

Expediting the Launch of Service Provision

Issue Brief—Early Lessons from LEAP

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November 2016

Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release (LEAP) grantees were permitted to spend the first 9 months of the 24-month project period on planning and start-up activities before enrolling participants into their jail-based American Job Centers (AJCs). This brief uses data from site visits to 8 of the 20 Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release (LEAP) sites to explore the factors that enabled them to complete these activities more quickly than the time allotted (see Figure 1).¹ While an expedited launch does not necessarily imply that a grantee will have stronger overall performance, an analysis of grantees that began enrollment quickly provides insight into the conditions present and the strategies used to achieve faster, and perhaps more efficient, implementation.

Study background

This issue brief series explores lessons from the planning phase of the Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release (LEAP) grants. Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, LEAP pilots the creation of jail-based American Job Centers (AJCs) to support the successful reentry of participants and directly link them to community-based AJCs upon release.

Key Findings

- Jail-based AJCs that began serving participants early on in the planning period were able to leverage existing staff, curricula, knowledge, and partner experience to roll out services quickly.
- Using the proposal and early planning phases of the grant to solidify the service structure and key relationships helped to expedite the launch of jail-based AJC services.

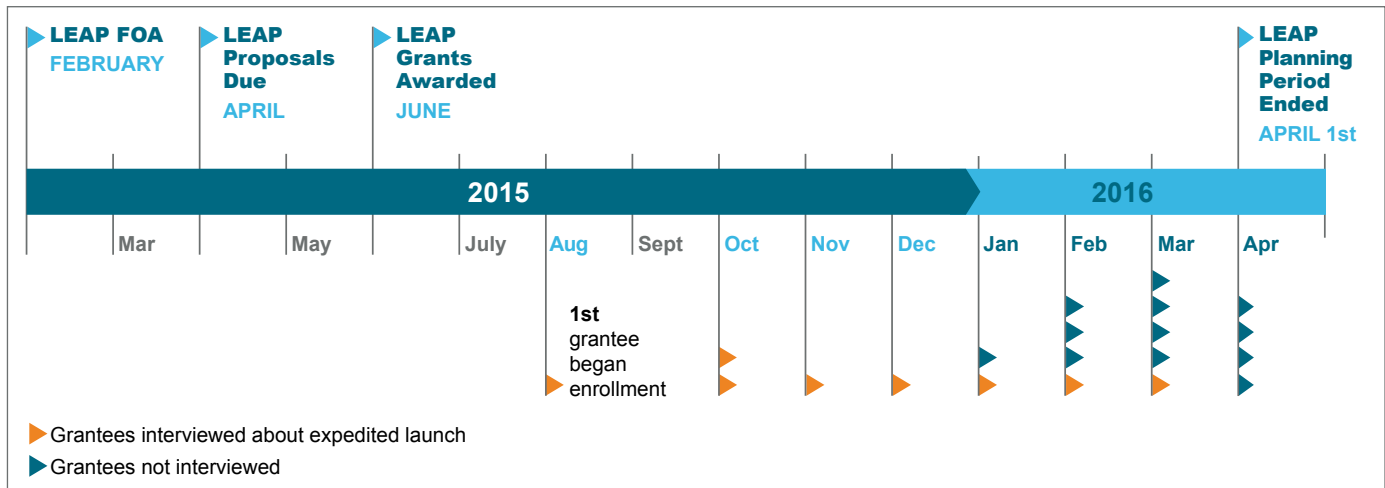
Drawing on Partnerships and Prior Relevant Programs

Jail-based AJCs that started serving participants before the end of the nine-month planning period reported that existing partnerships between workforce development agencies, jails, and criminal justice organizations were an important factor in their expedited launch. Three grantees had managed employment services programs in their jails or operated jail-based AJCs for over five years, and had already completed many key start-up activities. Two of the three were among the earliest to enroll participants, in August and October 2015. For these grantees, LEAP represented an opportunity to strengthen an existing program rather than create something new. However, the other grantees interviewed for this topic still achieved an expedited launch despite having to secure space for the jail-based AJC, achieve buy-in for the development of the AJC, and complete other required start-up activities. This brief provides findings from all eight site visits about this topic, but focuses particularly on insights from the five grantees that achieved an expedited launch despite having to implement their jail-based AJCs from scratch.

Grantees that had not already offered employment services in their jails still drew on partnerships and leveraged the experiences of others to expedite enrollment. For example, many gained criminal justice knowledge through participation in reentry councils or community corrections partnerships. Overall, grantees that achieved an expedited launch were able to:

- **Leverage staff experience working in jails.** As discussed in the companion brief, *Bridging Workforce Development and Corrections Cultures*, several grantees that had existing jail programs transitioned staff to work in the jail-based AJC. However, other grantees still leveraged the experience of Workforce Investment Board (WIB) or contractor staff who had worked in the jail, or hired people who brought this experience.
- **Develop relationships with jail “insiders.”** Grantees emphasized the need to develop relationships with trusted jail staff who could both offer useful advice about operations and promote the jail-based AJC to other jail staff. At one site, the jail’s reentry coordinator identified key jail decision makers and explained jail procedures so jail-based AJC staff did not waste time with simple questions when they met with senior jail administrators.

Figure 1. LEAP planning period and beginning of enrollment by grantees



FOA=Funding Opportunity Announcement

- **Capitalize on existing services and materials.** While grantees with prior jail-based services had clear service plans and materials to build on, the other grantees also used existing material. Three grantees adapted a curriculum used in the community, such as for a Second Chance grant. Another emphasized soft skills in their jail-based AJC curricula based on employer feedback while serving ex-offenders through another grant.

Leveraging the LEAP Proposal and Grant Planning Phases

Many grantees used the LEAP proposal process to (1) solidify partner commitments and (2) gather information they would need to operate the jail-based AJC effectively. To facilitate start-up, they used several techniques:

- **Target influential champions.** During the proposal phase, four grantees engaged local officials and community leaders, such as judges, to galvanize support for the jail-based AJC. One grantee sought the support of the county executive, who convened a leadership team that included the grantee, jail staff, judges, probation staff, and parole staff to discuss the design of the jail-based AJC. Because the county executive oversees both the WIB and the jail, this support helped focus attention on the project.
- **Collaborate on the proposal and obtain detailed commitments from jail and provider partners.** Collaborating on proposal writing and/or discussing actual design logistics during the process ensured that partners knew their potential commitments under the grant. One grantee noted that they would not have applied for the grant if they felt that the jail did not have sufficient space or would not allow participants to access computers. Another grantee promised the jail that they would support a light-touch version of a jail-based AJC even if they did not win the grant, demonstrating their own commitment and ensuring the jail's buy-in. In contrast, several grantees that did not start enrollment quickly were still working on memoranda of understanding and determining partnership details in the last month of the planning period.
- **Gather relevant data on the jail population, including convictions, eligibility, and education.** Working with jails on the proposal enabled grantees to gain useful information about how services would operate in the jail setting. Grantees also gathered important data on the jail population to help design the jail-based AJC to meet participants' needs. For example, two sites learned that a high percentage of offenders were pre-conviction and/or were frequently transferred to other facilities, and would not be suitable for enrollment. In response, one site revised its plan to target participants on work-release if they were unable to enroll enough eligible offenders in jail. Another site learned that the majority of the jail population had a high school diploma or GED, so they tailored services to individuals who had these credentials and encouraged others to attend the jail's GED program before enrolling at the jail-based AJC. These early insights prevented grantees from being derailed by enrollment challenges or questions of fit once the grant was awarded.

As soon as the grant was awarded, and sometimes before, the grantees interviewed for this brief dove into the planning phase. They emphasized that the following strategies helped them achieve an expedited launch:

- **Begin work in the jail early.** The grantees were eager to get started, and some worked on plans and/or jail space before the LEAP grants were even awarded. As explained in more detail in the companion brief, *Structuring Employment-Based Services Within Jail Spaces and Schedules*, grantees stressed the importance of having jail-based AJC staff spend time in the jail early in the planning phase to understand how the jail-based AJC would work and to acclimate to the environment before enrolling participants.

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- **Hold structured, in-person meetings.** Many grantees that achieved an expedited launch stressed the importance of holding in-person meetings to discuss logistics and strengthen partnerships. Several implemented regular meetings with two different groups: (1) key decision-makers, such as the project manager, jail reentry coordinator, and manager of contractor staff; and (2) all partners and senior administrators, such as the WIB executive director and jail director. The core team of key decision-makers would usually meet and then share decisions with the second, larger group. Although grantees that started enrolling participants later also highlighted the importance of communication, several of them noted that they mostly communicated on an ad-hoc basis via phone or email.

An expedited launch was not unexpected for the three grantees that already had years of experience operating a jail-based AJC or providing similar workforce services in their jail. However, the other five grantees interviewed for this topic were able to begin enrollment almost as quickly by leveraging prior experience, learning about jail operations, and capitalizing on and building partnerships. Together these actions created a strong foundation for building a new jail-based AJC and gave grantees the capacity and momentum to achieve an expedited launch.

Endnotes

¹ This brief draws primarily on data from site visits to eight grantees that had an expedited launch, but also includes comparisons to grantees that launched services later in the planning period. While several grantees beyond the eight interviewed for their expedited launch also began enrolling participants during the planning period, none were among the first five to enroll participants, and they were selected to speak on other interview topics.

Suggested citation for this brief: Paprocki, Anne. "Expediting the Launch of Service Provision." Princeton, NJ, and Oakland, CA: Mathematica Policy Research and Social Policy Research Associates, 2016.

Other issue briefs in this series by Mathematica Policy Research and Social Policy Research Associates include:

- "Internet Access for Pre-Release Job Search Training" by Hannah Betesh.
- "Bridging Workforce Development and Corrections Cultures" by Heather Lewis-Charp.
- "Structuring Employment-Based Services Within Jail Spaces and Schedules" by Jennifer Henderson-Frakes.
- "Staffing Jail-Based American Job Centers" by Mika Clark.

This project was funded, either wholly or in part, with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Labor's Chief Evaluation Office under Contract # DOL-OPS-15-U-00196. The contents of the publication do not represent the views or policies of the Department.

