

Internet Access for Pre-Release Job Search Training

Issue Brief—Early Lessons from LEAP

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Securing Internet access is a critical planning issue for the creation of a jail-based American Job Center (AJC). Community-based AJCs increasingly offer resources via the Internet, as the majority of job search activities and applications now occur online;¹ however, correctional facilities often do not offer any Internet access for inmates due to security concerns. In jails where Internet access *is* available, it is generally for purposes unrelated to job search, such as legal research and distance learning, and in designated areas such as a law library or classroom.² Arranging Internet access for the purpose of job search inside a jail-based AJC therefore represents a new and complex endeavor in the jail environment. This brief uses data from site visits to 8 of the 20 Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release (LEAP) sites to explore the role of Internet access in pre-release employment services as well as the resources, staffing, and infrastructure needed to establish Internet access for a jail-based AJC.

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

- Given heightened Internet security restrictions in jails, jail-based AJCs had to be flexible to adapt their pre-release curricula for this environment.
- Planning for Internet installation soon after grant award was critical, given the inherent delays and complexity of establishing Internet access in previously unwired jail settings.
- Adequate budgeting for both equipment purchases and space upgrades was essential to support Internet installation and access in jails.

Role of Internet Access in Pre-Release Services

The jail-based AJCs established by LEAP grantees planned to use the Internet for pre-release job search instruction, online basic skills and career interest assessments, and, in some cases, occupational skills training. Half of the jail-based AJCs were also offering or planned to offer formal computer and Internet skills instruction. As grantees discovered, however, Internet security settings inside jails often preclude access to multimedia and private business sites. Due to these restrictions, the jail-based AJCs implemented two key modifications to their pre-release job search programming:

- Due to restrictions on access to employer websites, jail-based AJCs shifted pre-release instruction on job applications to use paper applications or Microsoft Word versions of Internet applications saved offline. Community-based AJCs then planned to provide post-release instruction on the online component of the process, including selecting drop-down fields and electronically submitting the application. Because pre-release participants cannot access employer websites for background research or to check job openings, pre-release job search shifted to exploring local labor market trends and aggregated job search sites such as Monster and Indeed.
- Due to both Internet security settings and bandwidth limitations, three of the eight jail-based AJCs could not offer access to instructional videos or interactive media. These grantees needed to modify curricula (such as having participants read transcripts of videos), delay certain services until post-release (such as interactive occupational skills training programs), and/or make a substantial investment in a fiber optic line with sufficient bandwidth for instructional media.

Jail-based AJC staff also often needed to adjust to providing case management without immediate access to web-based case management systems. These systems are widely used for participant tracking in community-based AJCs, but were not always accessible inside

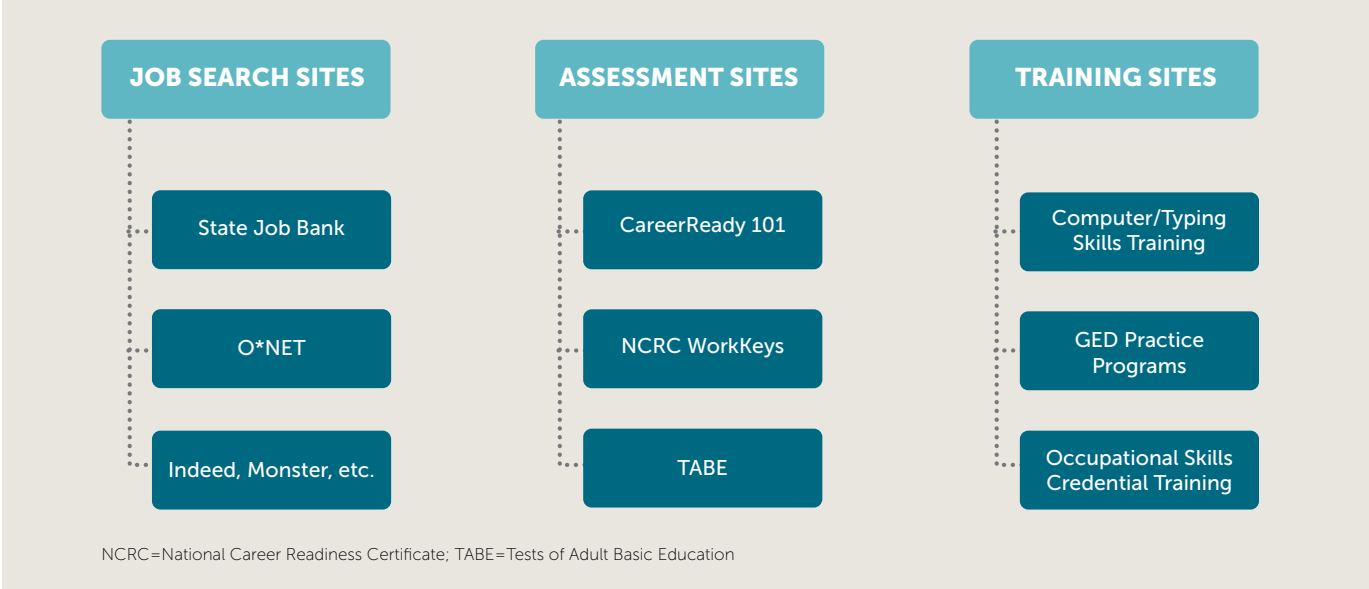
of jail-based AJCs. This meant that some jail-based AJC staff were not able to enter data or review Internet-based case management notes to recall a participant’s goals and progress while working in the jail-based AJC. Some staff adapted by maintaining hard copies of participant files that could be brought into the jail-based AJC.

Required Resources, Staffing, and Infrastructure

Developing and executing plans for delivering Internet-based services involved early and frequent collaboration between jail and Workforce Investment Board (WIB) staff, both at the leadership level and between information technology (IT) staff. Key stages of this process included:

- **Finalizing Internet access plans and configuring equipment for secure Internet access in the jail setting.** Local partners first had to determine whether an existing, secure Internet connection could be used for the jail-based AJC or if a new connection needed to be established. Through extensive discussions at the proposal stage and during the initial two to six months of the grant, jail and WIB leadership (in collaboration with jail and workforce IT staff or jail-approved IT contractors) at seven of eight grantees agreed on a plan for Internet access, computer purchases, and computer configuration that complied with jail security requirements.³
- **Development of an approved website “white list.”** All seven jail-based AJCs that were able to install Internet connections limited accessible websites to a documented “white list” of approved websites for job search, assessment, and training (see Figure 1 for examples). Because most jails had not previously offered any Internet-based job search training, workforce development staff at each site developed these white lists based on experience delivering similar services in community-based AJCs. Both jail leadership and jail IT staff needed to approve these lists to ensure that they were sufficiently secure and relevant to job search skills instruction. Grantees described the process of developing and finalizing these lists as an important priority and milestone in planning their jail-based AJCs.
- **Wiring and installation.** After Internet access plans and white lists were approved, grantees still needed to engage other county departments (such as a county public works department or county IT department) or use outside vendors to survey the space, pursue structural modifications for wiring, and install Internet access. It was important to clarify early in the planning phase which county departments needed to be involved and what procurement processes and clearance procedures would be required for outside vendors to work inside the jail.

Figure 1. Examples of “White List” Websites Approved for Pre-Release Services



Challenges Encountered and Strategies for Navigating Them

Two primary challenges emerged as grantees arranged for Internet access in jail-based AJCs:

- **Unplanned costs.** Spending on Internet installation ranged from \$7,000 to \$30,000, and four of the eight grantees spent more than planned. Most jail buildings have thick concrete walls and floors, and some grantees had not planned for the extensive work needed to drill for appropriate wiring.⁴ Some grantees also had planned to repurpose older computers but discovered that jail IT security policies required that all machines be delivered directly from the manufacturer to ensure they did not have any unauthorized programs installed.

- **Unanticipated delays.** At the time of the site visits—approximately one month before the end of the planning period, four of the eight jail-based AJCs still did not have Internet access due to various delays.
 - **Delays in obtaining approval for Internet access plans from jail directors and IT staff.** These delays occurred either because stakeholders needed more time to resolve differences in vision or, in one case, because there was turnover in jail leadership positions during the planning process.
 - **Delays due to jail infrastructure issues.** Four of the grantees could not move forward until they addressed infrastructure issues to prepare the space for Internet installation, such as installing additional electrical outlets.
 - **Delays due to county procurement processes and Internet service provider availability.** Although specific procedures vary by jail, generally all work orders—for example, for drilling to create ports and electrical outlets, or for contractors to configure machines to meet jail security settings—had to go through an extensive contractor procurement process. Internet access installation also required using an Internet service provider, such as Comcast or AT&T, which often have long wait lists for major projects.

Grantees reported that the following factors helped them navigate these challenges:

- **High-level support from jail leadership.** Securing buy-in from jail administrators at the proposal stage minimized the need for continued discussions (after grant award) about whether to allow Internet access in the jail, and enabled grantees to focus on installation details. Three grantees also noted that support of an entity with oversight over both jails and WIBs, such as a county executive, helped expedite Internet installation.
- **Early planning.** Grantees stressed the importance of developing a detailed plan for Internet access in collaboration with jail leaders and for jail IT staff to review that plan as early as possible, even at the proposal stage. This could help to anticipate time-intensive processes and potential infrastructure costs. They also suggested that early identification of the websites necessary for planned pre-release programming was important for timely review and approval by jail leadership and IT staff.

Internet installation in a jail setting is a complex endeavor that requires close collaboration between workforce development and jail partners, at both the leadership level and between technical staff from both entities. Three key approaches—flexibility, advanced planning, and adequate budgeting—were critical for ensuring successful installation despite the inherent complications of attempting to arrange Internet access in a jail-based AJC.

Endnotes

¹ D’Amico, Ronald, et al. “Providing Public Workforce Services to Jobseekers: Findings from the WIA Adult and Dislocated Worker Program Gold Standard Evaluation.” Prepared by Social Policy Research Associates for U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Employment and Training Administration (ETA). Washington, DC: DOL, ETA, forthcoming.

² Dryden, Benjamin R. “Technological Leaps and Bounds: Pro Se Prisoner Litigation in the Internet Age.” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law*, vol. 10, May 2008, pp. 819; Institute for Higher Education Policy. “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons.” Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011.

³ One grantee revised its service plan to offer pre-release services without Internet access, because, after submitting the proposal, their jail partner implemented strict regulations prohibiting use of computers, cell phones, and tablets in secure areas of the jail.

⁴ Most grantees are using hardwired, rather than wireless, Internet. The only grantees that were using wireless Internet are those that already had wireless Internet in inmate-accessible areas before LEAP.

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