

# Engaging Participants in Workforce Services after Release from Jail Issue Brief – Lessons from LEAP

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Reentering the community is a challenging transition for justice-involved individuals who often face numerous barriers in restarting their lives outside of jail. It is similarly challenging for service providers who aid them during this transition—recently released individuals become difficult to contact once outside, are spread over a larger geographic area, and face competing demands on their time. This brief presents lessons on engaging individuals after release from incarceration, drawn from the experiences of workforce and corrections agencies that established AJCs in jails to serve individuals and link them after release to community-based services.

### Study background

This issue brief series explores lessons from the evaluation of the Employment and Training Administration’s Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release (LEAP) grants, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Chief Evaluation Office. 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. The evaluation looks at approaches to providing services before and after incarceration across 20 sites based on site visits, phone interviews, focus groups, and grantee performance reports.

### Key Findings

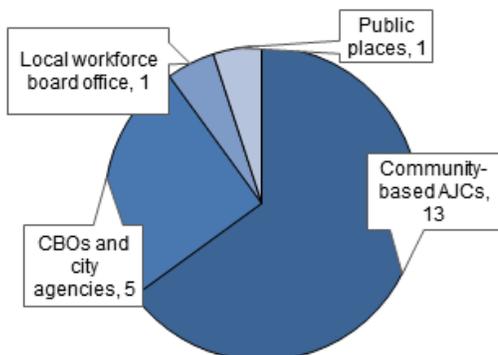
- To increase participant engagement after release, sites focused on developing strong relationships with participants during incarceration, communicating clearly about the transition to the community, and providing supportive services.
- Staff prioritized addressing barriers—such as unstable housing, lack of transportation, and history of substance abuse—that prevented participants from showing up for appointments after returning to the community.
- Staff who primarily served reentering individuals reported providing more intensive case management, more support for wraparound services, and more financial incentives than staff who served all AJC customers.

### Where were reentering individuals served?

Deciding where and how to serve participants is a key part of designing post-release services. Of the 20 LEAP

sites, 13 served individuals after release primarily in a local community-based AJC, usually the one serving the geographic area in which the jail was located (Figure 1). In 5 sites, participants met with staff at participating community-based organizations (CBOs) and, in one case, a city agency. In another site, a post-release case manager met with participants at the local workforce board office. In the final site, the pre-release case manager met with participants in public places that were convenient for participants. Staff in both of the latter two sites reported that meeting outside of the community AJC was useful for connecting with participants who could not easily travel to the community AJC; and gave staff more flexibility in the times of day they could meet with participants one-on-one.

**Figure 1. Where participants were primarily served**



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## How difficult was it for staff to engage participants outside of jail?

Sites had varying success in reaching individuals who were released from the jail facility and engaging them in continued services. As of July 1, 2017, 3,327 individuals had been enrolled in jail-based AJC services and 2,532 of those participants had been released from jail. Of those released, 62 percent (1,572 participants) had been out of jail for at least 30 days and had not yet found employment or enrolled in education.<sup>1</sup> The post-release enrollment rate in community-based services, which was calculated as the percentage of these individuals who enrolled in career services within their first month out of jail, was 68 percent (1,062 participants).<sup>2</sup> The post-release enrollment rate varied from 13 to 100 percent across sites.

During discharge planning, ideally conducted while the participant was still in jail, staff discussed housing, transportation, the location of the community AJC, and how to reach case managers after release. However, case managers in a few sites reported that the volatility of release dates or a lack of coordination with jail administrators often affected their ability to engage participants immediately upon release. In particular, participants were often released without advance notice, making it hard to discuss discharge plans with participants before they were released.

Other factors also influenced whether participants reconnected (and stayed connected) with workforce services after release, though a few of these factors were more challenging for some sites than others:

- **Lack of interest in further services.** Staff noted that many participants had financial obligations—including housing, food, unpaid court fees, and back payments on child support—that required them to find immediate employment rather than attend further training or education services. Many also felt pressure to find any job as soon as possible rather than look for a job with opportunities for advancement. Staff also felt that some participants were skeptical that case managers could help find them a job quickly and, as a result, were less likely to engage after release.
- **Unstable housing situation.** Grantee performance reports show that 28 percent of participants being released from jail were either at risk of displacement from their post-release residence or expected to be homeless. Staff noted that those with unstable housing were more difficult to locate and less likely to show up for service appointments, job interviews, and work. Some sites reported severe shortages of affordable housing in their region.
- **Transportation barriers.** Many participants did not have access to a car, could not afford to reinstate their driver's license, or could not afford public transportation to the AJC. Some participants also relocated far from the jail, making it harder to travel to the community AJC or provider locations where staff familiar with LEAP were located. Staff in some sites did try to connect participants to case managers in other AJCs, but it was unclear whether staff in all sites did this. A few sites noted that the public transportation infrastructure in their area was particularly weak, which made it more difficult for participants to travel to the community AJC.
- **History of substance abuse.** Grantee performance reports show that 48 percent of enrolled participants had a history of drug or alcohol abuse. Staff reported that many entered sober-living housing or rehab after release from jail. Some of these programs had restrictions on residents' ability to leave the facility, which meant that AJC or provider staff could not work with them for an extended period.

## How did staff encourage participants to connect to services after release?

Staff highlighted two key components of engaging participants: forming solid relationships with participants in the jail, and connecting with participants as soon as possible after release. Several respondents noted that a strong staff bond with a participant in the jail was a reliable predictor of post-release engagement. (A companion brief, *An Opportunity for a Reset*, discusses why the personal relationship was important for participants.) Case managers also noted that connecting immediately upon release was the best strategy to ensure engagement. As one staff person noted, “The sooner we get them engaged, the more successful they are. The longer they take to follow up, the less likely they are to be successful.” Most staff recommended having at least some type of contact within the first week of release, though staff in one site felt that participants sometimes need more time to settle into

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their new surroundings before they are willing and able to engage in services.

Staff were creative about getting in touch with participants, looking for them on social media, in halfway houses, or driving around town. Staff in Brunswick, Maine, eventually decided to meet participants on the day of their

release outside the jail, which staff reported made a big difference because “not a lot of people have someone waiting outside for them.” Staff also recommended establishing a specific day of the week when a staff member was available in the AJC to meet with participants. Figure 2 describes how the LEAP team in New Haven, Connecticut, which reported 80 percent post-release enrollment, approached the transition.

Sites tried a number of other approaches, both inside and outside the jail, to encourage participants to connect to services in the community after release, despite the many barriers they faced. Figure 3 on the next page highlights some strategies that sites noted were particularly important to encourage continued participation. On the inside, staff worked to build participant engagement, align jail-based AJC services with community AJC services, and prepare participants for a smooth transition to the community. On the outside, staff worked to connect to participants as soon as possible and remove personal barriers to job search.

## **Figure 2. Preparing for release in New Haven, Connecticut**

LEAP staff in New Haven outlined their approach to connecting services in the jail to the community, which included interaction with a post-release case manager and targeted reentry planning:

**Step 1.** Post-release staff visit the jail to introduce themselves to participants, provide their business cards, talk about services available after release, and photocopy participant case files.

**Step 2.** A pre-release coordinator checks in with participants every day leading up to release to explore pick-up and transportation needs. The coordinator also helps participants apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits before release so that SNAP electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards are waiting for them when they return home.

**Step 3.** After release, staff connect with participants within 48 hours to discuss next steps. If participants do not have transportation, staff might meet them at the gate of the jail upon release. Staff also use an Uber business account to pick up and drop off participants as needed to counseling or job interviews.

### **What services did staff provide after release?**

In the 13 sites where participants were primarily served in a community AJC, they had access to the same services as a typical AJC customer. Case managers conducted intake and assessment; registered participants in the state jobs database; and directed them to available resources at the AJC such as labor market information, job search and job readiness workshops, GED classes, work experience, and placement. The extent to which participants received additional services tailored to reentry depended on the resources already available in the AJC for reentering individuals, as well as whether sites chose to have participants interact with staff who primarily worked with reentering individuals. (The companion brief, *Case Management Models in Jail-Based American Job Centers*, includes more information on different approaches to staffing across sites.) In one site, participants attended an existing weekly job club for reentering individuals, received a resource guide for reentry-focused services, could receive specialized mentoring, and had access to a monthly reentry-specific resource fair that both service providers and employers attended. Grantees were not required to report data for all post-release services provided to participants, but did report on support services (Figure 4 on page 5) that were typically provided after release (except for parenting classes, which were sometimes offered pre-release), according to interviews with case managers.

Case managers who worked with the general community of AJC customers (and who provided post-release services in four sites) were less likely to have experience working with reentering individuals, and tended to outsource most of the wraparound services that participants might need, such as transportation assistance and referrals to housing, health care, substance abuse treatment, child care, assistance obtaining identification, and other supportive services. However, these case managers were also more likely to enroll participants in WIOA

than in other sites. Staff interviews suggest that five sites coenrolled all or most participants in WIOA, although grantee performance data did not include the specific proportion who received services through WIOA or other funding.

In six sites, participants met with the same case managers from the jail-based AJC after release, and in three sites, they met with staff who worked primarily with reentering individuals. Staff in these nine sites reported that participants received more intensive case management than the typical AJC customer. Staff reported spending more one-on-one time with participants, sometimes adapting workshop content to a one-on-one session if participants were hesitant to attend a group workshop where they might have to mention their recent incarceration. These staff also focused on addressing barriers to job

search and work, such as transportation, obtaining identification and other documentation, enrolling in counseling for substance abuse, and finding stable housing. In one site, staff connected participants with a local church for community service activities and mentoring while they waited for their documentation to be processed. Staff also accompanied participants to job interviews when necessary, and contacted employers who were open to hiring individuals with justice involvement. Participants in these sites were less likely to be coenrolled with WIOA, but some staff did report enrolling participants in WIOA services to take advantage of funding for on-the-job-training and tuition assistance on a case-by-case basis.

Of the seven sites where participants were primarily served outside of the community AJC, participants met with staff from a CBO (6 sites) or the workforce board (1 site). These organizations or their staff specialized in serving the reentering population and could provide the services typically available in an AJC but geared them toward recently released individuals. Most of the CBOs also offered more in-house wraparound services, such as legal

**Figure 3. Examples of strategies used inside and outside the jail to encourage post-release participation**



Source: Site visits and phone discussions with LEAP staff.

Figure 4. Support services received

Service type	Sites where at least one participant received service	Average % of participants who received service*
Transportation services	14	39
Housing assistance/referral	13	18
Follow-up occupational skills training	12	11
Follow-up mentoring	8	13
Needs-related payments	7	24
Follow-up high school equivalency prep	6	4
Parenting classes	6	13
Family reunification assistance	5	5
Referral for domestic abuse treatment	3	1

Source: LEAP grantee performance reports for 19 sites as of July 1, 2017, and for one site as of January 1, 2017. Although data are intended to indicate the percentage of participants who ever received each type of service, some grantees likely reported multiple instances of the same participant receiving services. As a result, statistics in this table should be considered an upper bound.

\* Percentage calculated out of total participants released from jail; average based on sites where at least one participant received service.

support, substance abuse and mental health counseling, housing assistance, life skills classes, and family reunification services. Staff were sometimes trained in behavioral therapy and trauma-informed care, had extensive contacts with employers who hired formerly incarcerated individuals, and reported placing participants directly into certification programs that would accept individuals with a criminal record, such as forklift training, welding or shipyard certification, and commercial driver license training. These sites were also more likely to offer financial incentives for participation, such as showing up for appointments at the CBO office (see next section). In four of the seven sites, participants were also encouraged to visit the community AJC and work with a case manager there, particularly if they were eligible for and could benefit from WIOA services.

### How did sites keep participants engaged?

A common challenge across sites was keeping participants continuously engaged in services after release. Staff noted that as participants return to their communities, they face financial struggles and are susceptible to influences and behaviors that can undermine their success. Using LEAP grant funds, many sites provided participants with supports that were not available to other AJC customers and were particularly crucial for individuals released from jail. For example, 8 sites subsidized or covered fees for acquiring identification; 14 sites provided bus passes or paid for other forms of travel; and 13 sites paid for work clothing and supplies. Staff reported that these supports were important for keeping participants engaged and connected to their job search or employment, especially in the early period after release.

Six sites went beyond these supports and offered cash incentives or gift cards for participating in services or reaching milestones. The site in Ventura, California, offered a menu of incentives (Figure 5), while other sites offered one or two. For example, the site in West Palm Beach, Florida, rewarded participants for showing up at their first community AJC appointment, and the site in Utica, New York, rewarded 90 days of job retention.

### Conclusion

Each individual who reenters the community after incarceration has a unique set of challenges to becoming self-sufficient. However, the experiences of the LEAP grantees suggest a number of ways that workforce and corrections agencies and their partners can design service delivery to keep individuals engaged with workforce services and help them succeed. These strategies start in the jail with building trust, continue during the transition to the community through communicating effectively about reentry as the individual's release date approaches, and are solidified outside of jail in the form of immediate and comprehensive support from case managers for

Figure 5. Post-release incentives in Ventura, California

Participants in Ventura could receive a number of incentives tied to their participation:

- \$50** for receiving the completion certificate in jail (payable upon release)
- \$50** for attending the initial post-release meeting at the community AJC
- \$100** for obtaining a job (with a pay stub as proof of part-time or full-time employment)
- \$100** for maintaining employment for more than 90 days

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released individuals. Post-release services that (1) address and remove the barriers that recently incarcerated individuals face and (2) include targeted incentives to motivate participants for success show promise in aiding justice-involved individuals in achieving self-sufficiency.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Data are not available on whether the remaining 38 percent of participants who were released from jail were still in their first 30 days after release, had entered employment, and/or were enrolled in education. The final report for the study will look at post-release enrollment rates for an updated sample of LEAP participants.
- <sup>2</sup> Post-release enrollment rate is defined as the percentage of participants who report for and are enrolled in comprehensive career services within 30 days after release. Participants who enter employment or education within 30 days of release without enrolling in career services are excluded from this measure. One site did not report a post-enrollment rate because all participants eligible for the measure had entered employment or education.

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

- “Providing Services in a Jail-Based American Job Center” by Jennifer Henderson-Frakes
- “An Opportunity for a Reset: The Experiences of Jail-Based American Job Center Customers Before and After Release” by Alix Gould-Werth
- “Case Management Models for Pre- and Post-Release Employment Services” by Ivette Gutierrez
- “Data Management for Pre- and Post-Release Workforce Services” by Jillian Stein

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