

## From the Facilitated Group Discussions: Employment

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I was only in trouble one time and [even] after so many years have passed . . . how do I overcome this and try to better myself when everywhere that I turn and I go, there's a roadblock. I can't get licensed in this. I can't go to school for this. So now it becomes what can I do versus what do I want to do?

We also asked participants to describe their experiences with employment. We asked about training programs that were available either before or after release. We invited participants to discuss the types of training and education that would help them prepare for a future career. We asked participants to describe employment challenges and, specifically, any forms of employment discrimination they experienced since their release. We inquired about the ways state licensing laws may be restricting eligibility and access to certain careers. Here we present a series of themes that emerged from the participants' collective responses. Each theme (a bulleted statement in boldface) is supported by direct quotes from the participants.

- **With or without employment assistance, those recently released from incarceration must navigate a variety of barriers, all of which interfere with the ability to find and maintain employment.** Of course, stable housing will make a difference in maintaining employment. A lack of reliable transportation also is a key obstacle to gainful employment. In addition, there may be health issues to manage or overcome if the individual is going to find and keep a job. For example, one participant reported sustaining chronic injuries while in prison, explaining, "I can't work, so I get disability." Without the ability to work, he solely relies on disability and cannot afford the basic tools, such as a computer, to find work. Another common barrier arises from demands by criminal justice and reentry agencies. One participant explained how overwhelming it was:

We had to do drug testing randomly three to four times a week. Then we had to do daily check-ins and then drop down after two months. But then within those two months, we had to do family support on Monday, [Intensive Outpatient Program] on Tuesday and Thursday, and then meet with another case manager on, for me, Friday. So, I was . . . kind of doing all these things in between, trying to find a part-time job and taking the bus.

### *Training Program Availability*

- **Participants had varied experiences with training programs before and after release, with many prerelease programs limited by the number of slots available and the length of the prison sentence.** Among those responding to the poll questions, 59% of the participants

said that there was a reentry program (including a department in the correctional facility) that assisted them prior to release. Participants listed the following specific training programs during incarceration that were particularly helpful: commercial driver's license training, computer skills, forklift, carpentry, welding, fiber optics, soldering, cosmetology, marketing, culinary arts, brick masonry, and auto mechanics. Others received prerelease training on job readiness, how to answer interview questions (including how to explain their incarceration), how to write résumés, and how to be a peer mentor or a peer-support specialist. In some instances, individuals could take college courses during incarceration. Yet, as with most people who find jobs in our society, personal networks are invaluable. A participant who did not face difficulty in securing employment explained, "My blessings just really came through my network of friends. They saw my work ethic, and I asked them if they knew anybody that they could recommend. That's how I got [my job]."

- **On the other hand, many participants indicated receiving no training at all, had difficulty accessing training, or experienced poorly administered training programs.** Among those responding to the poll questions, only half of the participants (51%) received assistance preparing for work prior to release. Several participants talked about how some of the prerelease training was unhelpful or outdated. As one participant explained, "We learned how to do a résumé 20 different times in 20 different groups and that's it. And it's all paper résumé. That's all we learned." Another participant explained, "There were no training programs or anything like that. It was, basically, we were told to go find a job." Another participant noted that "one person might not be able to get any type of services because they're only there for six months versus somebody that's there longer could get more." Another explained that some training was available only if you already had a high school diploma or some college education. One individual saw the tools being available but no implementation:

I guess during certain time[s] of day, they want us in one spot, saying that we work there and really you have all this technology, all this equipment that could have taught us something, coming out of here with a skill. And it's saying how they had us sitting in there not doing nothing but just having somewhere to be counted. I hope that they can fund these places so these young kids or young men can have somewhere they can go in and come out with something.

- **Participation in some training programs provided jobs during and after the period of incarceration.** After release, some participants could continue working with the same organization that provided their prerelease training. For example, one individual started working for a for-profit marketing company while incarcerated. She explained, "70% of their workforce works inside and 30% works outside. We were able to get a lot of really great job skills and training. I was very fortunate . . . I was able to work there for a few years." Other

participants received job training from nonprofit organizations or ministry programs that paid them during training, provided housing, provided counseling, and helped them find work or hired them afterward. In some cases, participants became peer-support specialists for the nonprofit organization that helped them reenter, letting them take on the valuable role of helping others in their reentry journey. It should be noted, however, that for many individuals, the level of support they experienced did not always involve housing and a job.

- **Participation in training programs did not always result in finding related work after release, and many felt misled in expecting a better outcome.** As one participant explained about their coding training:

I went to that coding program too, my last six months . . . And they kind of told us, they told everyone in the whole program, that they were going to be able to get a coding job when they got out. And only one person actually got one.

Another talked about missing information:

It was not told to me when I was incarcerated that the type of felony that you have would [limit] the type of field that you could get into. And I felt like that would've been really helpful information if that would've been related to us before taking the classes. Because with certain crimes, you can't work in certain areas.

Another participant explained that the job she performed in prison doesn't really exist outside:

I was trained in UNICOR [the federal prison industries]. UNICOR has different services in every prison . . . so I made labels . . . We have to do the artwork and everything, but it was just a pattern. The thing is, when we got out, we couldn't use it because all of that's done inside the prison.

### ***Employment Discrimination***

- **For some individuals, their history of criminal convictions was a barrier to securing employment.** Among those responding to the poll questions, 67% of the participants indicated having problems gaining employment because of their convictions. The impact of not being able to find gainful employment was best expressed by a participant who had previously recidivated:

I didn't have no murder, criminal sex conduct, or nothing like that, but a job counselor telling me basically that I won't get a job in the area that I was in, it was just like, okay, well what is the point of me even staying out if I can't even get a job and support myself and my kids? So, I just ended up going back to doing what I knew best. And then I ended up going back to prison shortly after.

For some, they received certifications that should have made them eligible for higher paying work, but they were denied employment in that field because of the nature of their felonies. As one participant shared:

During the time that I was incarcerated, I utilized my time with acquiring certain certificates and certifications. But the problem was, since I've been home, is that a lot of places don't hire ex-offenders. They tell you that. But I've been shot down three times as far as employment is concerned. And I presented my certifications.

- **For some individuals, a history of criminal convictions also was a barrier to keeping employment if they were initially hired or being able to perform the specific duties of their position in the long term.** Participants described going through multiple rounds of interviews before the denial because of their background check. One participant shared:

After I was offered the job, a few days prior to start date, they called me and told me that I actually couldn't work there because of my felony. They did not provide a legitimate business reason why I couldn't work there, [or] how my role related to the charges. They didn't provide me an opportunity to, I guess, provide evidence of rehabilitation.

Others were even hired, worked for the company, and then were later fired on the basis of having a felony. One participant described his experience:

I worked on one job where I was already working in service, where you went out and repaired the air condition units and heater units . . . And they called me in and let me go. Because they checked my background and they said, "I wasn't eligible," but I was already working, doing it. I guess, it's the insurance liabilities is what they told me.

One participant who had only been back in the community for less than a year had an experience with an employer that he was not prepared to deal with:

I was given this job at [company], but it was through a staffing agency as soon as I got out. I did the application . . . real quick . . . That made it easy for me just so I could go to work that day, . . . I ended up working a 12-hour shift that day, worked an 8-hour shift the next day, and then two days later worked another 8-hour shift. The point is when it came time for me to get paid, I never ended up even getting paid. They started sending me emails about how I was a felon and this and that . . .

Without support or knowledge of his rights, he decided not to pursue the money he was owed. Another participant working currently as a reentry service provider shared, "Corrections in my state just denied me access to the prison as a partner, based on the verbiage of my charge. So even now that I have employment, it still comes up."

- **Some individuals also reported unfair treatment by employers.** One participant reported as follows:

I got the job, the position that I wanted, but once I started, they stuck me with answering phones and doors. So, I thought that things were going to shift after 90 days . . . In the midst of that, the [person] who was in charge of the payroll, they kept jacking up my payroll. And I know that I'm the new kid on the block, but I am the only one with a criminal background. And I felt like there were some biases and some prejudice. So, I reported it and I left.

### ***Reflections on State Licensing Laws***

- **Even though it was possible to enter training programs, state licensing laws could mean that those with felony convictions could not work in the field, or bureaucratic requirements might interfere with their plans.** One participant explained two licenses she could not get because of her record:

So, I wanted to do real estate and then I found out that I'm not able to be licensed with real estate because the type of felony that I have. . . . Another dream of mine was to own a funeral home. . . . In [my] state . . . to own a funeral home, you have to go to embalming school and know how to embalm . . . And so I contacted them and lo and behold, I can't get licensed in that.

Another participant explained how she gave up on a career in nursing: "After coming out of incarceration, I just went back to get my degree, but I didn't pursue the nursing because I knew I would have a problem, pretty much." Another participant talked about a peer's experience: "When he came out, they told him he could not get the license to be an architect, and so he thought, 'Oh, wow. You tell me to get out of prison and do well, and then you block me like that.'" Another participant talked about the policies in their state, where they were unable to take advantage of their training in fiber optics and plumbing. "If our court costs are not paid, we can't get state certified. I'm going through that right now."

### **Recommendations**

In their descriptions about how reentry works or how to improve conditions so that reentry success is possible, individuals in the group discussions provided numerous recommendations related to employment.

#### ***During the Transition from Incarceration to the Community***

- The transition from a very controlled setting to an unstructured environment can be disorienting, stressful, and overwhelming. Ideally, everyone would have holistic support so that they have a way to support themselves.

## ***Living-Wage Employment***

- Employment programs need to be modernized, and correctional facilities should develop programming to engage individuals with technologies that they will have to use once they are living in the community, such as learning how to apply for jobs online and how to use email and social media for communications with potential employers.
- Demand is great for a variety of options so that each person can find the best fit in trying to secure meaningful living-wage employment. For some persons, a transitional jobs program will be valuable. For others, a vocational training program may be attractive if there are viable career opportunities in the community where they will be living. For still others, learning about entrepreneurship may be the best option.
- More needs to be done to ensure viable pathways to career opportunities for individuals while they are incarcerated. Training programs are important, but only if there are connections to existing jobs for when they return to the community. Direct-hire trainings, in which the organization providing the training also is doing the hiring, are popular where they are in place.
- There is not enough coaching available to prepare individuals for how to promote themselves to potential employers. This cannot begin early enough, to build a person's confidence for the following: How do you talk about where you've been with your employment? How do you talk about your felonies? Or how do you not talk about them? How do you get a job when you are a convicted felon?
- The kinds of supports that help a person navigate the barriers to securing and retaining a job in their chosen field should be expanded and enhanced, including case management, mentoring, and networking.
- There should be training on employment rights, for example, rights to challenge discriminatory hiring behavior, making sure they are paid for their work, and avoiding exploitation by employers.

## ***Other***

- To facilitate effective integration into the community, it is important to invest in transportation options that are accessible, affordable, and reliable.
- Finally, reentry should be about authentic second chances. There is a lot of interest in emerging policies in some jurisdictions that after a certain length of time, a person's criminal history would no longer be held against them. Knowing that they would have a clean slate after some period of time (even as long as 7–10 years) after their conviction gives these individuals hope, something to look forward to, and something to work toward.

## Implications for Stakeholders

Based on what we heard from participants, we offer potential implications of our takeaways for reentry providers, correctional administrators, and policymakers.

### *Reentry Providers*

Based on what we learned from these group discussions, there are several takeaways for reentry providers. Most importantly, comprehensive initiatives are vital. Those in reentry need support in multiple ways:

- A continuum of employment programs from transitional job programs to entrepreneurship programs.
- Equity of access for all gender, racial, and ethnic subgroups for all services.
- How to balance the needs for structure and accountability (by criminal legal agencies) with the support and flexibility necessary for an individual's success.

### *Correctional Administrators*

The group discussions also produced several takeaways for correctional administrators, including the following:

- Thoughtfully examining the training programs offered, with a particular eye to viable paths to living-wage employment once individuals are back in the community.
- Exploring how to expand the availability of vocational training and workforce preparation programs—in ways that a higher proportion of the incarcerated can participate in, including those who are close to release or not expecting long sentences.
- Collaborations among state and federal agencies appear to be the best way to ensure that everyone leaving incarceration has the necessary forms of identification they will need to find work, find housing, and participate fully in the economy (e.g., banking, establishing credit).

### *Policymakers*

The themes and recommendations from these conversations also point to ways that legislators and policymakers might improve the reentry experiences for those who were previously incarcerated. This includes further consideration of ban the box initiatives for employment. New legislation might provide ways to protect individuals from unfair exploitation practices related to employment. Finally, it makes sense to review state licensing laws to reconsider unnecessary restrictions or whose repeal would not have negative consequences.

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