-counsel with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in *Hayden v. Spitzer*, which seeks to overturn the New York law disenfranchising people in prison and on parole. CSS is also co-counsel with the Center for Constitutional Rights in *Walton v. New York Department of Corrections*. *Walton* challenges the constitutionality of the state's monopoly telephone contract with MCI/Verizon, which has resulted in exorbitant charges to family members trying to maintain ties with loved ones in prison.

CSS also engages in individual advocacy and training to prevent discrimination against people with criminal records. CSS trains staff and clients of community-based organizations serving this population about the legal protections against employment discrimination and helps individuals obtain certificates to demonstrate their rehabilitation.

Additionally, CSS uses litigation in employment discrimination cases for individuals who are formerly incarcerated as a way to identify systemic barriers to reentry. In the policy area, we

advocate for workforce development projects that would directly benefit persons with prior convictions. Finally, CSS recruits senior volunteers to work as mentors to detainees at Riker's Island and for the children of incarcerated parents all as part of our Retired Senior Volunteer Program – the largest in the country and founded by CSS.

All of these efforts inform our understanding of the comprehensive services necessary to help people who have been involved with the criminal justice system.