

# Building Career Pathways Systems within a Corrections Setting:

## Lessons Learned from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections

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With support from the U.S. Department of Education *Improving Reentry Education* grant, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) is spearheading an effort to build sustainable, employer-driven career pathways that prepare inmates with in-demand skills while incarcerated, and that connect those individuals to jobs, support services, and ongoing education upon release.

To date, DOC has laid the groundwork for Career Pathways “inside the walls,” while coordinating with the workforce development system outside the walls. This brief provides an overview of this work so far, as well as how other corrections systems and states can pursue a Career Pathways framework for inmates and reentrants.

### Why Career Pathways?

Individuals with a criminal record face significant barriers in finding and keeping gainful employment. A 2010 study by the Center for Economic Policy Research estimates that reentrants are employed at a rate that is 5 to 20 percent lower than the general population. Without the skills to successfully re-enter the labor market, reentrants struggle to interrupt the cycle of recidivism. In Pennsylvania, approximately 60 percent of released inmates are rearrested or reincarcerated within three years of release.

Career pathway models have shown promise in supporting individuals who face barriers to employment. Career pathways combine education and training, work experience, and basic workplace skills (“soft” skills) to prepare individuals for success in the workforce. In a corrections setting, a career pathway model can align and connect education, training, counseling, and work experience opportunities within the prison to support inmates in building skills and experience needed to get – and keep – a job once released.



Top photos courtesy of PADOC; bottom photo used with permission from the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO).

# Looking Inside the Walls: Internal Collaboration



Multiple units within the DOC play a role in preparing inmates to be successful in the workforce (see list on next page) but, traditionally, they tended to operate as independent units.

Limited coordination and collaboration across units meant that workforce training and services were not delivered in a clear sequence with opportunities to build from one program to another. As a result, even the most successful inmates who participated in multiple training and work experience opportunities left prison with a collection of certifications and competencies but little focus on specific careers.

Without a clear set of goals and an understanding of how to apply those certifications in the labor market, reentrants fail to leverage their skills and experiences gained in prison to get and keep a job on the outside.

By making career pathways—or the sequence of education, training, and work experience within the DOC—clearer and more visible, the DOC is increasing opportunities for inmates to ‘chart their own course’ and build the skills and experience needed to succeed in jobs and careers (see diagram, left).



**Key Takeaway:** Involve front-line prison staff from the beginning. Staff provide valuable insights on what is working, what can be improved, and what changes would be the most valuable.

At the institutional level, the DOC focused on three primary strategies for improving information-sharing and program coordination:

- **Implementing a new “Pathway to Success” course as an introduction to all inmates pursuing vocational training within the DOC.** This course introduces inmates to in-demand careers by providing recent labor market information and guides them through the process of identifying career goals and developing a career plan for developing the skills and credentials needed to meet those goals. This includes hearing from “guest” instructors that teach various vocational training programs offered within the prison, as well as guest speakers from Parole and the workforce system.

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# Looking Inside the Walls: Internal Collaboration

## Units within the DOC and Probation & Parole that Prepare Inmates for Success in the Workforce

- **Bureau of Correction Education:** Provides vocational training and nationally recognized certifications. Certifications are awarded in a number of industries, including auto tech, barbershop and cosmetology, business education, carpentry, construction trades, custodial maintenance, electrical, HVAC, warehousing, and welding.
- **Inmate Employment:** Provides employment for inmates as part of the day-to-day operations of correctional institutions. Examples of occupations include Janitor, Library Clerk, Chapel Clerk, and Kitchen Assistant. Inmates request to have their names added to the waiting list and fill out a job placement questionnaire that asks about prior education, vocational training and special skills, and areas of job interest. The Correctional Employment Vocational Coordinator then works with work supervisors to determine inmate placement.
- **Correctional Industries:** Employs inmates in a range of enterprises, including furniture manufacturing, industrial laundry, and warehousing facilities, in correctional institutions and provides on-the-job training and certifications.
- **Reentry Service Offices:** A centralized office within a State Correctional Institution (SCI) that provides reentry services to inmates. RSOs offer computer access and may offer workshops related to successful reentry.
- **Transitional Housing Units:** Housing units specifically for inmates nearing their minimum date. Provides computer access and reentry workshops.
- **Veterans Services Units:** House veteran inmates at 36 months prior to their minimum date and provide reentry workshops that emphasize job search skills.
- **Bureau of Community Corrections:** Operates Community Corrections Centers (“halfway houses”) for reentrants and may provide individualized, structured support, including workforce development services.
- **Board of Probation and Parole:** Refers reentrants to workforce services and subsidized employment opportunities.

### (DOC Strategies, cont.)

- **Creating a ‘career plan’ that follows inmates through their incarceration and helps document and track progress toward career goals.** Starting with the Pathway to Success course, inmates create a career plan that includes career interest assessment results as well as career goals that can be shared with other DOC staff, including inmate employment coordinators.
- **Updating inmate resumes to reflect relevant education, training and work experience while incarcerated before reentry.** Reentry staff focus on preparing inmates with job search skills, including updated resumes, to begin searching for jobs after release. This includes documenting the full range of education, training, and work experience gained while incarcerated to help inmates present a clear and focused track record that will maximize their chances of success in the job market.

# Outside the Walls: Workforce System Collaboration

## What do Employers Need?

Determining which careers are both realistic for reentrants and in-demand by employers is a crucial step in building a Career Pathways model that starts inside a correctional system. Pennsylvania's DOC engaged a consulting firm that specializes in workforce development systems to facilitate and assist DOC staff with this work.

DOC looked at employer demand in three targeted industries: construction, manufacturing, and transportation and logistics. These industries represented the top industries in Pennsylvania that provide career pathways for individuals with criminal backgrounds, both due to limited restrictions on hiring as well as opportunities for advancement and family-sustaining wages.

A statewide and national scan was conducted of in-demand skills and certifications based on industry associations and individual interviews with employers in each of the three industries.

This scan resulted in two key pieces of information: first, most employers in each of the three targeted industries are more interested in general 'soft skills' over specific technical training or certifications. Second, employers are looking for individuals with an accurate understanding of careers in their industry.



**Key Takeaway:** Specific certifications and credentials are generally much less important to employers than general work-readiness and soft skills for entry-level employees.

By preparing inmates with clear and accurate expectations of work environments, earning potential, and skill requirements of various career fields, the DOC can help address the mismatch between jobseekers' expectations and employers' needs. The DOC responded to this feedback with the creation of the Pathway to Success course (see page 2).

## **Bridging the Prison/Employer Divide: Partnering with the State Workforce Development System**

At the state level, the DOC developed a strategic partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry (L&I), which oversees Pennsylvania's PA CareerLink® Centers, which are the primary access points for workforce services under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA).

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# Outside the Walls: Workforce System Collaboration

## Utilizing the Workforce System to Serve Reentrants

### WIOA, or The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The law that guides federally funded workforce development activity. States receive formula funding to carry-out the provisions of WIOA, including to train unemployed and underemployed individuals, provide adult education and literacy activities, and operate job centers.

Under WIOA, “ex-offenders” are specifically identified as individuals with a barrier to employment, which prioritizes them to receive services.

### Workforce Development Boards (WDBs)

Regional entities in each state that implement WIOA and offer residents in their area access to workforce development programs. Each Workforce Development Board must have their own plan that guides how they will best serve those in need of workforce services in their area. Many plans include reentrants specifically.

WDBs appoint members to serve on their Board and guide their activity. At least 50% of these members must be employers. As such, WDBs are a good first point of contact to learn about employment in a specific regional area, including “reentrant friendly” employers and industries.

### American Job Centers, also known as One Stop Career Centers

These centers bring together government and community partners in one place to provide services to job-seekers. In Pennsylvania, these centers are branded as PA CareerLink® Centers.

In many PA CareerLinks®, job seekers can use computers to enter their resume information and search for a job. There may be one-on-one assistance from a staff person to assist with a job search or to find job training. Reentrants should let staff know that they are a reentrant, and should also let staff know if they are a veteran, as they may be eligible for additional services.

### Labor Market Information

Includes information such as industries that are growing, in-demand occupations, average wages and salaries, and the unemployment rate. This information is often available at a county level.

When presented properly, this information can be very valuable to reentrants to assist them in understanding what jobs exist in their area of reentry, and also what they can realistically expect to be paid should they be hired.



**Key Takeaway:** Allow prison staff to visit one stop career centers; invite career center staff into the prison. This creates a relationship and lets each partner demonstrate the services they provide to reentrants.

# Outside the Walls: Workforce System Collaboration

## (Partnering with the State Workforce Development System, cont.)

At the state level, the DOC and L&I have worked together to:

**Build knowledge and capacity in community-based staff.** Leveraging the WIOA priority on serving individuals with barriers to employment (including reentrants), DOC is partnering with state Parole and L&I to deliver Reentry Employment and Offender Workforce Development trainings to PA CareerLink® staff across the Commonwealth. Having PA CareerLink® staff trained to better serve the reentrant population reinforces successful outcomes for job placement and retention.

**Expand in-reach services from PA CareerLink® across Pennsylvania.** L&I has encouraged all PA CareerLink® staff to connect with their nearest state prison to offer services inside the prison ranging from job fairs to resume and job development services. In addition, L&I assembled a list of key points of contact in every PA CareerLink® across the state.

**Enroll inmates in JobGateway—the PA CareerLink® system’s database—before release.** In order to facilitate information exchange between DOC and the workforce system, DOC and L&I are developing a way for inmates to enroll in the online JobGateway system before they are released. This allows inmates to create a profile and enter their resume before entering their first PA CareerLink® office.

**Share labor market information.** Since hiring trends and the labor market change regularly, the DOC entered into an agreement with L&I to provide annual reports on in-demand careers to all SCIs. This information is used in the introductory Pathway to Success course as well as by vocational instructors to ensure they have an up-to-date understanding of labor market trends, in-demand jobs, and earning potential.



**Key Takeaway:** Start with Labor Market Data. Understanding the jobs and skills that are in demand provides the starting point to determine the changes that need to be made to programs in the correctional setting.

**Share data that helps track key indicators about training and employment outcomes of inmates and reentrants.** The data sharing agreement between L&I and DOC allows DOC to understand the job outcomes for reentrants, including whether or not they are employed after reentry, how long they retain employment, and the industry in which they’re working. Coupled with DOC’s data on inmates who completed vocational courses, DOC can now determine which vocational programs are leading reentrants to jobs.

## Next Steps



**Key Takeaway:** Build changes into policy. It's important that prison staff view career pathways as "just part of what we do," rather than a stand-alone, short-lived program.

While DOC has successfully developed a career pathways framework inside its correctional institutions, the work is far from complete. The next phase of this work will rely intensively on outside partners to continue what has started inside the walls.

**Continue partnering with Parole.** Once an individual leaves prison, the prison staff can no longer influence outcomes. Parole agents play a vital role on the outside. Providing a good "hand-off" to Parole agents, including information on career plans and credentials earned, will increase the likelihood of reentrants continuing on their chosen career pathway.

**Building community partnerships.** The workforce development system is just one of many partners providing services to reentrants. Reentrants need extensive support, including housing, substance abuse treatment, medical care, family reunification and childcare, transportation, etc... The DOC should continue to create relationships with organizations that support reentrants. Reentrants cannot focus on employment if their basic needs are not met.

**Working with education providers.** Traditional career pathway models include a clear sequence of further education and training to progress in a career. The DOC should pursue articulation agreements with education providers, such as Community Colleges, that have experience serving low-income and adult populations.

### More Information on Pennsylvania DOC's Career Pathways Program

A 48-page Career Pathways Toolkit that details DOC's work and includes staff training aids is available. For more information, please contact Dorenda Hamarlund, [dhamarlund@pa.gov](mailto:dhamarlund@pa.gov), or Kelly Martini, [kemartini@pa.gov](mailto:kemartini@pa.gov).

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