

Pathway Home Evaluation Brief: Establishing Reentry Services to Support People After Release

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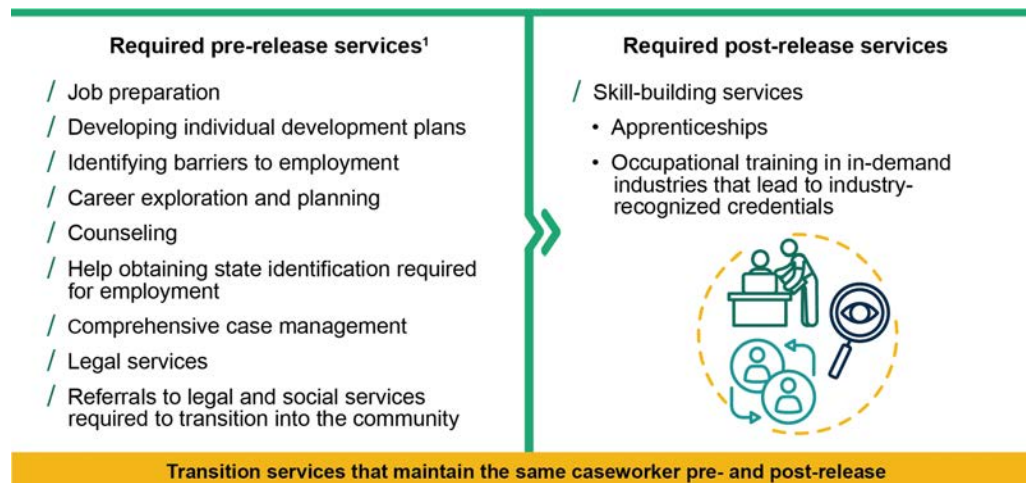
Introduction

People transitioning from incarceration to successful reentry often face difficulties finding jobs because of obstacles related to mental health, the stigma of being a former offender, and limits on the types of jobs they can obtain because of restrictions for people with criminal records (Pager 2003; Holzer et al. 2004; Raphael 2014; Council of State Governments Justice Center 2020). Findings from evaluations of prior U.S. Department of Labor-funded reentry grants (Linking to Employment Activities Pre-Release in 2015 and Reentry Project in 2018 and 2019) highlight the importance of addressing participants’ basic needs directly and through partnerships with community organizations that understand the needs of those returning from incarceration (Geckeler et al. 2022; Bellotti et al. 2018). This brief builds on those lessons by detailing how the Pathway Home grantees implemented services and established community partnerships to provide community-based services that address participant needs and help connect them to employment opportunities (see Exhibit 1 for description of the Pathway Home service model).

Study background

In 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) funded Mathematica and partner Social Policy Research Associates to conduct an evaluation of the Pathway Home grants.¹ This brief focuses on the 22 Pathway Home grants awarded in 2021 and describes the grantees’ experiences during their first year of implementation. DOL also funded a prior cohort of 20 grantees in 2020 that were the focus of a separate [brief](#). ▲

Exhibit 1. Pathway Home Service Model



Source: U.S. Department of Labor Pathway Home 2 FOA-ETA-21-02.

¹ Pre-release services such as job preparation, career exploration and planning, and other supportive services begin pre-release but may continue through post-release services.

¹ The Council of State Governments Justice Center was also part of the initial contract and supported the design of the Pathway Home Evaluation.

This brief is the third in a series describing the Pathway Home grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) in 2021, focusing on the grantees' six-month planning period and the first year of enrollment.² The brief details the experiences of the 2021 grantees as they established programs to support people's transition back to their communities from incarceration. The brief also describes the challenges grantees faced and the solutions they implemented to address those challenges. Other briefs in this series provide an overview of the 2021 Pathway Home grantees and describe the grantees' experiences implementing their programs inside correctional facilities during the first year of implementation.³

To inform this series of briefs, the study team collected data about the 22 grantees awarded grants in 2021 from five sources: (1) a review of grant applications, (2) five virtual group discussions with frontline staff and grant managers in summer 2022,¹ (3) a survey of grantees in fall 2022, (4) a survey of correctional facility partners in fall 2022, and (5) data from grantee performance reports as of December 31, 2022 (18 months into their grant period). Overall, the grantee survey had a 94 percent response rate (32 of 34 grantees and subgrantees), and the facility survey had a response rate of 70 percent (83 of 119 facility partners). The findings reported in this series of briefs reflect the 2021 grantees' experiences and should not be as interpreted as representative of all Pathway Home grants.

Establishing post-release services in communities served by Pathway Home grant programs: Summary of findings

- Grantees focused their services on addressing participant needs and barriers to employment and partnered with employers and community-based organizations to offer a greater variety of specialized services.
- To build partnerships with employers, grantees attended job fairs, reimbursed employers for training opportunities, attended chamber of commerce and workforce development board meetings, employed dedicated employer outreach staff, and established industry advisory boards.
- To build relationships with community-based organizations, grantees suggested connecting early, networking often, and maintaining ongoing communication.
- Grantees faced several barriers in connecting participants to jobs, including limited housing, transportation, and health services; the stigma of criminal records; and difficulty maintaining employment while complying with the requirements of community supervision and mandated treatment or services.
- To encourage participants to engage with services after release, grantees began building relationships with participants inside correctional facilities, collected multiple points of contact at intake, and offered incentives for reaching program milestones. ▲

Training and job placement

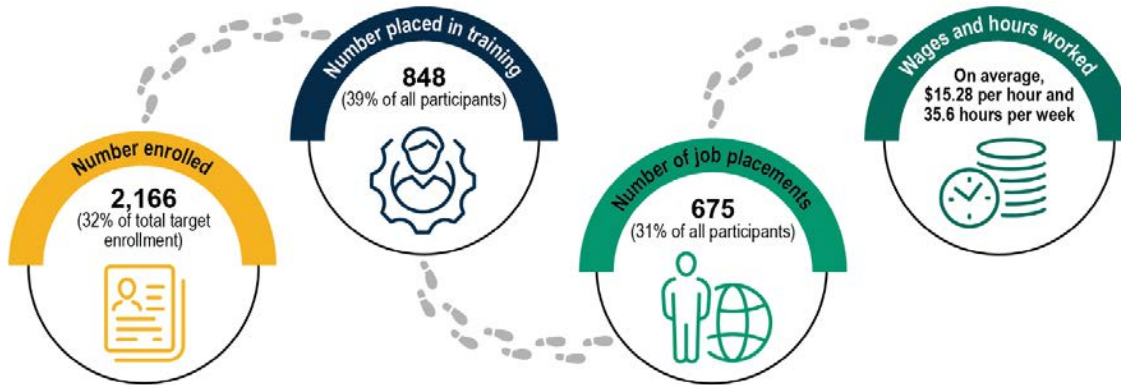
As part of the Pathway Home service model, grantees supported participants' transition from jails, prisons, and state-licensed halfway houses to their communities by providing a variety of post-release services. Such services included occupational training leading to industry-recognized credentials, apprenticeship placements, and support from the same case manager both before and after release (Employment and Training Administration 2021). By December 2022, approximately 18 months after the grants were awarded, grantees had enrolled a total of 2,166 participants, or 32 percent of the total target enrollment. Across grantees, the percent of grantees' target enrollment met ranged from 2 percent to 77 percent. Grantee performance reports indicate that 17 of 22 of grantees were providing participants with employment and training services by the end of 2022, with 39 percent of enrolled participants across all

² DOL awarded subsequent rounds of Pathway Home grants after 2021.

³ Pathway Home Reentry Evaluation briefs and reports are available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/pathway-home-reentry-evaluation>.

grantees (including those yet to establish employment and training services) having received employment training, such as on-the-job training, skill upgrading, or occupational skills training. All but one grantee had begun placing participants in jobs, with 31 percent of participants receiving job placements by the end of 2022. Grantees also reported that, on average, participants were earning \$15.28 per hour and worked an average of 35.6 hours per week. Exhibit 2 highlights these and other key milestones the Pathway Home grantees achieved.

Exhibit 2. Early implementation milestones achieved among Pathway Home grantees



Source: Grantee quarterly performance reports from all 22 direct grantees and intermediary grantees, as of December 31, 2022.

Navigating barriers to employment

Before connecting Pathway Home participants to employment, nine of the grantees who participated in the discussion groups reported connecting participants to other supportive services and working with employers to address their concerns about participants’ criminal backgrounds and post-release supervision requirements, such as probation or parole obligations.

Addressing supportive services needs

While employment is the primary outcome goal of the Pathway Home grant programs, nine grantees indicated that needs for other services often affected people’s ability to participate in the program and find a job. For example, during a discussion group one grantee mentioned that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, community housing and transportation services were even less accessible than was typical. During discussion groups the grantees shared how they responded to barriers by connecting participants to the services they needed, either directly or through partnerships with employers and service providers.

“If you don’t have the basic needs [met], you’re not going to get employment.”

—Grantee reflecting on the need for supportive services

Housing. In discussion groups, seven of the grantees noted a need for stable housing in their communities, and two of the seven highlighted a need for transitional housing (temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness), in particular. Four grantees mentioned forming partnerships with local community housing organizations, shelters, and transitional housing providers to address participants’ housing needs. During discussion groups, three grantees reported that housing support was so critical that they established multiple relationships with transitional housing providers in case they were to lose one partnership.

Mental health and substance use. Five grantees who participated in discussion groups described mental health and substance use as barriers to employment. Three grantees reported in their quarterly narrative reports (QNRs) to DOL that they established partnerships to provide mental health services to address these barriers. One of the grantees focused on health and recovery services for participants with chronic health conditions, including substance use disorder. In their QNRs, two additional grantees described referrals to mental health and drug and alcohol counseling. Another worked to establish a reentry coalition (an alliance of organizations serving people returning from incarceration) in its county to coordinate mental health and substance use treatment services.

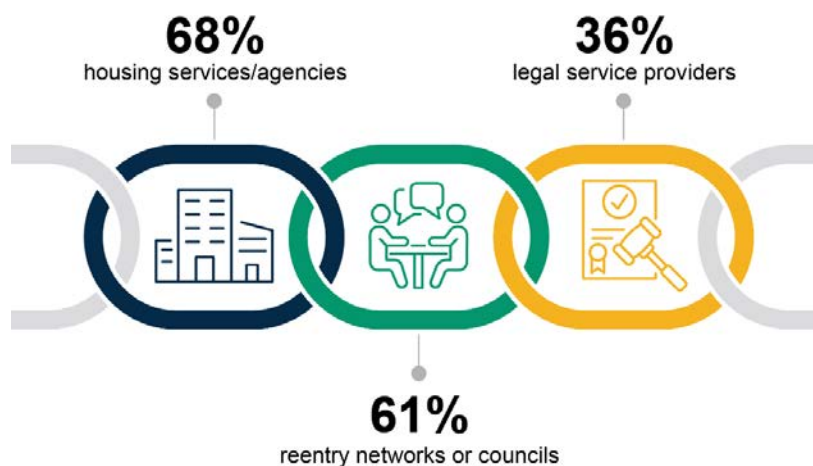
Transportation. In the discussion groups, five grantees mentioned that transportation issues posed a major barrier to the success of employment services. Four of these grantees served both nonrural and rural areas, and one served only nonrural areas. One grantee shared that many job openings were in suburban or outlier counties, which made those jobs difficult for participants to reach without reliable transportation. Another grantee located in a rural area mentioned that having no available public transportation was a barrier for participants. To address transportation issues, one grantee sought out employers who provided transportation support to employees, and another partnered with an employer that agreed to pay for participants' transportation during work-based learning. Two grantees attempted to address these challenges by offering bus passes to participants.

Other service needs. In discussion groups, five grantees reported helping participants obtain identification or driver's licenses. In the grantee survey, 10 of the 22 grantees reported having used grant funding to offer peer-to-peer and mentoring supports to participants.

Building partnerships for supportive services

Through surveys and group discussions, grantees reported that partnerships were critical to help participants meet their service needs. The three types of partnerships that grantees most commonly cited in the survey as critical to their programming were housing services and agencies (68 percent), reentry networks or councils (61 percent), and legal service providers (36 percent) (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3. Supportive services partnerships that Pathway Home grantees found most critical



Source: Responses from the 32 direct grantees, intermediary grantees, and subgrantees surveyed in December 2022.

Six grantees shared in group discussions that they approached partnership development with specific needed services in mind, such as housing, transportation, employment training, or substance use support.

Grantee strategies for building partnerships for supportive services

Grantees shared the following strategies for establishing partnerships:

1. **Build connections early and continue to network.** In discussion groups, two grantees shared the importance of identifying partners early in the grant process, and one noted that it regularly engages in community networking. Another grantee reported in its quarterly narrative report (QNR) that it regularly attends conferences and webinars to stay up to date on the availability of reentry resources in the community.
2. **Join reentry coalitions where possible.** In discussion groups, three grantees highlighted their participation in long-standing coalitions of reentry service providers, and one grantee mentioned this in its QNR. In one case, a coalition included more than 80 partners who helped find providers for needed services. These coalitions can also provide resources such as a guide on available community services.
3. **Draw on partnerships before using grant funds.** In discussion groups, two grantees emphasized the importance of identifying partners for supportive services before using grant funds. This enabled them to use more grant funds for case management, education, training, and job placement programming, which helped them serve as many eligible people as possible.
4. **Maintain relationships through ongoing communication.** Six grantees explained the importance of maintaining partner relationships. Four mentioned this during discussion groups and two in their QNRs. Ways to do this include sharing information or goals and meeting regularly. By maintaining relationships from previous projects, three grantees quickly formed partnerships for Pathway Home.

Easing employer concerns

Employer concerns around criminal records and common reentry requirements created another barrier for participants. Grantees reported in discussion groups that they responded to employer concerns by training staff to communicate with employers, highlighting the benefits of on-the-job training, and providing information on the benefits of hiring people with records.

Criminal records. During discussion groups, two grantees reported that discrimination against people with criminal records complicated efforts to find job opportunities for participants. In their QNRs, five grantees reported using strategies to help address employer concerns about criminal records:

- One grantee held trainings for their staff on how best to engage with employers on hiring people with justice-involved backgrounds and highlighted the benefits of on-the-job training to employers.
- A different grantee addressed this challenge by talking positively about program participants during communications with local employers.
- Another grantee planned to host industry-specific “reentry roundtables” during which local employers would provide information on the benefits of hiring people with criminal backgrounds, such as tax credits and the Federal Bonding Program.⁴ Two other grantees provided similar information for employers.

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“Some companies claim to be open to providing second-chance opportunities, but really aren’t.”

—Grantee reflecting on the challenges faced when connecting participants to job opportunities

⁴ The Federal Bonding Program is a hiring incentive tool that protects employers from losses caused by the fraudulent or dishonest acts of the bonded employee such as theft, forgery, larceny, and embezzlement. For more information, visit <https://nicic.gov/resources/nic-library/web-items/federal-bonding-program-us-department-labor-initiative>.

Post-release supervision requirements. Two grantees reported in their QNRs that employers sometimes pointed to participants' post-release requirements as barriers to employment. Examples of these requirements included regular check-ins with a probation officer for those under probation and reporting regularly to a supervising officer or living within a defined area for those on parole. One grantee observed, "With these obstacles, employers would rather wait for client stabilization before considering on the job training." This grantee worked with local corrections partners to obtain documents listing participants' specific restrictions (such as home arrest, court-mandated treatment, or geographical restraints) so it could plan accordingly. The other grantee directly contacted probation and parole officers to share information about the Pathway Home program and to learn about participants' restrictions.

Building partnerships for employment and training services

Just as grantees drew on partnerships for supportive services, they also reported turning to partners to help address employment needs. For example, based on responses to the grantee survey, the three types of organizations that grantees most commonly described as critical partners for their grants include employers (93 percent), training providers (86 percent), and workforce development boards or American Job Centers (71 percent). During discussion groups, three grantees noted that they built relationships with employers and training providers who were willing to hire people who had been involved in the justice system and that were in industries in which they knew participants would be able to find work.

Grantee strategies for building partnerships for employment and training services

Grantees shared the following strategies for establishing partnerships:

1. **Attend or host job fairs.** One grantee shared in a discussion group that it hosted its own job fair inside the facility and invited employers to attend. In their quarterly narrative reports (QNRs), other grantees reported attending community job fairs, partnering with Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs to host job fairs or holding virtual job fairs inside facilities.
2. **Offer incentives to employers for training opportunities.** In discussion groups, one grantee described reimbursing employers for on-the-job training. In the survey, 11 grantees reported providing subsidized training opportunities pre-release, and 15 grantees reported providing these opportunities post-release. Nineteen grantees reported providing supports for employers of program participants, and nine reported providing subsidized employment.
3. **Attend meetings of local chambers of commerce or workforce development boards.** In their QNRs, four grantees mentioned attending these meetings. One of these noted that it established an office within the chamber of commerce for ease of access to local employers.
4. **Dedicate staff members to employer outreach.** Two grantees mentioned using specially dedicated staff who worked with local employers. One of these grantees shared in a discussion group that its business service team worked with employers on a one-on-one basis to learn about openings or whether employers were open to offering trainings or apprenticeships. Another grantee reported in its QNR that it hired a job developer who served as the primary liaison for employer outreach. The same grantee also started a website through which employers could express interest in providing second-chance employment.
5. **Establish an industry advisory board.** One grantee described during a discussion group establishing an industry advisory board; the board met about once a month and was an opportunity for employers to update the grantee on their needs and give feedback on the grantee's curriculum. Another mentioned in its QNR that it was working to organize one.

Reaching participants and encouraging them to use services after release

Despite providing an array of services to help support participants' transition from incarceration, grantees often face challenges keeping participants engaged in services after their release. Maintaining contact with participants after release can often be a challenge, as three grantees explained in the discussion groups. To help address this challenge, one grantee shared that, at intake, it asked participants not only for their own contact information but also for two more contacts, which the grantee perceived to help increase the likelihood of connecting with them after their release. Another grantee tried a variety of approaches to contact participants, including social media, working with a local housing partner, and reaching out to friends and family. The third grantee shared that it started an alumni group with events and activities to keep participants engaged after release.

To encourage and reward participation, three grantees in discussion groups and two in their QNRs reported using incentives for reaching certain milestones such as training or meeting certain lengths of time in employment. In its QNR, one grantee reported awarding gift cards to participants as they reached their goals. Another reported holding graduation-like ceremonies or celebratory events for participants.

When providing case management services, two grantees in discussion groups noted the importance of building rapport with both participants and respective family members, especially as they transitioned to receive post-release services. These grantees also shared that participants tended to respond well to case managers who established relationships during the pre-release period. This dynamic enabled participants to become familiar with the types of supportive services offered during the post-release period. Five grantees shared in their QNRs that their case managers allowed participants to determine the supportive services they needed and then helped connect participants to available services by determining their eligibility and making appointments. During discussion groups, two grantees noted that assessments administered at intake were used to inform individualized service plans and supportive service needs.

Next steps for studying Pathway Home grant programs

The findings in this brief provide an overview of the ways the 2021 Pathway Home grantees began implementing their programs in their communities and discuss the lessons the grantees learned from those early implementation efforts. A future implementation report will document the experiences of these grantees over the full period of enrollment using information from site visits to the impact study grantee sites, in-depth interviews with program participants, Workforce Integrated Performance System data, and interviews with grantee staff. An impact study will assess how services offered by a subset of Pathway Home grantees affected participant employment, recidivism, and other outcomes.

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Endnote

ⁱ The study team tailored each discussion group to focus on a different aspect of implementation, and each grantee only attended one discussion. Three to five grantees attended each of the five discussion groups. Two grantees did not participate in any of the discussion groups. The themes shared in this brief were synthesized from across the five different discussion groups, and grantees may have spoken to topics that were not the focus of their group discussion. As a result, the text provides counts where possible to reflect the number of grantees that contributed to a specific point, but those counts are not representative of all grantees’ perspectives on each topic.

This report was prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office (CEO) by Armando Yañez, Benjamin Christenson, and Sonoi Omwenga. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government