Reentry Projects Grant Evaluation

SUMMARY

For two decades, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has invested in reentry services by committing substantial funding toward programs serving justice-involved individuals. Among its recent investments, DOL awarded over $243 million in Reentry Projects (RP) grant programs between 2017 and 2019 to improve participants' employment and justice outcomes. DOL prioritized awarding grants to programs that were evidence-informed, and many went to experienced providers. They were awarded across a broad range of intermediaries and non-profit community-based organizations (CBOs) serving a total of 17,361 participants across 34 states, Washington DC, and Puerto Rico. RP grants were 36-39 months long and were at different phases when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. RP grantees served a total of 9,098 adults (individuals over 24) and 8,263 young adults (individuals between ages 18 and 24) after their release from jail or prison.

In 2017, the Chief Evaluation Office (CEO), in collaboration with the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), funded contractor Mathematica, with Social Policy Research Associates, to conduct the *Reentry Project Grants Evaluation*. This implementation and impact evaluation aims to identify and evaluate promising practices used in reentry employment programs, which are comprehensive strategies to address the range of challenges formerly incarcerated adults and young adults who have been involved in the juvenile or adult justice system face in making a successful transition back to the community.

The implementation study has three main goals: (1) describe the structure of RP grant-funded services over two grant cycles (2018 and 2019), including how funding was used during these cycles, the ways in which grantees operated their programs, and the services grantees delivered; (2) highlight unique and potentially promising strategies to support justice-involved individuals, including strategies that grantees used during the COVID pandemic; and (3) inform the interpretation of impact study results by identifying structural differences across programs as well as variations in implementation. Grant documents, a grantee survey, virtual site visits, and administrative data from the Workforce Integrated Performance System (WIPS) informed the present implementation findings. An impact study is ongoing, and findings are expected in 2024.

This Department of Labor-funded study was a result of Section 169 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) as well as the annual process to determine the Department's research priorities for the upcoming year. It contributes to the labor evidence-base to inform employment and training programs and policies and addresses Department strategic goals and priorities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS
Final report: Implementing Employment Programs to Support Reentry: Lessons from the Reentry Project Grants

- **Connecting participants to education and training was identified as a key success.** Program staff and participants from 15 sites indicated that some of their programs' greatest successes were helping participants complete education and training services and to obtain degrees and certifications. Grantees offered a diverse set of education and training to participants, including work-based learning (WBL) opportunities.

- **Helping participants find and retain jobs was one of the greatest successes**. Staff members from four sites also described helping participants find jobs with the potential for advancement.

- **When working to place participants in employment, RP program staff provided intensive job search support, job placement, and retention assistance.** Job placement assistance was reported as an important employment-focused service. RP grantees stressed that their programs build up to employment, with all the previous steps—assessment, goal setting, and training—leading up to job placement. RP staff then helped support career exploration, connected participants directly to employers for application and interviews, and provided ongoing support following placement.

- **Work readiness services laid the foundation for grantees efforts to connect participants with employment.** Nearly all grantees that responded to the survey, and three-quarters of the visited RP sites, reported that they provided RP participants with work readiness services and a variety of other pre-employment services (either in house, through partners, or both) that were designed to help participants with the soft skills needed in employment contexts.

- **Case management was an integral component of program service delivery.** Ninety-seven percent of surveyed grantees had at least one case manager, with an average of 2.5 case managers per RP program. Some grantees implemented a standard model of service delivery across sites, while others developed their approach to case management based on local context and needs. Participants and program staff emphasized the importance of the case manager/participant relationship in motivating participant success.

- **Despite outreach efforts, RP grantees frequently reported encountering challenges enrolling and recruiting participants.** Most grantees (69 percent) indicated in the survey that recruiting participants was "somewhat" or "very" challenging. Recruitment proved to be especially challenging for young adult grantees, with 96 percent of young adult grantees identifying it as "somewhat" or "very challenging." RP grantees typically relied on referrals from criminal justice system partners to drive enrollment, and recruitment challenges were worsened

by the pandemic, as courts closed or operated virtually and as prisons and jails changed exit plans.

- **Despite the availability of education opportunities, RP grantees identified challenges providing or connecting participants to these opportunities.** Over half of surveyed grantees (54 percent) reported some challenges providing or giving access to high-quality education-related activities. The pandemic limited sites' abilities to offer education and training.

- **Common barriers to employment among individuals with justice involvement in communities served by the grant included perceived employer bias, skill gaps, and substance use.** Respondents described challenges placing individuals with violent offenses in employment. Employers also wanted to hire individuals with high school equivalency and/or certifications that documented their skills. Drug use was mentioned as another common barrier to employment.

- **Meeting participants' basic needs was a primary challenge.** When asked about the biggest participant-level challenges faced during implementation, respondents spoke about participants' unmet basic needs. They reported only limited access to stable housing, mental health- and trauma-based services, and transportation. Respondents from at least one site each also mentioned participants confronting a lack of food, a lack of work cloths, and limited financial literacy skills.

- **Staff members reported that growing and building their RP partnerships were the greatest implementation successes their programs experienced.** One theme raised by site visit interview respondents was the importance of identifying partners and individuals who understood participant needs, genuinely cared about them, and were a good fit for the training and career interests of participants.

- **RP staff also shared considerations for future programming.** RP grant staff suggested that reentry programs might benefit from: greater flexibility in how grant funds could be used to address participant needs (e.g., for mental health services, transportation, and housing); beginning services pre-release that might help improve successes for participants; thinking about longer-term visions for capacity building and partnership-building to support reentry program goals, along with longer grant periods of performance.

Issue brief: Advancing Employment Opportunities for Justice-Involved Individuals through Work-Based Learning: Experiences from Reentry Project Grantees

- **Most (23 of 27) sites included in the study offered access to paid and/or unpaid Work-based Learning (WBL) opportunities, providing those services directly through their RP programs or through referrals to partner organizations such as American Job Centers (AJC), unions, community colleges, etc.** Twenty-one RP sites reported offering access to paid WBL opportunities such as paid internships, on-the-job training (OJT), and apprenticeship programs, whereas 16 sites reported offering access to unpaid WBL opportunities, such as facility tours, job shadowing, unpaid internships, and pre-apprenticeship programs. Fourteen sites offered a combination of both paid and unpaid WBL to justice-involved individuals participating in their RP programs.
- **WBL offered justice-involved individuals opportunities to earn an income while engaging in training, building their workplace skills, and gaining real-world experience.** It also served as a conduit for employers to gain familiarity with and comfort in hiring justice-involved individuals. Even though participants and program staff preferred OJT opportunities, program staff from 14 sites that offered access to WBL reported that the pandemic limited their ability to offer both paid and unpaid WBL opportunities because opportunities "dried up" among businesses in their communities.
- **Future programs could benefit from providing additional supports, including supportive services, ongoing case management, and mentoring, to encourage participation and completion of WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals.** Just over half of RP sites that provided WBL opportunities (13 of 23) reported barriers, such as reliable transportation and mental and behavioral health problems, that affected justice-involved individuals' ability to participate and/or complete WBL activities.

Issue brief: Adult and Young Adult Reentry Project Grants: Differences in Service Offerings and Implementation Challenges

- **Young adult grants were more often awarded to intermediaries with multiple subgrantee locations compared to CBO grantees serving a single location.** Seventeen of 52 young adult grantees (33 percent) received intermediary grants compared to only 8 of 64 adult grantees (13 percent).
- **Analysis of grantee survey and qualitative data suggest that adult and young adult services differed in four key areas: (1) positive youth**

development components (2) legal services for child support and diversion, (3) educational services and requirements, and (4) program length.

- **Young adult grantees faced unique challenges.** Based on the survey, young adult grantees were significantly more likely than adult grantees to report challenges with recruiting participants (94 versus 52 percent), engaging and retaining those participants throughout the course of service delivery (96 versus 77 percent), and placing participants in employment (88 versus 64 percent).

Issue brief: Participants' Perspectives During Reentry Project Programs

- **RP participants stressed their motivation to improve their lives and identified service needs immediately following their release from incarceration that could help them achieve that goal.** The most-cited need was finding a job. Participants' reasons for needing to immediately enter employment included meeting a requirement of their probation, earning an income to meet their own basic needs (such as for housing or food) or those of their family, and/or because jobs were perceived as an important component of their readjustment.

- **RP participants reported that the biggest barrier that they faced when finding and retaining work was their background with the justice system.** Additional barriers to employment included: poor quality of available jobs, unreliable transportation, lack of self-motivation/ self-confidence,

- **The RP service that participants most commonly reported as useful for their future was training and certifications.** Participants also reported that training services helped meet their needs. Training services included GED preparation and occupational skills training.

Issue brief: Portrait of the Reentry Project Grantees

- **Community-based organization (CBO) grantees had experience with service delivery, including those provided to people with justice involvement.** All CBO grantees provided education and training programs before receiving RP grant funding, for about 22 years on average. Ninety-nine percent of CBO grantees also previously provided services to people with justice involvement.

- **Probation and parole officers were the largest source of participant referrals to RP programs.** Ninety-three percent of CBO grantees identified them as a source, with 52 percent ranking them as the largest referral source.

- **CBO grantees indicated they offered a wide variety of employment, education, legal, and supportive services.**

Issue brief: Connecting Reentry Project (RP) Participants to In-Demand Local Industries: Insights from RP Grant Programs

- **Grantee sites partnered with three top industries: (1) construction; (2) food and hospitality; and (3) transportation, logistics, and warehousing.** All 27 grantees interviewed during site visits partnered with at least one of these three top industries. When selecting their industries of focus, grantees considered numerous factors, such as locally in-demand industries, availability of training offerings, and participants' interest.

- **Grantees focused on training and certificates within each industry.** Construction-oriented grantees focused on Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certification training, pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships, National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) training, welding, carpentry, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) training. Food and hospitality-oriented grantees provided training opportunities included ServeSafe certification, on-the-job training, and unpaid internships. Transportation, logistics, and warehousing–oriented grantees focused on training for forklift operators and commercial drivers.

- **Grantees encountered both successes and challenges when partnering with employers.** Reported elements of successful partnerships included frequent communication, RP staff connecting good candidates to employers, and RP staff staying connected to participants and offering support after job placement. The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for RP grantees, especially in the spring 2020. Seven grantees found maintaining and building partnerships to be a greater challenge due to high staff turnover. Partnerships with training providers halted or ended when training centers closed during the pandemic.

Issue brief: Common Indicators of Recidivism Used in Program and Policy Evaluations

- **When selecting and using recidivism metrics, there are several key considerations.** When selecting recidivism metrics, it is important to determine the intended use of the data. Understanding the goals for collecting information can inform which metric is best to select. It is also important to determine what resources are available to collect the data, what data are available, and what

biases or limitations exist within that data. When using recidivism metrics, evaluators need to consider differences in law and policy across jurisdictions and time (for example, the same action may be considered a crime in one place or at one time, and not in another). Evaluators must also provide details on how and why data samples were selected. Specifying a follow-up period is particularly important when studying recidivism.

- **Common measures of criminal justice involvement used as recidivism indicators include rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, and technical violations.** Each of these measures has distinct strengths and challenges associated with their use.

Issue brief: Using Risk/Needs Assessments in Reentry Services

- **Eighty-four percent of the CBOs that participated in RP grants conducted participant risk/needs assessments, according to the grantee survey.** The most common tools were those based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity framework (53 percent), the Resource Allocation and Service Matching tool (42 percent), the Integrated Risk and Employment Strategy tool (38 percent), and the Dynamic Risk and Needs Assessment (33 percent). The majority of CBOs used more than one risk assessment.

- **Among the RP CBO grantees surveyed, 98 of those that used a risk/needs assessment reported using the tool in their participant screening process and 85 percent in the development of Individual Development Plans.**

- **There are strategies to mitigate potential issues and improve the usefulness of assessments.** When deciding whether and which risk/needs assessment to use, employment-focused reentry providers may consider strategies such as selecting tools with clear algorithms, conducting proper training and local validations independently or in partnership with an evaluator, and examine how screening and service provision relates to race, ethnicity, and gender.

SEE FULL STUDY

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