

Data Management for Pre- and Post-Release Workforce Services Issue Brief – Lessons from LEAP

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May 2018

In 2015, 20 LEAP grantees established jail-based AJCs to offer employment-related services to incarcerated individuals and connect them to further support immediately upon their release into the community. To successfully provide—and link—these jail- and community-based services, grantees needed to collect and synthesize data gathered by different stakeholders, including jail administrators, workforce administrators, case managers in the jail- and community-based AJCs, partner service providers, and participants.¹ For most grantees, this was their first attempt to track data across corrections and workforce systems. Decisions included whether to use or modify existing data systems and how to manage data flow between organizations. This brief describes how grantees collected, managed, and used data to recruit inmates, track service delivery from pre- to post-release, stay in touch with participants, and measure outcomes.

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

- Gaining access to corrections data was critical to providing AJC services in the jail—from recruitment, to service delivery, to planning for release.
- Most sites relied on a mix of paper files and multiple MISs to track participant data. Key challenges included the strict security of justice data, lack of capacity to modify existing databases, and lack of staff internet access from within jails.
- Aggregating data from multiple sources and entering it into multiple systems created capacity challenges for many sites. Staff often had to double- and sometimes triple-enter information across systems

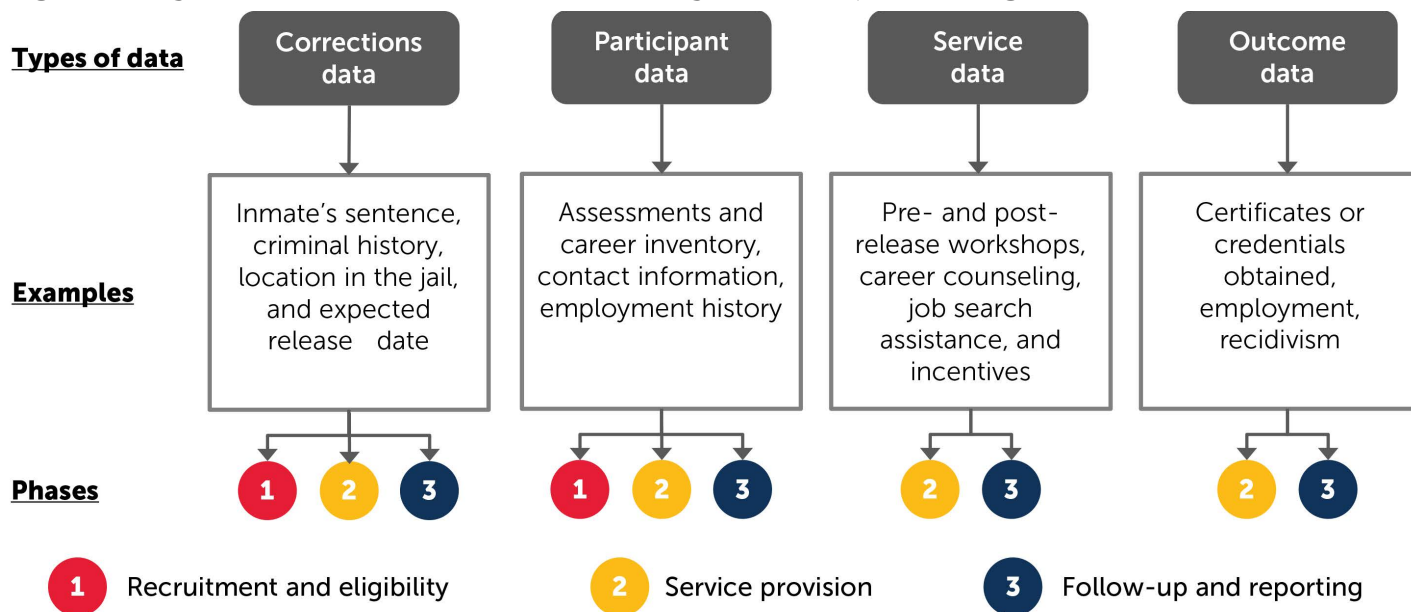
Types and uses of data collected

Sites integrated data from multiple sources throughout the phases of serving reentering individuals (Figure 1). Staff used data to identify potential participants, determine eligibility, plan programming, reengage participants in the community, and measure outcomes. Four main types of data were collected:

- **Corrections and jail facility data.** Jail-based AJC staff needed access to corrections data to (1) identify eligible participants (sentencing, criminal history, and expected release date),² (2) locate participants to escort them to programming (location within the jail), and (3) plan for participants' release (expected release date and community where they are expected to reside). Staff in most sites looked up participants in the corrections system and transferred relevant data manually to hard-copy case files or into a separate Excel or an internet-based MIS.
- **Participant characteristics data.** Staff collected a range of data about participants including background characteristics, contact information, demographics, needs, interests, and work readiness, often through various assessments. These data were used to determine eligibility, plan for services, keep track of participants and encourage them to come to the community AJC after release.

- **Service receipt data.** Staff who provided pre- and post-release services to participants were responsible for tracking the services delivered, including counseling, workshops, job search assistance, incentives, and other services. These data were mostly used for grant management and reporting but some sites also used them for program improvement. For example, some sites discovered through data tracking early in the grant period that participants had low rates of engagement after release; in response, sites introduced incentives for post-release participation and used data to assess the efficacy of the incentives. Jail-based AJC staff in three sites also reported participants’ attendance at pre-release services to the jail.
- **Outcome data.** DOL required grantees to collect data to document participants’ progress toward employment and successful re-entry for one year after release from jail, including completion of educational programs (and receipt of certificates or other credentials), employment and earnings information, and recidivism. In addition to grant reporting, grantees sometimes shared outcome data with partners and external stakeholders to help them assess program performance and to garner continued support for the program.

Figure 1. Types of data collected for reentry services, including uses and sources



Common approaches and challenges to collecting and tracking data

Approaches to data collection varied considerably across the sites for each major phase of serving participants. This variation stemmed from factors such as whether jail-based AJC staff had access to the jail database, whether they had internet access inside the jail, whether the same or different organizations provided pre-release and post-release services, and whether sites were able to customize existing databases to track participants. This section describes how sites accessed, used, and stored data during (1) recruitment and eligibility, (2) service provision, and (3) follow-up and reporting.

Recruitment and eligibility. Participating jails reported that, on average, about 40 percent of inmates in their facilities were sentenced, with rates ranging from 4 to 93 percent across sites.³ Staff in some sites felt that finding the sentenced individuals was like “finding a needle in a haystack.” With the help of corrections partners, jail-based AJC staff in 12 of the 20 sites were able to gain access to jail data to identify and recruit potential participants. Across these 12, staff in 8 sites were given access to the jail MIS, whereas staff in 4 sites had access to paper records (such as booking or rap sheets) or inmate reports the jail generated daily or weekly.

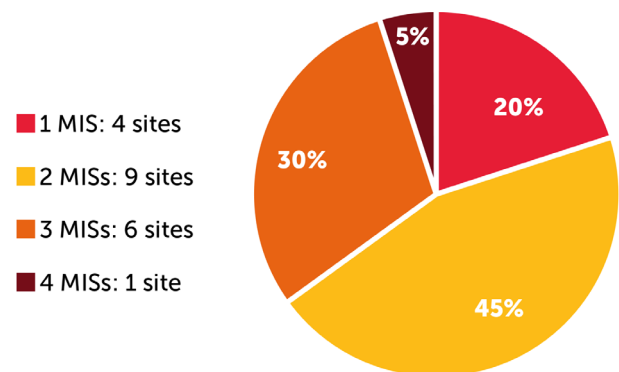
The remaining eight sites relied on self-referrals from inmates or referrals from jail staff to the jail-based AJC. When sites relied on corrections staff to identify and refer inmates, the quality of referrals depended on the

corrections staff’s knowledge of eligibility requirements, their buy-in to the value of jail-based AJC services, and their capacity to spend time identifying potential participants.

Service provision. Sites used various approaches to track participant services, but all used a mix of paper files and one or more MISs. Interviews revealed the following strategies and challenges with service tracking:

- **Given the challenges of linking databases, partners developed processes to share data to the extent possible.** Linking data across systems can require intense coordination, including data-sharing agreements, technical specifications, and software programming to export and import data from one system to another. As a result, none of the participating sites linked data systems across corrections and workforce entities, noting security concerns and funding as hurdles. Instead, staff in eight jail-based AJCs were able to gain direct access to the jail MIS; in one of these sites they had read-write access which they used to enter class attendance and case notes for the jail. Sites where staff did not have direct access to jail data reported that it hindered their ability to provide services; in one site, jail-based AJC staff could not access accurate release dates, case file numbers, or contact information for participants.
- **Half of sites used the state workforce MIS as their primary database.** Of the 20 sites, 10 reported that they entered records for all participants into the state workforce system regardless of enrollment in other programs. Another four sites entered participants into the state system only if they qualified for WIOA adult, dislocated worker or youth programs. In the remaining six sites, staff reported that they did not enter participants into the state MIS, either to avoid duplicative data entry or due to concerns that entering jail-based AJC participants would negatively affect their WIOA performance metrics.
- **Staff had to double- and sometimes triple-enter information across different entities (Figure 2).** When an organization other than the WDB provided pre- or post-release services, staff from that organization often needed to input data into their own MIS as well as into the state workforce MIS. In addition, some sites needed to use other systems or software to tabulate participants’ baseline, service, and outcome information to submit grantee performance reports to DOL, such as a separate Access database. Staff at one site also entered data into a corrections database so jail administrators and probation officers could monitor participants’ attendance. In most sites, the project manager was responsible for reconciling data sources across MISs and tabulating data for the grantee performance reports, but three sites had a data manager who helped manage the analysis and reporting for many grant streams, including LEAP, which they found eased the burden on the project manager.
- **Several sites reported a lack of time or resources to modify their existing MIS.** Many sites wanted to modify their organization’s MIS to track services, but few felt they had enough time or resources to implement these changes. Smaller organizations had fewer resources dedicated to data management and hence were unable or hesitant to invest in developing an MIS specific to DOL’s data definitions for a short-term grant (LEAP grants were initially awarded for 24 months). A few grantees suggested that greater uniformity between DOL grant requirements and the requirements for WIOA or other federal funding might make them more inclined to invest in developing or modifying an existing MIS so it could be useful beyond the life of the current grant.
- **Regardless of the number of MISs used to track services, sites often struggled with poor internet connections or a complete lack of access to the internet from the jail.** Staff in six sites had to leave the jail with paper files to enter pre-release service data at the community-based AJC or service provider’s office. Sometimes this data entry occurred days or weeks after the services were provided, which could introduce errors and make it more difficult for staff to recall sufficient detail when entering data. Staff in one site entered case notes for pre-release participants

Figure 2. Number of MISs used by sites



monthly at the community AJC and reported that this delay sometimes prevented community AJC staff from having the most current contact information for released participants.

Follow-up and reporting. Sites collected outcome data on participants' education, employment, and recidivism to track performance and submit quarterly reports to DOL. These data came from a mix of sources including participants, employers, community-based staff, and corrections staff (such as parole and probation officers).

- **Staff relied on communication with participants to track outcomes.** Staff working with participants after release were usually responsible for tracking down and recording when participants secured employment or earned a credential. They typically verified information provided by participants through paystubs or directly with employers or educational institutions. Because participants were often a primary source of outcome data, if staff lost touch with the participants, it became difficult to update their status.
- **Most sites relied on corrections partners to identify participants who recidivated, though the level of detail differed across sites.** Three sites were able to learn if participants returned to any correctional facility in their state, while four sites were only able to identify individuals who returned to the same facility, which meant that it was harder to track recidivism for participants who committed new crimes in another county and were sent to a different jail or prison. Two sites used public databases to track recidivism. Staff found that participants often returned to jail for reasons other than for new crimes, such as for violations of parole or probation, missed court dates, or prior outstanding warrants.

Conclusion

Communities interested in starting a jail-based AJC that links participants to community-based services after release should consider both their short-term and long-term data needs in developing strategies to manage participant and performance data. Implementing data access and sharing agreements between the corrections and workforce systems or identifying other strategies to link data could improve service delivery and reduce staff burden for data entry. Dedicated staff for data management could also ease the burden on case managers and administrators, so they can focus on engaging and serving participants.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jail- and community-based AJC staff were typically employees of the workforce board or a service provider operating the AJC, but sometimes pre- and/or post-release services were provided by staff from a community-based organization.
- ² See FOA-ETA-15-03, Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release Specialized American Job Centers (AJCs), U.S. Department of Labor, ETA, for details on eligibility requirements for participation in LEAP services.
- ³ Estimate is based on available data from 16 of the 20 sites.

Suggested citation for this brief: Stein, Jillian. "Data Management for Pre- and Post-Release Workforce Services." Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, May 2018.

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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.

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