Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site is an abandoned prison turned criminal justice museum located in Philadelphia. The building is considered one of the birthplaces of the American criminal justice system. It is ground zero for the way we use incarceration in the United States, where we have more of our population locked up than any other country in the world.

Eastern State was an active prison from 1829-1970 and was abandoned in 1971. Its founders believed that all people are good and that incarceration could reform people. That’s why they called it a penitentiary – a building designed to inspire penitence or true regret. Its original system was total isolation with labor and silence. So this is also the birthplace of solitary confinement, which approximately 80,000 prisoners live in today.

We became a museum in 1994. For most of our time as a museum we only talked about history. Starting around 2012, we began to talk more about contemporary issues in prisons. In 2014 we built The Big Graph, a larger than live infographic representing mass incarceration. Then in 2016 we opened the exhibit Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration, which makes the statement: Mass incarceration isn’t working.

Dialogue remains at the core of our practice as a museum, we ask questions and encourage visitors to think critically with us. Most Eastern State visitors report no personal connection to the criminal justice system, so this can be hard but rewarding work. Many visitors are operating off of pop culture and media stereotypes, and we work to disrupt that narrative.

Part of our journey to this social justice work began in 2013 when we started a new family program called Pets in Prison. We centered the program on animals in the history of the prison and in prisons today. We partnered with an organization called New Leash on Life USA to talk about their work saving shelter dogs and bringing them to be trained inside of prisons and jails. Their VP of Operations, Rob, called me to tell me he had a person in the program who needed a job. We hired him to work in Visitor Services. When he joined the staff, we were working on a program about food in prisons. He told us he made the best chi chi – comfort food prisoners make out of commissary items like ramen noodles, cheese curls and canned fish. He wanted to serve chi chi to visitors and talk to them about his experience in prison. We agreed and he had a positive experience working with visitors during that program.

He and I began prototyping longer visitor engagement and in the meantime, we applied for a grant from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience for a project that could fail and we wouldn’t have to give the money back. This was the project we applied for, hiring formerly
incarcerated folks to work as tour guides at Eastern State. This staff member and I gave tours of Eastern State’s dining halls, and for the first time, I saw visitors moved to take action on issues of justice.

We got the grant and began the project in earnest. We took one year to do research and assemble a group of advisors. Some of our advisors are currently incarcerated and they have been among the most important voices in shaping this project.

To date we’ve had three cohorts of formerly incarcerated guides who want to share their stories with the public within the context of the historic site. This quote demonstrated the profound impact the project has had on visitors:

“I left there knowing what my daughter just learned. Her little mind just broke through numerous barriers. But, even more barriers were broken because over the years I have tried to keep my daughter from learning that her own uncle, my baby brother, is in the middle of a ten year prison sentence. Last night she learned the truth of where her uncle has been and I owe it all to this woman and her openness, her honesty, her bravery and her kindness… I will forever remember Sharmaine.”

Many guides we’ve worked with report sharing their story can be therapeutic and they take pride in educating visitors about Eastern State. Folks also report that learning about the history of incarceration gives them a better context of the system that has impacted their lives. But this project is not without challenges – mitigating trauma and understanding that this job is not for everyone. For these reasons we have chosen not to market this project widely.

This project has impacted the organization internally as well. In 2017, we rewrote our mission statement and now have a formerly incarcerated person (and the PA Secretary of Corrections) on our board. A recent staff survey revealed that the team wants to see more formerly incarcerated folks in leadership positions, so we created a supervisor position in the education department, and recently had someone accept the position who is formerly incarcerated.

Our next project is making films with currently incarcerated folks. It’s called Hidden Lives Illuminated. As we continue to get proximate to the issue of incarceration and raise awareness of the impact of this civil rights crisis we hope our visitors will work to help change it.