

## Tips for Working with Jobseekers Newly Released from Prison

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**People who have been recently released from prison face a number of serious barriers to employment** such as long gaps in work history and the stigma of a criminal record. These barriers are frequently compounded by many other factors such as unstable housing, low literacy, lack of identification or other documents, substance abuse and mental health issues, and child support arrearages. Moreover, people on conditional release, such as parole or probation, typically must meet stringent conditions such as drug testing and reporting requirements that can interfere with work. Yet most people reentering communities from prison desperately need income as soon as they are released in order to secure housing and meet other basic needs. It is estimated that up to 60 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals are unemployed one year after their release.<sup>1</sup> With about 700,000 people released from America's prisons every year, mostly into economically stressed neighborhoods with high unemployment and few job opportunities, it is clear that more must be done to help equip them to find employment.

**The Transitional Jobs strategy has shown promise in helping people reentering from prison gain valuable work experience and stay out of prison by providing recently released prisoners with immediate paid income, work experience, work readiness training and supportive services.** Many Transitional Jobs programs specifically target their efforts toward people who are reentering their communities from prison, and still more TJ programs serve substantial numbers of people with criminal records. Here are some best practices and recommended strategies for providing TJ to people reentering from prison, based on the best available evidence and input from experienced providers.

### Issues Facing People Reentering Communities From Prison

- **Child support debt:** child support arrearages upon release from prison are often unmanageable; for example, a study in Colorado found an average of \$6,600 in child support debt among parents leaving prison.<sup>2</sup>
- **Housing needs:** a study in Chicago found  $\frac{3}{4}$  of people released from prison said that stable living arrangements were important for staying out of prison.<sup>3</sup> Also, people recently released from prison are more likely to recidivate if they are staying in a homeless shelter.<sup>4</sup>
- **Substance abuse issues:** Estimates suggest that nearly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of US prisoners meet the criteria for a substance abuse disorder. Former prisoners who struggle with substance abuse have a higher likelihood of recidivism.<sup>5</sup>
- **Mental health issues:** Over half of all jail and prison inmates have a mental health problem. Prisoners with mental health problems are more likely to have three or more convictions.<sup>6</sup>
- **Other needs:** More than half of reentering individuals need basics such as food, clothing, medical treatment and a place to live, as well as basic identification such as a birth certificate, Social Security card, and ID.<sup>7</sup>

## Key #1 Help Participants Comply with the Conditions of Parole

Much of the time, reincarceration is not the result of a person committing a new crime, but rather because of a technical violation of the conditions of parole or probation—things like missing appointments for drug testing or meetings with parole officers.<sup>8</sup> People on parole have a number of conditions that require strict compliance, and failure to comply often results in an individual returning to prison; for example, they are often subject to random drug testing in which they have very short notice to report for a test. TJ programs and worksites should consider participants' probation or parole requirements in order to comply with the terms of their release and avoid reincarceration.

- **Provide flexibility in work and training schedules so participants can comply with drug testing, reporting, and other requirements.** On-site TJ programs with control over scheduling can establish policies that assist participants with meeting the requirements of conditional release. For this to be effective all front-line supervisors should understand and adhere to these policies. If the Transitional Job is being provided off-site, it is necessary to communicate with employer partners the importance of allowing participant workers enough flexibility to make appointments with parole officers and comply with drug test requirements while still putting in a full day's work. It may be helpful to explicitly include these provisions in memoranda of understanding or worksite agreements with employer partners.
- **Build relationships with parole officers and other local criminal-justice system officials.** Experienced TJ providers serving the reentry population stress the importance of building relationships within the local criminal justice system, especially with parole and probation officials. The consequences of parole violations are often left to the discretion of parole officers, so it is especially important that they understand the goals of TJ and that they know the participant is working in TJ and active in the program. Also, parole officers are often a key part of recruiting and referring participants, so they need to know what makes a parolee a good candidate for TJ.

Good long-term relationships with the criminal justice field take time to form and mature, and TJ programs need to actively initiate and cultivate them in order to be effective. Much of the relationship building takes the form of informal communication and social activities; for example, some programs hold luncheons and invite their local parole officers, or take them out for coffee. More formal relationship building takes the form of orientation sessions to educate criminal justice personnel about the TJ strategy. It may also be useful to distribute materials to parole officers and other officials that introduce your program, outline its goals and objectives, and give an overview of the TJ strategy's core elements and benefits to people exiting prison.

## Key #2 Help Participants Manage Child Support Obligations

Often prisoners who are non-custodial parents accrue large amounts of child support arrearages during their incarceration. The burden of this debt, and the threat of wage garnishment that often consumes 50-65% of a reentering individual's paycheck<sup>9</sup>, can sometimes create disincentives to legitimate work and encourage participation in the underground economy or illicit means of making money. Although child support owed directly to custodial parents cannot usually be modified without the custodial parent's agreement, in some cases debt owed to the state as compensation for TANF payments can be modified by altering the court order (about 50% of all child-support debt is owed to the government<sup>10</sup>). Some TJ programs effectively advocate with the courts to set up manageable arrearages and realistic monthly payments that allow a reentering individual to meet child support obligations through working a legitimate, above-the-table job while meeting his own basic needs as well. Child support systems are complex and vary by state; if your program has the capacity and resources to do so, it is ideal to have dedicated child support advocates on your team to build partnerships with local child support enforcement agencies and help participants prepare and file petitions to modify court orders. For more information on helping participants manage child support issues, see Public/Private Ventures [Navigating the Child Support System](#).

### Key #3 Target Those Who Will Benefit Most from TJ

New evidence suggests that the reductions in recidivism associated with TJ are greatest among participants who have a high risk of reincarceration. Former prisoners who are younger and those with multiple prior arrests are at higher risk of recidivating. According to a recent analysis by MDRC of recidivism impacts on participants at the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), participants who had a high risk of recidivism as indicated by age and prior arrest record experienced greater impacts from TJ than lower-risk participants. This suggests that Transitional Jobs programs with limited resources should target their efforts toward the individuals with higher risk of recidivism, since they appear to benefit the most from TJ.<sup>11</sup>

### Key #4 Tailor Job Readiness and Job Search Assistance for People Who Were Formerly Incarcerated

People who have been recently released from prison have special needs with regard to searching for and preparing for work. For example, due to long periods of incarceration, participants may be unfamiliar with using the latest computer technology or searching for a job using the internet; job search assistance and training should include remedial technology training for tasks such as searching online job boards and filling out electronic applications. Formerly incarcerated participants also benefit from guidance on how to talk with potential employers about their criminal record and their incarceration—this should be a central part of job search assistance and interview preparation. Strategies to discuss include how and when to disclose a criminal record, and how to focus the conversation on rehabilitation and the positive steps the participant has taken since prison—such as participation in a Transitional Jobs program.

### Key #5 Provide a Mentor

Evidence suggests that adding a mentoring component to employment programs serving former prisoners can improve employment and recidivism outcomes. In the Ready4Work demonstration project conducted by the US Department of Labor and Public/Private Ventures, formerly incarcerated adults participating in employment programs who received mentoring were less likely to leave the program, more likely to get a job, more successful in retaining a job, and less likely to recidivate when compared with participants who were not mentored but otherwise got the same services.<sup>12</sup> Mentoring formerly incarcerated adults can happen one-on-one or in groups, and shows special promise when it begins prior to release from prison. For more information on mentoring, see Public/Private Ventures' page on [Ready4Work](#).

### Key #6 Build Effective Partnerships for a Continuum of Services

Employment, while critical, is usually far from the only need for someone exiting prison. Transitional employment alone may not be enough to help someone successfully reenter their community and avoid reincarceration; a spectrum of services is typically required. These needs include:

- Literacy and adult basic education
- Substance abuse counseling
- Mental health services
- Family reconciliation
- Stable housing
- Income supports and benefits

It is rare that a single organization can provide all these services, so partnering is critical. Many of these services are in short supply relative to demand, so some TJ programs maintain relationships with multiple referral partners in order to secure services for participants who need them. Often these referral partnerships are reciprocal, in that partners may refer their clients to the TJ program for employment services.

## Key #7 Help with Access to Documents and Records

Recently released participants are likely to need assistance with acquiring basic identification documents, such as state IDs, Social Security cards and birth certificates, which are necessary for getting a job. Some former prisoners may have had their driver's license revoked or suspended while incarcerated and could benefit from assistance with getting it reinstated. Additionally, participants may require assistance with accessing their rap sheets and correcting errors in their records. More information about accessing rap sheets and determining benefits eligibility can be found through the [National HIRE Network](#).

## Key #8 Provide Effective Job Placement and Employer Outreach for People with Criminal Records

Provide effective unsubsidized job placement and employer outreach for people with criminal records. Job developers and other professionals conducting outreach to employers need to educate employers regarding hiring people with criminal records. This includes being knowledgeable about and effectively communicating information on:

- [Federal bonding](#) for formerly incarcerated workers.
- Tax incentives for hiring formerly incarcerated people such as the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#).
- Sectors and occupations that are closed to people with criminal records—these vary by state
- Criminal record sealing and expungement options

For best practices in these and other elements of the TJ strategy, see the NTJN's other [program resources](#). To get more information, request technical assistance, or share your successful strategies for working with people with criminal records, please contact Chris Warland at [cwarland@heartlandalliance.org](mailto:cwarland@heartlandalliance.org).

### Endnotes

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The National Transitional Jobs Network is (NTJN) is a coalition of city, state, and federal policy makers; community workforce organizations; anti-poverty nonprofit service providers and advocacy organizations committed to advancing and strengthening Transitional Jobs programs around the country so that people with barriers to employment can gain success in the workplace and improve their economic lives and the economic conditions of their communities. The NTJN supports a constituency of over 4,000 active members and stakeholders across the country.

The NTJN is a project of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights.

