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**Recognize and address the obstacles that make it difficult for an ex-offender to obtain and retain viable employment while under community supervision.**

Individuals released from prison or jail are likely to need support to maintain employment, or to find jobs if they have not done so prior to their release to the community. Preceding policy statements, including Policy Statement 15 (Education and Vocational Training), Policy Statement 16 (Work Experience), Policy Statement 21 (Creation of Employment Opportunities), and Policy Statement 22 (Workforce Development and the Transition Plan), have provided a blueprint for preparing people during their incarceration for employment and for stimulating job creation in the community. Community corrections officials can complement these strategies by assisting individuals after release with logistical barriers to employment, trying to accommodate the job requirements of these individuals in implementing the supervision strategy, and referring releasees to community-based organizations that provide more extensive employment services.

## research highlights

**People with criminal convictions face substantial legal and logistical barriers in obtaining a job.**

Barriers to work faced by re-entering individuals include the stigma of a criminal record, spotty work histories, low education and skill levels, and physical and mental health problems.<sup>48</sup> Many individuals also lack necessary identification documents, access to transportation, and childcare for dependent children. To a lesser extent, many recently released prisoners have unstable housing situations that may prevent access to employment. Policies, such as restrictions on the type of employment an individual can obtain, and practices of supervision agencies may pose additional obstacles to obtaining and retaining employment for those under supervision. Predetermined reporting requirements and supervision fees may be particularly burdensome.

**Most individuals are released from prison or jail without a job or transitional work placement.**

Estimates of the share of prisoners that has a job secured before release range from 14 percent to just under 50 percent.<sup>49,50</sup> Most of the remainder needs to secure employment; job placement organizations can play a key role in this area. Transitional employment can provide released prisoners with access to income, ready-made structure, and additional supervision to assist in the transition from custody to freedom. For instance, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) in New York City places people in temporary employment while they are undergoing training and waiting for a permanent placement, which both aids them in their transition to working and reinforces their independence and sense of self-worth. Even after an individual is placed in his or her permanent job, a counselor continues to contact the person to provide support and guidance during the first year of employment; after the initial year, CEO remains a source of guidance and training for their graduates.<sup>51</sup>

**Even when former prisoners do secure employment, job retention over the medium to long term is a challenge.**

Conditions that pose obstacles to re-entering individuals in obtaining jobs also contribute to the difficulty they face in maintaining employment. According to a National Institute of Corrections study which incorporated findings from several focus groups and a survey of 512 practitioners, the obstacles to job retention cited most often were substance abuse (cited by 68 percent of respondents), limited transportation (63 percent), limited knowledge of workplace culture (34 percent), and limited support meaningful to the offender (29 percent).<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, studies from even the best programs, such as the Safer Foundation and the Center for Employment Opportunities (discussed in Policy Statement 21), indicate that although the majority of individuals secures employment upon release, job retention is a challenge. For example, job retention for CEO participants in 1996 at one month of employment was 75 percent.<sup>53,54</sup> This proportion dropped to 60 percent after

48 Harry J. Holzer, Steven Raphael, and Michael A. Stoll, "Employment Barriers Facing Ex-Offenders" (paper presented at The Urban Institute's Reentry Roundtable, Washington, DC, May 19–20, 2003).

49 Christy Visser, Nancy G. La Vigne, and Jill Farrell, *Illinois Prisoners' Reflections on Returning Home* (Washington DC: The Urban Institute, 2003).

50 Steven Steurer, Linda Smith, and Alice Tracy, *Three-State Recidivism Study* (Lanham, MD:

Correctional Educational Association, 2001).

51 Available online at [www.ceoworks.org/ceo\\_model.htm](http://www.ceoworks.org/ceo_model.htm).

52 Melissa Houston, *Offender Job Retention*, National Institute of Corrections, Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement (Washington DC: 2001).

53 Peter Finn, *Successful Job Placement for Ex-Offenders: The Center for Employment Opportunities*, National Institute of Justice, Program

Focus (Washington, DC: 1998), NCJ 168102; Peter Finn, *Chicago's Safer Foundation: A Road Back for Ex-Offenders*, US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, (Washington, DC: 1998) NCJ 167575. Available online at [www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/167575.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/167575.pdf).

54 Peter Finn, *Successful Job Placement for Ex-Offenders: The Center for Employment Opportunities*, National Institute of Justice, Program Focus (Washington, DC: 1998), NCJ 168102.

three months and to 38 percent after six months.<sup>55</sup> In 1996, the retention rate for Safer Foundation participants who were still employed after the initial 30 days was 81 percent after two months, 75 percent after three months, and 57 percent after nine months.<sup>56</sup> Two-thirds of 18- to 21-year-old youth who completed Safer's basic employment education course were placed in school, training, or employment within thirty days; almost sixty percent were still employed, in school, or in training at 180 days.<sup>57</sup>

## recommendations

### **A | Update community corrections policy so that it encourages, rather than discourages, employing people on probation or parole.**

Nearly all people on parole and probation are required to seek and maintain employment as a condition of their release. As noted previously, community supervision officers can assist their supervisees in complying with this responsibility by ensuring that any restitution or other financial obligations are not too overwhelming and are tied to the supervisee's earnings. (See Policy Statement 17, *Advising the Releasing Authority*, for more on the importance of setting realistic terms and conditions of release.) There are, however, other steps that community supervision officers can and should take to encourage and support the employment efforts of the people whom they are supervising.

Parole and probation officers should be trained to be sensitive to workplace issues and consider the impact of their interactions with someone under their supervision while that person is at work. Employers should never feel that their productivity would be reduced because they have to constantly accommodate the needs of the community corrections officer and the person he or she is supervising. Further, community corrections officers visiting a probationer or parolee's workplace should be considerate about wearing a weapon in obvious sight, singling out the individual unnecessarily, or searching the person's possessions conspicuously. Such actions would needlessly compromise the person's ability to succeed in the workplace and his or her standing with his or her employer.

Community supervision officers can also partner with the employers directly to ensure that community supervision work does not unduly interfere with probationers' and parolees' continued employment. In

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Finn, *Chicago's Safer Foundation: A Road Back for Ex-Offenders*, US Department of Justice, National Institute

of Justice, (Washington, DC: 1998) NCJ 167575. Available online at [www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/167575.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/167575.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

jurisdictions where certain employers hire many ex-offenders, such communication between corrections and the community can be particularly useful.

**EXAMPLE: Clark Construction and Court Supervision and Offender Services Agency (DC)**

The DC community supervision office has worked with Clark Construction to create realistic and functional operating procedures for people under community supervision working for Clark on construction jobs. For example, if Clark is working overtime doing a concrete pour, people under community supervision may not be able to leave on time to meet parole or probation requirements, such as returning to a halfway house by curfew. An understanding between the two organizations means that these Clark employees may complete their work without risking a violation.

**EXAMPLE: Greater New Orleans, Inc. and the Louisiana Department of Corrections**

The Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC) works closely with Greater New Orleans, Inc. (formerly MetroVision Economic Development Partnership), an arm of the New Orleans Regional Chamber of Commerce, to identify barriers to the employment of individuals released from prison and to find ways to overcome these barriers. The DOC employs job development specialists to cultivate relationships with employers who may be open to hiring people with criminal records. Once an individual is employed, his or her parole officer will check in with the employer once a week for the first 30 days to ensure that the employee is meeting expectations.

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**B | Assist, to the extent appropriate, people with criminal records seeking to surmount legal and logistical obstacles to employment.**

A wide range of legal and logistical obstacles affect the ability of a person released from prison or jail to maintain successful employment. (See Policy Statement 21, Creation of Employment Opportunities, for an extensive discussion of legal and policy barriers to employment for offenders.) Community-based services, such as legal aid offices and employment services organizations, are available to help releasees identify and remove logistical and legal barriers to employment. Many offenders are unaware that such resources exist, however, and the resources that do exist are limited. Accordingly, probation and parole officers can help their supervisees surmount these obstacles to employment both by referring supervisees to outside agencies and by providing them with informal counseling.

Community corrections officers can refer probationers and parolees who are seeking to have a conviction removed from their records to legal services providers, including state bar associations. In some jurisdictions, people with criminal convictions are eligible for pardons three to five years after release. Although pardons may be relatively easy to obtain in some areas, few people are aware of the process or seek to apply for them. Other jurisdictions provide opportunities to have certain kinds of convictions set aside or expunged from a record. The hearing process may be lengthy (possibly including a waiting period of a few years) and detailed, and the requirements vary by state. A chance to wipe the record clean, however, could have powerful implications for a probationer or parolee seeking

to find and maintain employment. Oregon law (Or. Rev. Stat. § 137.225) provides a statutory right to apply to have a criminal record expunged or sealed. Once a motion to set aside, expunge, or seal a conviction is granted, an individual has the legal right to answer “no” to any questions (including those on a job application) that inquire about a history of arrests or criminal convictions.

Given the relative rarity that a conviction is set aside or pardoned, the network of community-based One-Stop Career Centers may be the best solution to the logistical impediments to employment for releasees. (See Policy Statement 22, Workforce Development and the Transition Plan for more information on One-Stops.) One-Stops are already designed to provide universal access to a wide range of services for job seekers and employers (who benefit from gaining skilled, supported workers, especially as the labor market tightens). Jurisdictions should continue to push at the state and federal level for full integration of services and resources through One-Stop Career Centers, centralizing job development services.

Aside from One-Stop centers, many community service organizations already provide general employment support and training for people released from prison or jail, regardless of whether they are still under community supervision. If someone in prison has not been connected to community-based employment support, community corrections officers should facilitate linkages between their supervisees and these organizations. Ideally, these employment services organizations will continue to work with people even after their term of community supervision is complete. Unfortunately, such programs do not have the capacity to meet the needs of all the unemployed workers who could benefit from their services. Accordingly, such programs should be expanded so that all workers, including people with criminal records, can have access to their services.

**EXAMPLE: Delancey Street Foundation (CA)**

The Delancey Street Foundation acts as a residential education center that assists individuals released from incarceration, former substance abusers, and people who were formerly homeless to acquire basic and employment-oriented skills and to achieve economic independence. The residents of Delancey Street live and work together, pooling all of their income earned through a variety of business schools. Using the principle of “each one, teach one,” Delancey Street has developed over 20 enterprises run completely by formerly unskilled people.

**EXAMPLE: Developing Justice in South Brooklyn, Fifth Avenue Committee (NY)**

Parole officers are one source of referrals to this program, which provides one-on-one assistance to individuals returning to South Brooklyn after at least one year in prison. Program counselors, who themselves are former prisoners, assist each participant in achieving their individual reintegration goals by connecting them to Fifth Avenue Committee employment and housing services, support groups and counseling, and by serving as a broker for other needed services like substance abuse treatment.

In addition to referring probationers or parolees to such community services, community corrections officers themselves can play a key role assisting releasees who are struggling with logistical hurdles that make it difficult for them to obtain and retain employment. For some less

specialized areas of need, community corrections officers can pick up where transitional planners have left off, offering basic logistical aid to the individuals on their caseloads. For instance, transportation can be a major hurdle for a person returning to a community, especially after many years of incarceration. Accordingly, the supervision officer should ensure that the probationer or parolee has an understanding of how he or she will arrange transportation to arrive promptly at his or her workplace. Community supervision agents should also provide information on the community's system of public transportation, including bus routes, trains, and subways. Such basic information can greatly enhance a person's ability to integrate back into the community.

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**c | Promote supportive transitional employment programs through community corrections.**

For people released from prison or jail who are unable to secure a job immediately upon release, working in a transitional job can be the next best thing to permanent employment. Transitional jobs typically share these characteristics:

- Relatively low-skill, entry level positions for individuals without substantial experience in the labor force
- Frequent payment of wages, usually daily, so that employees have the money to support themselves immediately postrelease
- Close supervision, mentoring, coaching, and case management for the individual during the period of holding a transitional job
- Wage subsidies to the employer for a set period of time—often three months as a probationary period—that help to cover training and retention costs
- Assistance from the community corrections program staff in helping the employer apply for tax credits
- Training from community corrections on employability and soft skills.

Community corrections administrators should seek to establish transitional job programs in their communities.

**EXAMPLE: Blue Jacket, Allen County Community Corrections (IN)**

Allen County Community Corrections has established "Blue Jacket," a nonprofit social enterprise to train, place, and support recently released individuals through transitional employment. Built around 30 hours of intensive job readiness training known as an "Employment Academy," Blue Jacket operates in a manner similar to the temporary service agency, but is able to provide more intensive follow-up and mentoring services in its role as a community corrections provider.

Transitional jobs initiatives are most effective when they keep the individual focused on securing employment, provide clear guidelines and practices for achieving success, and work closely with employers to offer support and financial benefits for their willingness to hire an ex-offender. With these goals in mind, community-based employment services organizations should be engaged to combine transitional work, training, and support effectively.

**EXAMPLE: Wildcat Service Corporation (NY)**

Wildcat Service Corporation works in partnership with the state department of corrections to provide vocational and “work habits” training for chronically unemployed individuals, including those individuals participating in day reporting programs. Wildcat enrolls offenders in full-time subsidized and “supported” work for about six months and provides job placement for unsubsidized full-time employment, counseling, and referrals to other human and social support services.