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Staffing Jail-Based American Job Centers

Issue Brief—Early Lessons from LEAP

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To operate specialized American Job Centers (AJCs) within jail facilities, workforce development agencies had to adapt their standard approaches to hiring and staffing to accommodate the operations and security requirements of the jail and hiring processes of various partners. Drawing on data from site visits to seven LEAP sites, this brief explores their approach to staffing jail-based AJCs, including the varying staffing configurations, key staff qualifications, hiring and onboarding processes, and strategies to expedite hiring based on lessons learned.

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

- Grantees sought to hire staff with a combination of criminal justice experience, workforce development experience, group facilitation skills, and interpersonal skills, but found it difficult to find candidates who possessed all of these skills.
- Lengthy background checks required to work in the jails, difficulty recruiting qualified candidates, and long, bureaucratic hiring processes contributed to staffing delays.
- Engaging partners in the hiring process and being flexible with staffing plans helped mitigate hiring challenges.

STAFFING CONFIGURATIONS

To staff the jail-based AJC, sites had to decide which types of staff to hire and which partner agencies should provide services. Below is a summary of the common approaches used by the seven sites visited:

- **Services were delivered to participants by three to six staff on a cross-agency team or by the local workforce development agency.** Sites considered the expertise of their different partners to determine whose staff should provide the core jail-based AJC services. Partners typically included county jails and local workforce development agencies, but sometimes also included community-based organizations (CBOs) and educational institutions. Workforce development agencies that lacked experience providing reentry services often relied on staff from their experienced CBO or jail partners to provide case management or, in two cases, to lead the operation of the jail-based AJC. Grantees typically formed a core team of one project manager and two to three direct service staff who provided case management, job readiness training, and employment services. Some grantees also recruited volunteer mentors and hired vocational instructors and job development staff to support the team.
- **Roles of jail staff ranged from coordination to supporting partners to delivering most direct services.** In most sites, jail staff involvement was limited to coordinating activities, such as identifying jail space, facilitating scheduling, approving materials, recruiting and screening participants, and escorting participants to the jail-based AJC. However, at two of the seven sites, the jails had a history of delivering case management or job training services, so jail staff provided direct services to participants, ranging from supplemental job search support to core service components.

- **Four of the seven sites used the same staff for pre- and post-release services.** Sites that used the same staff for both roles believed that this staffing configuration would give participants a sense of continuity and stability during reentry, as well as a familiar face to help connect them to the community-based AJC upon release. In contrast, other sites differentiated these roles to allow staff to specialize in the activities related to different stages of services, such as workshop facilitation for pre-release staff and job development for post-release staff. This approach made it easier to find suitable job candidates.

DESIRED STAFF QUALIFICATIONS

All sites looked for job applicants with experience in criminal justice, workforce development, group facilitation, and case management, as well as strong interpersonal skills and a desire to work with vulnerable populations. According to respondents, specific desired qualifications included:

- **Experience with the criminal justice system.** According to the sites, the ideal job candidates: (1) know how to integrate themselves in the jail environment, (2) feel comfortable working in a locked-down facility, and (3) understand the unique challenges faced by individuals involved in the criminal justice system. However, respondents felt that candidates who had worked exclusively as correctional officers might find it difficult to transition from maintaining security inside the jail to providing support to individuals transitioning to the community.
- **Experience in workforce development.** Candidates should understand the workforce system, have case management experience, and be able to connect individuals transitioning to the community with employment services, job training, and employers without extensive support.
- **Effective group facilitation skills.** Ideal candidates are dynamic presenters with experience leading group trainings and workshops.

- **Strong interpersonal skills.** The ideal candidates have a special set of relational skills that enable them to (1) perform within the structure and hierarchy of the jail environment, (2) bring flexibility and creativity to career development, (3) engage and relate to participants facing diverse challenges, (4) adapt to distinct institutional cultures, (5) be assertive with participants without seeming punitive, and (6) demonstrate self-direction. One grantee mentioned wanting staff who could gracefully accept failure and stay focused on their work if participants recidivated or dropped out of services.

Although an ideal candidate would have all of these qualifications, sites reported difficulty finding individuals with such a broad range of skills. As a result, some grantees compromised on workforce development or criminal justice experience, believing that field-specific knowledge was easier to learn on the job. Others prioritized skills differently according to the needs of the position; for example, they prioritized group facilitation skills for pre-release staff and prioritized case management and workforce experience for post-release staff.

HIRING AND ONBOARDING PROCESSES

The hiring and onboarding processes for jail-based AJC staff typically involved several steps and took from a few weeks to a few months. The main steps included:

Step 1: Develop job descriptions, recruit and screen candidates. In general, the organizations that employed the new staff created job descriptions and spearheaded the hiring process. Most organizations sought partners' input on job descriptions based on their areas of expertise and understanding of desired qualifications. Five of the seven sites hired internally for at least one direct service position. Two sites operated by workforce development agencies invited jails and/or other partners to participate in second-round interviews of candidates, which reportedly helped establish their buy-in to the hiring process and a sense of accountability to jail-based AJC staff.

Step 2: Conduct background checks. Although background checks were required for staff working in the jails in every site, the length of background checks varied significantly depending on jail policy and the level of security clearance required. Some staff received clearance within 48 hours, but others waited more than three months. Generally, staff given greater latitude to meet with participants and freedom of movement in the jail facility underwent more intensive screening.

Step 3: Train staff. The amount of training provided to staff ranged from less than eight hours to over 100 hours. In general, staff already employed by partners received less training than those newly hired. Training topics included:

- *Jail policies.* In every site, staff attended an orientation on jail policies and procedures that included a combination of safety, security procedures, getting approval for materials, dress code, chain of command, and jail staff roles.
- *Case management skills.* Staff in three of the seven sites received training in skills such as motivational interviewing, administering assessments, and social work concepts. Social work concepts included therapeutic relationship models for employment support, factors for criminological thinking, and approaches to working with an incarcerated population. One site used a specific curriculum, Thinking for Change (http://nicic.gov/t4c), which incorporates research from cognitive restructuring theory, social skills development, and the learning and use of problem-solving skills.
- *Workforce development systems.* Three sites provided training to help hired staff navigate the workforce system, such as describing the customer flow at the community-based AJCs and training on specific workforce curricula used at local AJCs.

STRATEGIES TO EXPEDITE HIRING

Although grants were announced in June, most grantees did not fully staff jail-based AJCs until at least December. Grantees reported that recruiting and hiring the right staff took longer than they expected, which ultimately affected some grantees' ability to meet their implementation schedules. Specifically, the following challenges affected hiring timelines: (1) grantees had a limited pool of job candidates who had the right combination of desired qualifications and were willing to work in a jail, especially in rural areas; (2) background checks further limited this pool by screening out some qualified candidates who were passionate about the work due to their personal experiences, such as having a criminal history or a close family member with a criminal history; (3) procedural requirements, such as background checks and the civil service hiring process, were time consuming; and (4) although grantees valued achieving consensus among key partners on hiring and selecting staff, scheduling meetings with multiple partners sometimes required additional time.

To help address these concerns, two important lessons emerged from LEAP grantees' early implementation experiences for expediting the hiring process.

- **Engage partners in hiring and leverage existing resources.** Engaging partners promoted a common understanding of the type of staff needed to provide services and helped lead agencies understand their partners' hiring processes. Effective practices included: (1) seeking information from partners about their staffing policies and hiring processes as early as possible to establish a realistic timeline and prevent unexpected delays; (2) working with high-level champions within partner agencies to "cut through red tape" and encourage human resource departments to prioritize hiring staff for the jail-based AJC; and (3) leveraging resources, such as job descriptions and training materials, from existing programs at partner agencies to accelerate the hiring process.
- **Keep staffing plans flexible.** Challenged to find qualified staff, current grantees often deviated from their planned hiring process to meet their goals. Strategies included: (1) adjusting staff roles to keep talented staff who could not pass jail security clearance (for example, one site restructured its staffing plan to allow one highly qualified staff member to work with participants only post-release); and (2) reallocating staff temporarily from existing programs to support the jail-based AJC when hiring took longer than expected.

Staffing configurations varied across the sites visited based on the structure of site partnerships, the strengths of partnering organizations, and available job candidates, as well as in response to unforeseen delays. While sites found that hiring for and staffing jail-based AJCs presented unique challenges and took longer than expected, they overcame these obstacles by engaging their partners and being flexible with their staffing plans.

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