

Providing Services in a Jail-Based American Job Center Issue Brief – Lessons from LEAP

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For inmates transitioning back to the community, pre-release employment and related services have the potential to foster post-release success. The LEAP grants established AJCs inside jail facilities and enrolled 3,110 participants between August 2015 and June 2017. The U.S. Department of Labor required that pre-release AJC activities for these participants “include all required [Workforce Investment Act] core and intensive services for participants,” including but not limited to comprehensive case management; job-seeking services; and assistance with education or training.¹ The jail-based AJCs also provided participants with a needs assessment and career planning services, which often included assessments not typically administered in a community-based AJC. This brief discusses how jail-based AJC staff assessed inmates’ needs and goals, prepared employment and service plans, and delivered services to address participants’ barriers before their transition to the community and the workforce.

Study background

This issue brief series explores lessons from the evaluation of the Employment and Training Administration’s Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release (LEAP) grants, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Chief Evaluation Office. LEAP pilots the creation of jail-based American Job Centers (AJCs) to support the successful reentry of participants and directly link them to community-based AJCs upon release. The evaluation looks at approaches to providing services before and after incarceration across 20 sites based on site visits, phone interviews, focus groups, and grantee performance reports.

Key Findings

- Jail-based AJC services addressed diverse but interrelated aspects of both job and life skills.
- Work readiness training, workforce information services, and career/life skills counseling were the most common pre-release services.
- Participants valued opportunities to gain marketable skills, such as Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) certification, and to obtain supportive services, such as assistance getting official identification.
- Staff felt that refresher activities just before release for participants who had completed pre-release programming with time left in jail could boost participants’ chances for post-release success.

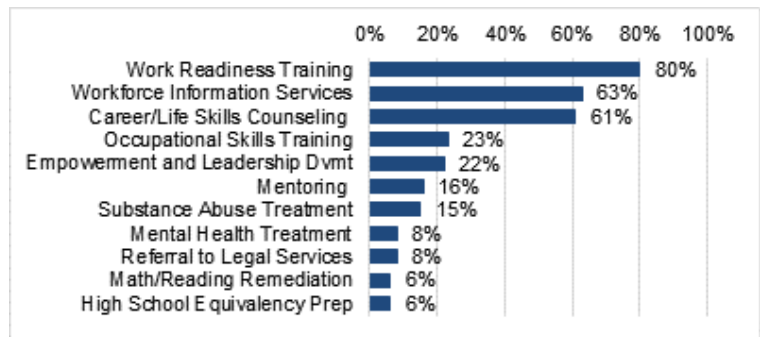
Prior to LEAP, the participating jails sometimes had no or very few services available to prepare returning citizens for gainful employment and other positive life outcomes. Even in facilities where inmates had access to job-related training or work experience, the jail-based AJCs added comprehensive services to address personal and structural barriers to success, as well as a support system aimed to create a continuity of services after participants were released.

Individual service planning

Sites used individual service plans to document participants’ backgrounds and goals—particularly career goals—as well as action steps, supportive service needs, personal goals, and educational and employment histories. Pre-release case managers typically developed individual plans during one-on-one time with participants, eventually sharing the plans with post-release staff such as job developers and employment specialists. However, in at least two sites, the plan was not created until just before release or when participants were in the community.

Sites used both traditional AJC assessments and corrections-specific assessments to help inform individual service plans. Traditional assessments included educational, career interest, job-readiness, and mental and physical health assessments for understanding participants' interests, skills, and needs. Corrections-specific assessments were usually a type of criminogenic risk assessment to determine participants' initial eligibility for jail-based AJC services. The most commonly mentioned assessments were the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions risk assessment, the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory, and the Test of Adult Basic Education. Generally, jail-based AJC staff administered the assessments unless correctional facility staff had already administered them to inmates. In two sites, results from an assessment served as the individual plan, such as one site's pre-work readiness assessment.

Figure 1. Share of participants who received selected services before release



Source: LEAP grantee performance reports as of June 30, 2017, except for one site that reported as of December 31, 2016. While reports include the percentage of participants that ever received each type of service, some grantees appear to have reported multiple instances of the same participant receiving services. As a result, statistics in this graph should be considered an upper bound.

Although all sites assessed participants, individual plans were not often used to customize pre-release services for each individual, as would normally occur in a community-based AJC. This was likely due to the limitations of scheduling and service offerings in the jail-based AJC. One site did use individual plans to determine whether to enroll participants in remediation or job readiness. More often, the jail-based staff used the plans to guide one-on-one counseling, and the assessments and plans were shared with staff serving participants after release (see companion brief, *Post-Release Engagement and Services*).

Job-preparation and training services

Job preparation was at the heart of jail-based AJC services. Grantees reported work-readiness activities as the most common pre-release service, with an estimated 80 percent of participants receiving them (Figure 1). Inside the jail, participants engaged in job-preparation services for anywhere from two weeks to three months, with six to eight weeks being the most commonly reported time frame.

Job-preparation services were usually delivered through group classes. Depending on the length of pre-release programming, job-related classes could occur daily or one or two times per week. Classes were often paired with access to a computer (to work on resumes, for example) and case management meetings to provide individualized support. Outside of these classes, participants in some facilities could access other non-LEAP-funded employment-related services, such as work release or computer literacy offered by the jail.

Some sites noted the need to adapt class content given variation in education levels, though there generally was little customization. In one site, if participants were very close to their release date, jail-based AJC staff reported foregoing classes and relying exclusively on individualized case management and job search assistance.

Job-preparation classes were broad in scope, covering both job and life skills. Job-related topics covered the full range typically covered in a community AJC, including job search, job applications, resumes and cover letters, and interviewing techniques. Classes also commonly covered workplace etiquette (such as dress code and co-worker interactions) and communication (including email and phone etiquette and, less commonly, maintaining an appropriate social media presence).

Sites also recognized the unique personal, financial, and emotional barriers to employment success that justice-

involved individuals face, and delivered instruction on strategies such as time management, organizational and decision-making skills, financial literacy, and anger management. The curriculum used most often with participants or as a resource for training staff (in 8 of 20 sites) was *Thinking for a Change*, an integrated, cognitive behavioral change program designed for justice-involved individuals. Two sites required participation in classes that addressed individual barriers before job-readiness classes. For example, one site required participants to complete a reentry action planning class that focused on addressing cognitive and emotional barriers before beginning the classes that concentrated solely on job readiness.

Opportunities for occupational training and certification were less common but strongly valued by participants when available. Nearly one-quarter of jail-based AJC participants received vocational or occupational skills training (Figure 1; 23 percent or 725 participants as of July 1, 2017). Training opportunities were sometimes available through the jail’s laundry and print shop, or through other jail vocational programs such as culinary arts, landscaping, and industrial mechanics. Staff in six sites indicated that opportunities to certify for OSHA, ServSafe Food Handler, hazardous material remediation, National Retail Federation, and National Career Readiness Assessment were available to participants in the jail-based AJC.² OSHA and other certifications were sometimes already offered through the jail, and LEAP sites took advantage of those existing resources. Participants particularly valued these trainings because they provided nationally recognized credentials that demonstrated to employer a commitment to learning, and boosted participants’ confidence while in jail. Staff at one site described certification as a prized feature of their pre-release services.

Nearly one-quarter (725) of jail-based AJC participants received vocational or occupational skills training

Some sites developed occupational skills training programs for their jail-based AJC participants when not available through the jail. One site successfully encouraged a community college to deliver training courses in customer service and OSHA with associated credentials in the jail. The college offered the courses in conjunction with soft-skills classes provided by jail-based AJC staff.

Another site encouraged a community college partner to design and offer a web-based, six-week industrial mechanics course with associated OSHA general safety and construction credentials at the jail using portable equipment.

Career and life skills counseling

Of all pre-release services, one-on-one counseling or case management offered the strongest opportunity for both forging personal connections and tailoring plans and services to individual goals, interests, education, and work history. Such counseling typically occurred during classes or during one-on-one meetings with participants. Grantee performance reports indicated that 61 percent of participants received some form of career or life skills counseling (Figure 1). See the companion brief, *Case Management Models for Providing Pre- and Post-Release Employment Services*, for more detail on the content, frequency, and structure of case management across sites.

Support and other services

In addition to workforce preparation and training services, participants could receive other supports from jail-based AJC staff or from existing service providers at the jail, including leadership development, mentoring, substance abuse and mental health treatment, legal services and referrals, parenting classes, social service and benefits enrollment, and assistance with obtaining official personal identification. Although helping obtain identification proved challenging for some sites, at least one site had particular success in helping participants acquire a valid ID in the form of an occupational limited driver’s license, which was less expensive than a traditional driver’s license and enabled participants to travel to interviews and jobs.

Potentially promising practices

Data from participants and staff suggest that certain practices hold promise for jail-based AJC programming:

Peer interaction may boost learning. Jail-based AJC staff indicated that integrating peer interaction, sharing,

and problem-solving into class time helped boost participants' engagement and learning. One site changed its pre-release curriculum to allow participants to move around and share with peers, and another valued enabling participants to share strategies with one another during class.

Celebrating success appears to benefit both participants and programs. Three sites provided participants with a certificate of pre-release programming completion and/or with a graduation ceremony. In one site, local media covered the event in which high-level city officials attended, participants received certificates, and a celebratory cake was part of the festivities. Staff viewed this ceremony as giving visibility to jail-based AJC programming and providing participants an opportunity to have their achievements recognized and voices heard.

Employers can play an important role in pre-release services. At two sites with a focus on employer engagement, employers visited the facility to conduct mock interview sessions with pre-release participants. Employers also helped pre-release participants in one of these sites with their resumes. Three additional sites worked with employers to secure work release opportunities for inmates. Of these three sites, one invited employers to speak with inmates at the jail about employment opportunities. Another site reported partnering with an employer to offer a culinary training program at the jail.

Refresher activities just before release may improve participants' chances for success. Because release dates are uncertain, some participants completed jail-based AJC services with time remaining before release. One site made refresher courses available for participants because the participants they perceived as most successful tended to complete classes within one week of release. Another site allowed participants with time remaining in jail to engage in post-graduation activities, such as practicing interviewing skills with a career specialist.

Conclusion

Pre-release employment services aim to help participants focus on goals and plans for self-improvement while also paving the way for positive employment and life outcomes after release. Sites provided a variety of services in the jail that you might typically find at a community-based AJC—including work readiness training, highly valued occupational skills training, and supportive services. However, jail-based AJC staff reported that addressing the unique barriers of justice-involved individuals through the content of workshops and counseling and providing a support system for participants to receive continuity of services upon release were important ingredients for motivating individuals to persist and succeed.

Endnotes

- 1 Per FOA-ETA-15-03, Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release Specialized American Job Centers (AJCs), U.S. Department of Labor, ETA.
- 2 Some certifications participants could complete in the jail-based AJC did not meet the definition of a recognized postsecondary credential as defined for the WIOA Credential Attainment performance indicator in ETA guidance.

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Other issue briefs in this series by Mathematica Policy Research and Social Policy Research Associates include:

- "An Opportunity for a Reset: The Experiences of Jail-Based American Job Center Customers Before and After Release" by Alix Gould-Werth
- "Case Management Models for Pre- and Post-Release Employment Services" by Ivette Gutierrez
- "Data Management for Pre- and Post-Release Workforce Services" by Jillian Stein
- "Engaging Participants in Workforce Services after Release from Jail" by Samina Sattar

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