

Case Management Models for Pre- and Post-Release Employment Services

Issue Brief – Lessons from LEAP

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The LEAP grants sought to create a stronger linkage between pre- and post-release employment services for justice-involved individuals. Case management—coordinating services for and working directly with clients—is an important aspect of that linkage. In the LEAP sites, interactions with case managers played a role in shaping participants’ experiences with employment services in the jail, and their engagement. This brief explores the different models used to deliver case management through jail-based AJCs and community-based AJCs and service providers, the benefits and drawbacks of those models, and strategies used to help establish continuity of services after release.

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

- Jail-based AJC staff were reported to drive the connection between jail-based and community-based services through the relationships they develop with participants while they are incarcerated.
- Linking participants to community-based case managers before release, either through informational meetings or through workshops, could help smooth the transition to community-based support after release.
- Regular channels of communication between jail-based and community-based staff could help community-based staff maintain the service plan established in the jail.

Case management in the jail-based AJC and community

Participants receiving services through the jail-based AJCs worked with case managers both in the jail and for up to one year after release. Although caseloads varied by site and over time within sites, staff reported that they worked with 6 to 40 participants before release, and 15 to 80 participants after release.

- On average, participants in jail-based AJCs met with a case manager every one to two weeks to receive individualized support and guidance on topics such as: participant goals, plans for pre-release services, addressing personal barriers to success, employment plans, impending release dates, and supportive services needed after release. Most sites provided other employment- and training-related services in group formats in addition to one-on-one counseling, although one site’s service model relied entirely on individualized case management and job search assistance, with no group classes or workshops.
- After release, participants in most sites met with case managers every one to two weeks until they secured employment or enrolled in an educational program (unless they were in sober living housing). Some sites scheduled meetings on an as-needed basis. Community-based staff facilitated or referred participants to various career services, including job search, job placement, and occupational training. They also helped participants enroll in education, find housing and transportation, and obtain identification cards and other right-to-work documentation, although the extent to which they provided these supports varied.

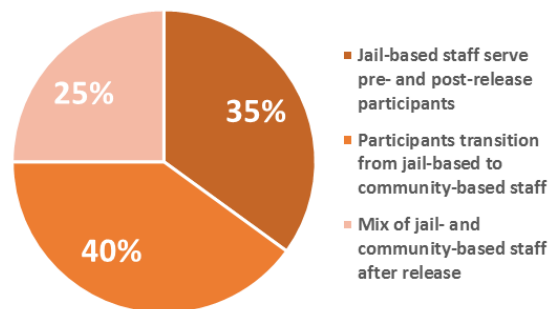
Staff and participants viewed case managers as the strongest influence upon participants' likelihood of success. They indicated that the most effective case managers treated participants in the jail-based AJCs as fellow "human beings" rather than as inmates, showed a profound level of personal caring and dedication to participants' success, and had dynamic, inspiring personalities that engaged participants and laid important groundwork for post-release contact and engagement. The human component was particularly valuable from the participants' perspective (see companion brief *An Opportunity for a Reset: The Experiences of Jail-Based American Job Center Customers Before and After Release*).

Case management models

To determine who would provide case management before and after release, the sites used one of three primary configurations (Figure 1):

1. **Jail-based staff serve participants both before and after release from jail.** Seven sites employed this model. Most either identified the days of the week on which staff would be in the jail-based AJC or the community and scheduled appointments accordingly, or reserved blocks of informal drop-in times, usually at a community AJC, for participants who had been released. Staff in one site did not have a regular schedule and adapted to the availability of their released participants.
2. **Participants transition from jail-based staff to community-based staff.** Eight sites linked participants after release to new, community-based staff for services. At the minimum, sites gave participants basic contact information for the new staff, but many introduced community-based staff to participants before release by bringing staff to visit the jail or holding virtual meetings.
3. **A mix of jail-based and community-based staff provide services after release.** Another staffing model emerged during implementation. Five sites had originally planned for the same staff to work with participants both before and after release, but as the caseload of released participants grew and other challenges emerged, they elected to expand their teams. In two sites, some team members divided their time between the jail and the community, while the remaining staff worked almost exclusively in the jail-based AJC. The other three sites supplemented their team with community-based AJC case managers. Case managers in these sites worked with participants before and after release to coordinate supportive services and keep them motivated and engaged. Participants were often also encouraged to work with community-based AJC case managers, who would provide or link them to career services available in the AJC.

Figure 1. Case management models across sites



Benefits and challenges of different models

Grantees chose a case management model based on their available resources, jail and community partners, and the capacity of contracted service providers. Each of the three models outlined above were reported to have limitations and benefits.

Relying on *the same staff to provide both jail-based and community-based services* appeared to have clear benefits; it eliminated the challenging handoff process from before to after release. Perhaps more importantly, the time invested in building quality relationships between staff and participants led to strong connections even after participants were released. Jail-based AJC staff had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with participants' personalities, needs, and barriers, as well as to understand the environment the participants would be returning to. They also had time to build the trust and rapport needed to quickly serve participants after release. One site described this model as "the most effective way." Another site used the transition from before to after release as an opportunity to transition participants from learning about career services to discussing their barriers to employment, leveraging the bond with staff to ease into an often difficult and sensitive subject area.

“That’s one thing that I do like about them, we’re in here interacting with them, they know about us, our background, what we want to do. Instead of having to explain to them all over again what we like to do.”

- Participant

Sites that used this staffing model reported more success than other sites in quickly contacting and serving participants after release. Staff in these sites collected phone and address information of family and friends (with a focus on a relatively stable family member), and then used this information if they could not reach the participant after release. Although sites with different pre- and post-release staff could have used this approach, they did not report collecting this information and staff in those sites often reported difficulties in contacting participants after release.

However, sites also relayed some challenges with using jail-based staff to provide post-release services. Staff caseloads continued to grow indefinitely, and they had to coordinate schedules with three distinct populations: (1) participants in jail without an imminent release date, (2) those nearing release, and (3) those who had been released. One site managed this issue by “ween[ing participants] off the support gradually.” The staff met with recently released participants weekly and eventually transitioned them to less frequent meetings. Four of the seven sites reported that staff turnover was also a substantial challenge for this model because a staff member’s departure affected both jail and community-based services, and the background checks required to hire new staff to work in a jail can take months. In addition, this model could hinder participants’ access to a fuller array of community AJC services. Case managers often felt they knew participants best and were reluctant to refer them to other staff in the community AJC, who did not specialize in serving reentering individuals but might have had access to other community resources.

The case management model of using *separate jail-based and community-based staff* had different benefits and challenges. Participants who were transitioned to community-based staff encountered a team dedicated to serving only released participants, and sites were able to hire staff with more specialized skills for each role (see study brief [Staffing Jail-Based American Job Centers](#) for more information on staff qualifications). Staff were more flexible about when and where they met participants, and they could more easily coordinate schedules with probation officers for participants on formal supervision. On the other hand, staff at sites that used this model found that they needed to make a substantial effort to build relationships with participants; indeed, it was often difficult even to make an initial contact with participants, since participants did not recognize or have relationships yet with the community-based staff. Furthermore, rapidly changing release dates added a layer of complexity to this connection process—community-based staff were often surprised by unexpected releases. One site relied on participants to initiate contact with community-based staff, since staff did not have enough notification to schedule appointments before release. Another site made sure that participants had contact information for post-release staff, “because they might be gone before the planned release date.”

Sites using the third model, with *a mix of staff serving participants after release*, experienced some of the benefits outlined above, such as leveraging trust between staff and participants built in jails, but also faced the challenge of balancing caseloads. In one site, staff working only in the community had smaller caseloads than staff serving both jailed and released participants, overburdening some staff while underutilizing others. However, this model’s staffing flexibility was reported to promote more collaboration between grant leadership, partners, and direct-service staff, since staff who worked in both locations moved between the jail and community frequently and interacted with different teams. Although one site noted that communication between teams was a challenge, in general, sites found they could adjust their staffing easily to meet participant and program demands.

Strategies for aligning services

Sites’ efforts to create strong case management models that would help align jail-based and community-based services generated the following promising strategies:

- **Introduce community-based staff to participants before release.** A majority of the sites where participants worked with different case managers before and after release created opportunities for community-based staff to meet or get to know participants before release. Some brought community-based staff to the jail-based AJC to meet

with participants in a group or one-on-one setting to discuss post-release services and participant needs. One site arranged to have community-based staff stand in for jail-based staff as needed. Visiting staff often administered specific services, such as individual assessments and registration for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act career services or training. In one site, staff held mock interviews to build rapport with participants. Sites that did not bring community-based staff to the jail used other strategies, including introductions via Skype or recorded video presentations.

- **Facilitate regular staff collaboration to increase communication about participants' needs and progress.** Sites that used the same staff to serve participants before and after release often reported that they relied on individual employment plans developed while participants were in jail to anchor the first post-release meeting. But in sites where different staff served participants, knowledge transfer was a challenge. To increase the alignment of services, a few sites had weekly or monthly staff meetings that included jail-based and community-based staff and partners to discuss participants' progress and needs. Some sites used these meetings to decide which participants would receive additional intensive services. Other sites had informal check-ins for staff to discuss participants' cases. These types of regular meetings seemed to facilitate following the service plan established in the jail, and provided avenues for feedback so that staff in the jail and community could make course corrections to services as needed. In one site, jail-based staff lamented that community-based staff did not communicate with them about participants and, as a result, they could not assess whether the services they provided in the jail were beneficial for participants.
- **Use a common Management Information System (MIS) to improve the transfer of information between jail-based AJC and community-based staff.** Sites that had one MIS accessible in real-time to staff serving both pre- and post-release participants reported having better access to information about participants and the services and support they needed upon release. One of the sites described their MIS as the main method of communication between staff about participants. Sites that used different systems for tracking pre- and post-release data reported difficulty accessing information necessary for engaging and serving participants after release. Even sites that used one MIS for both pre- and post-release staff but did not have real-time updates (i.e. jail-based AJC staff had to leave the jail to update the MIS) reported gaps in critical case notes and contact information for follow-up (see companion brief, *Tracking Participant Data for Reentry*, for more information about grantee MIS use).

Conclusion

Grantees implemented a variety of approaches to coordinating services across the jail and community contexts for justice-involved individuals, but staff members' experiences suggest that some strategies can help align services to assist participants in finding the support they need to succeed. These include creating opportunities for community-based staff to get to know participants before release, and making sure staff in the jail and community communicate effectively and in a timely way about participants and services.

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- "Data Management for Pre- and Post-Release Workforce Services" by Jillian Stein
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