

Authors: Gina Lewis and Brandon Hollie

Connecting Reentry Project (RP) Participants to In-Demand Local Industries: Insights from RP Grant Programs

The Reentry Project (RP) grant required grantees to describe the need for the training programs offered to their participant populations (DOL 2018, 2019). Grantees also provided information on in-demand industries and local hiring needs in their service areas within their grant application. To connect RP participants to those industries, grantees formed partnerships with industry-specific training providers and employers.

This brief draws on data collected from virtual site visits with 27 RP grantees to identify the industries

grantees commonly focused on, describe industry-specific training they used, discuss the development of industry partnerships, and provide insights for connecting individuals with justice involvement to locally in-demand industries. Site visit data included interviews with 33 employers; together with grantee interviews, the visits highlighted successes and challenges grantees experienced when engaging and partnering with employers. Exhibit 1 summarizes key findings. While the evaluation team interviewed a diverse set of RP programs, the information collected from site visits is not representative of all RP programs. Additionally, the number and roles of individuals interviewed were not exactly the same for each site due to staff vacancies and scheduling conflicts.¹

Study background

This issue brief is part of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office, that explores the implementation and impact of the Reentry Project grants. DOL's Employment and Training Administration awarded a total of 116 grants in 2017, 2018, and 2019. These grants aimed to improve employment and public safety outcomes and reduce recidivism for individuals previously involved in the criminal justice system.

Chief Evaluation Office
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RP virtual site visits

The evaluation team conducted 27 virtual site visits with selected 2018 and 2019 RP grantees between December 2021 and April 2022. Sites were chosen by examining certain grantee characteristics (for example, population served, geography, and program features) to ensure selection of a diverse set of grantees in order to inform impact study results and explore potentially promising practices of interest, as identified by site visit respondents, to DOL. Site visits typically included interviews with RP program staff, partner employers, a training provider, a justice system partner, an American Job Center partner, and program participants.

Exhibit 1. Research questions and summary of findings

What industries did RP grantees partner with?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 27 sites included in virtual visits identified three top industries for partnering: (1) construction; (2) food and hospitality; and (3) transportation, logistics, and warehousing
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¹ When a RP program experienced high staff turnover in certain positions, information was collected from staff with limited experience implementing RP compared to staff at other sites who were present when the grant began.

<p>What training and employment opportunities did RP grantees offer participants in the top industries?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction—Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certification training ^a; pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships; National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) training ^b; welding, carpentry, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) training • Food and hospitality—ServeSafe certification, other culinary training programs, on-the-job training, and unpaid internships • Transportation, logistics, and warehousing— certification, forklift operation, commercial driver’s license (CDL) training, and on-the-job training from employers
<p>What successes and challenges did grantees encounter when partnering with employers?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eleven employers mentioned being satisfied with RP program partners and enjoyed being able to provide work to justice-involved individuals. Reported elements of successful partnerships included frequent communication, RP staff connecting good candidates to employers, and RP staff staying connected to participants and offering support after job placement. • The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for RP grantees, especially in the spring 2020. Seven grantees found maintaining and building partnerships to be a greater challenge due to high staff turnover. Partnerships with training providers halted or ended when training centers closed during the pandemic.

^a Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certification is a training to prepare individuals working in construction and general industry on workplace safety and risk. For more, see <https://www.osha.gov/training>.

^b The National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) is an entity that created a standardized training and credentialing program for the construction industry. For more, see <https://www.nccer.org/workforce-development-programs>.

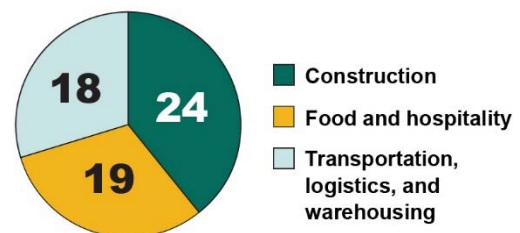
What industries did RP grantees partner with?

During site visit interviews, RP program staff were asked about the main industries they partnered with. The top industries grantees listed were (1) construction (24 grantees); (2) food and hospitality (19 grantees); and (3) transportation, logistics, and warehousing (18 grantees) (Exhibit 2). All 27 grantees interviewed during site visits partnered with at least one of these three top industries. Sites reported the following motivations for choosing these industries:

Local demand. Ten grantees identified local demand as a reason for choosing industries to partner with. The grantees explained their interest in ensuring both the availability of local jobs for participants pursuing work and room for growth within an industry. Grantees determined local demand in a variety of ways, such as using Economic Modeling Specialist International (EMSI) software, state Labor Market Information (LMI), Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data and asking employers about their labor and training needs. Local demand was observed to vary by grantee location. For example, one grantee noted that tourism drove the local economy, making food service and hospitality a natural fit for the RP grant.

Employers’ willingness and desire to hire individuals with justice involvement. Nine grantees reported that they opted to partner with industries that were willing to employ justice-involved individuals. In addition, two grantees indicated that the speed in which employers would hire participants was also a reason for selecting certain industry partners. Industries that the grantees found to be more open to hiring RP participants included construction, food service, trucking, and warehousing. By focusing on industries willing to hire individuals with different criminal backgrounds (such as sex offenders and violent offenders) and had few barriers to obtaining licensure, site visit respondents believed that RP programs could better position participants for success.

Exhibit 2. Reentry Project grantee top partnering industries, as reported by grantees



Source: Virtual site visits (N=27)

Note: Chart displays the number of grantees that identified each industry as a major industry partner.

Participants' interests and needs. Five grantees emphasized aligning industry training with participants' interests and needs. One grantee noted that they primarily focused on participants' skill sets to determine which industries to partner with and connect them to. Another grantee described how participants' interests contributed to the trainings they identified.

Identifying employer partners

After choosing what industries to partner with, grantees sought to engage employer partners within those industries. Grantees reported using the following strategies for identifying employer partners:

- **Visiting and communicating with employers to gauge their openness to hiring individuals with justice involvement.** Sixteen grantees identified employer partners based on their willingness to hire justice-involved individuals. For example, one grantee mentioned that the first question they asked a potential employer partner was “what criminal background would disqualify a participant?” The grantee considered this process helpful when determining if the employer would be a good candidate for partnering with the program and working with participants. A different grantee used the strategy of knocking on the door of businesses displaying a hiring sign and inquiring about their comfort level with hiring individuals with justice system involvement. Two other grantees stated they focused on medium sized “mom and pop” shops because of their tendency to be more flexible and open to hiring individuals with criminal backgrounds compared to larger private companies. At least two other grantees prioritized businesses with owners who themselves had justice system involvement and were therefore more understanding of participants' situations.

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“[We] recruit employers by knocking on doors when [we] see a hiring sign at a business and ask if they’re comfortable employing people that have had criminal involvement. When we tell them the services we provide, they’re happy to partner with us.”
—RP case manger
- **Leveraging previous partnerships.** Six grantees identified having partnerships or connections to employers before the grant period began. For example, one of these grantees had a connection with an employer through an RP staff member’s previous employment. This connection enabled the grantee to send a steady stream of participants for interviews with the employer. The other five grantees leveraged their preexisting partnerships with employers or good standing within the community to provide participants with work opportunities.

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“A case manager [we] hired several months ago knew about this employer from their previous job at a halfway house. The case manager has a connection with the hiring manager and sends participants to him for interviews.”
—RP staff member
- **Marketing the grants to employers.** Five grantees identified employers through marketing. Marketing efforts included hosting and attending job fairs and employer spotlights, inviting employers to job meetings, and holding monthly meetings with potential employer partners. Engaging in marketing efforts appeared to help grantees build rapport with potential partners, pitch their program, and set up times to meet and interview participants.

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“[Our] employment team participates in regular job fairs in the area, and also hosts [our] own hiring events. [Our] goal is to host three job fairs per year, bringing employers into [our] office to meet and interview participants for open positions.”
—RP employment specialist

What training and employment opportunities did RP grantees offer participants in the top industries?

Types of training offered by grantees were reported as varying across industries, as did the involvement from employers with identifying training offerings. Seven grantees reported that they identified training opportunities based on local demand. Grantees reported the following training and employment options for each of these industries:



Construction-oriented grantees focused on training and certificates in trades. Twenty-four grantees identified construction as a top industry. Of this 24, four highlighted the importance of listening to local construction employers about training necessary to enter employment in the industry. The remaining 20 considered other factors such as labor market information and local training availability. Specific trainings in construction offered to RP participants included the following areas:

- *Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certification training.* Eleven grantees used the OSHA10-Hour and five used the OSHA30-Hour curriculum to provide participants with basic training and certification for a construction career. The short duration of the OSHA10-Hour and OSHA30-Hour (10 and 30 hours respectively) was attractive according to grantees, as participants could quickly obtain the certification and employers valued those credentials.²
- *Pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs.* Grantees also created opportunities for on-the-job training in areas such as welding, carpentry, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) training. Ten grantees established either apprenticeships or pre-apprenticeships in house or through employer partnerships. The grantees described that these programs helped participants gain experience in construction trades.
 - Four grantees identified trainings and on-the-job trainings that led to union employment after successful completion. One grantee’s pre-apprenticeship program connected participants to apprenticeship programs with unions for electricians, carpenters, sheet metal workers, iron workers, plumbers, cement masons, and painters. This grantee noted that having union partners overseeing their pre-apprenticeships program helped position participants for success.
- *National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) certification.* At least six grantees offered participants the opportunity to obtain certification by participating in classroom and worksite construction training. It took participants approximately 2-6 months to complete this training and become eligible to take an assessment that led to a NCCER certification. These six grantees found it difficult to convince participants to complete this training due to its lengthy duration.



“[Our] 12-week pre-apprenticeship bootcamp is one of the most successful programs in placing participants in union apprenticeship programs. The placement rate is 75 to 80 percent.”

—RP staff member

² OSHA-10 is not a recognized WIOA credential. Guidance on WIOA industry recognized certificates and certifications is available here: https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL_10-16-Change1_Acc.pdf#page=12



Food and hospitality–oriented grantees relied on a common set of industry-recognized credentials. Thirteen of the 19 grantees focused on the food and hospitality industry offered culinary trainings and certificate options to participants. Common trainings in food and hospitality included:

- *ServSafe food safety trainings*³. Eleven grantees provided ServSafe trainings to participants interested in food and hospitality. The different ServSafe trainings participants completed included ServSafe Food Handler, ServSafe Manager, ServSafe Alcohol, and ServSafe Allergens. Grantees identified the short timeframe, ranging from 1 hour to 2 days, as rationale for connecting participants to the ServSafe certification, along with participant’s ability to start working handling food after receiving the certification.
- *Other culinary training programs*. Two grantees provided in-house culinary training. One grantee connected participants with a culinary apprenticeship program. Their culinary apprenticeship program is a 20-month certified apprenticeship program that consists of a 12-week life skills and workforce component followed by 17 months of paid-on-the-job training.
- *On-the-job training*. Three grantees found the food and hospitality industry to offer on-the-job training opportunities for RP participants. For example, grantees identified paid and unpaid internships, job shadowing, and social enterprises as opportunities for participants to gain work-based employment experience.⁴ One grantee partnered with a hotel that allowed participants to job shadow for a day before committing to the training or paid employment.



Transportation, logistics, and warehousing–oriented grantees focused on forklift and CDL trainings. Eighteen grantees identified transportation, logistics, and warehousing as a top industry. One grantee described engaging with employers during the planning stages to identify skills needed and industry trends. These 18 grantees provided training and certificate opportunities for participants in the following areas:

- *Forklift operation*. Thirteen grantees helped participants obtain their forklift operation certification. Grantees reported forklift trainings taking between 1-2 days to complete. One grantee training partner had participants learn online for two hours, spend eight hours practicing operating a forklift, and then take an exam to become certified.
- *Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) training*. Ten grantees offered participants training to obtain a CDL. Grantees reported this training to take 150 hours, or around 4 weeks, to complete. One grantee reported a social enterprise opportunity that provided paid on-the-job work experience for participants pursuing a CDL. Through this opportunity, participants were paid for approximately 20 hours per week for 3 months.

³ ServSafe is an affiliate of the National Restaurant Association that delivers training to food service professionals and offers certifications necessary to comply with state and local food handling policies. ServSafe certifications are not WIOA recognized credentials. More information on each certification offered through ServSafe is available here: <https://www.servsafe.com/ServSafe-Manager/Get-Certified>

⁴ Social enterprises are described as “revenue-generating businesses with a mission,” such as expanding access to public benefits or improving the environment. They also aim to help individuals enter or reenter the workforce. See the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s definition of a social enterprise for more information. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-a-social-enterprise>

Identified barriers to partnering with other industries

Throughout site visit interviews, RP staff mentioned other industries that they would have liked to offer trainings in and partner with based on participant interest and local demand. These industries included healthcare (identified by seven grantees), information technology (three grantees), and cosmetology and barbering (two grantees). While eight grantees were able to partner with at least one of these industries, others found they presented greater barriers for participants. Grantees described the following barriers to partnering with other industries:

- **Challenges hiring justice-involved individuals.** Grantees described several different challenges connecting participants with jobs in certain industries. Applicants with certain types of criminal charges were often unable to work in the healthcare and IT industries, which have strict background requirements, according to site visit respondents. As one grantee said, “If an individual has a drug-related charge, they will not be able to work [in] some nursing and/or pharmacy jobs; or if they have a child endangerment charge, they would not be able to work near schools.” Additionally, two grantees mentioned drug and substance use as a barrier to employment in the healthcare and advanced manufacturing industries. Despite the use of some drugs being legal in the area, grantees found that certain industries still commonly drug-tested applicants and employees. One grantee noted drug and substance abuse was of particular concern in advanced manufacturing as employees work with heavy machinery. Another grantee stated employers would not hire participants without a driver’s license.
- **Lengthy and costly training programs.** Four grantees described the time and cost of completing certain industry training programs as a reason for not offering a particular kind of training. One grantee described local demand for welders, but staff cited the length of the training, as well as the difficulty in finding multiple trainers to deliver the training as barriers to offering the training. This forced the grantee to discontinue their welding program and move away from the industry all together. Similarly, two grantees considered providing cosmetology training and researched the certification process. This research revealed that the length (6 to 8 weeks) and the cost (\$3,000 to \$4,000) of the training made offering the training infeasible.
- **Lack of certifications or training providers.** One grantee identified roofing as an industry they would like to partner with but were unable to do so because employers valued direct experience over occupational skills training. The grantee was unable to develop work-based learning offerings to address employers’ concerns. One grantee stated that they were forced to provide all of the trainings themselves because there were no training providers in the area. The grantee wished they had forklift operation and OSHA-30 training, as these programs would allow them to provide more versatile training offerings. The RP training instructor said it would have taken the duration of the grant for him to get certified as an OSHA trainer.

What successes and challenges did grantees encounter when partnering with employers?

Grantees established and built partnerships throughout the grant period, and interviewed employer partners reported satisfaction with those partnerships. Challenges to these partnerships were described as stemming primarily from the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Grantees attempted to adapt to overcome these challenges, but it proved to be very difficult to make use of the factors they had employed, such as consistent and in-person communication and engagement, to create successful partnerships before the pandemic.

Employer satisfaction with RP grantee partnerships

During site visit interviews, 33 employers expressed their satisfaction with partnering with the RP program. Employers stated the following reasons for this satisfaction and for successful partnership with RP programs:

Satisfaction with participants referred to them by the RP grantees. Eleven of the 33 interviewed employers were satisfied with the participants hired through partnerships with RP grantees. These employers described participants as reliable, hardworking, focused, professional, and determined. Five employers stated liking how RP staff prescreened participants before placing them with an employer. Interviewed employers enjoyed having a pipeline for good talent and found partnering with the RP program to reduce their burden for finding employees.

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“When doing talent acquisition, you have to get creative. There are people who are ready to work who have barriers, and we found that if we can develop partnerships with organizations that are supporting individuals to become work ready, it supports a need for the community, it supports a need for participants and it also supports a need for us.”

—Employer partner

Consistent communication from the RP grantees. Seven employers mentioned that they frequently communicated with RP staff before and after participant placement. Five grantees expressed the importance of frequent communication with potential employers to help create rapport, promote understanding of their program, and see individuals as more than someone with justice involvement. These grantees did this by maintaining in-person contact with employers, holding mock interviews, and giving presentations. One employer reported speaking with RP staff once a week to discuss open positions, hiring needs, and RP participants who were a good fit and able to start working.

Fulfillment in providing work opportunities to justice-involved individuals. Eight grantees stated feeling a sense of joy and fulfillment when hiring RP participants. Three employers specifically focused on finding applicants with criminal backgrounds because they are aware of the benefit it has for the community. One employer expressed how partnering with RP programs to provide employment opportunities is “a good thing to do” and was happy to have had the chance to form a partnership.

Continued support from RP staff. Four grantees discussed the importance of following up with employed participants after placement. This process was described as helping grantees understand if participants were successful in their placements and whether there were any challenges. One employer expressed satisfaction and relief in knowing participants working for the employer were still connected to the RP program and receiving ongoing support.

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“It’s like we have a lifeline. We can get insight into how to make things better . . . so that’s an advantage to having a partnership like this, we can have this person succeed.”

—Employer partner

Perceived challenges with partnerships

When asked about challenges partnering with employers, grantees focused on challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic rather than specific industries. Commonly identified challenges included the following:

- 1. Business and training facility closures.** Nine grantees described challenges with maintaining and building partnerships during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the closure of businesses and facilities. The grantees' partnerships with training providers stopped or ended because training providers closed and did not offer services throughout the pandemic. One grantee overcame this obstacle by searching for different training providers and establishing new partnerships with entities offering online training.
- 2. RP staff turnover.** Seven grantees emphasized that partnerships with employers were more of a challenge during the pandemic due to staff turnover. Specifically, two grantees had multiple job specialists throughout the grant period, which made it difficult for employers to stay connected with a single staff member. Staff vacancies and turnover also posed challenges for maintaining accurate employer contact information, according to respondents from two sites. As stated previously, communication was a factor in employer satisfaction, but grantees expressed difficulty maintaining good communication due to their own and employers' staffing changes. Two grantees relied on the flexibility of staff to take on tasks outside of their assigned role to help maintain partnerships and connect participants to partners.

Conclusion

As highlighted through virtual visits for the RP evaluation, RP grantees sought to connect participants with training and employment in select industries through their grants. When selecting their industries of focus, site visit respondents considered numerous factors, such as locally in-demand industries, availability of training offerings, and participants' interest. Based on these considerations, RP grantees frequently targeted the construction and culinary/hospitality industries because employers in these industries had unfilled hiring needs and tended to be open to hiring individuals with prior justice involvement. Although some RP grantees sought to establish partnerships with industries like healthcare, opportunities to do so were more limited due to challenges with job placement and availability of training programs. Employers participating in interviews generally expressed satisfaction with the RP grantees and appreciated being connected to a hiring pipeline. This brief identifies insights that other programs could consider when working using sector strategies to address the needs of individuals with justice involvement.

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Additional briefs and reports developed for the Reentry Projects evaluation are available here: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Reentry-Projects-Grant-Evaluation>

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