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Structuring Employment-Based Services Within Jail Spaces and Schedules
Issue Brief—Early Lessons from LEAP

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Workforce development agencies must navigate jail spaces and inmate schedules to provide American Job Center (AJC) services effectively to inmates transitioning back to the community. The rules guiding the use of jail space and the scheduling of inmate activities can be complex and vary considerably based on each jail's structure, security level, reentry focus, and existing programming. This brief discusses how LEAP workforce development staff worked with jail administrators to gain access to jail space and their strategies for scheduling services inside the jail-based AJC. It relies on data gathered through site visits to eight LEAP sites during the planning period for LEAP, as well as tours of all 20 jail-based AJCs being implemented by grantees.

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

- The particular facility or area within the facility where the jail-based AJC was located, along with its associated reentry focus and security level, significantly influenced the development of the AJC, the process for participants to access the space, and the negotiations around scheduling of AJC services.
- Early onsite time with jail leadership and staff was critical for understanding space and scheduling parameters, assessing what was feasible, and making necessary adjustments.
- Securing the buy-in of corrections officers was just as important as buy-in from jail administrative staff, given the considerable logistics involved with inmate movement and the complexity of daily jail schedules.

Identifying Space for Jail-Based AJC Services

To establish a jail-based AJC, sites first had to identify and prepare space within the jail. The rules guiding the use of jail space could be complex and vary considerably between sites. However, all sites had to weigh the need to adhere to security requirements with the desire to create a suitable space—that is, one conducive to learning and employment preparation. Several lessons emerged on preparing spaces within the jails:

- **The jails' security level and reentry focus influenced the availability of appropriate space.** Facilities accustomed to incarcerating inmates at lower security levels typically already had a reentry focus and had suitable learning spaces, complementary programming, and relative freedom of movement for inmates. In addition, relatively newer jails or jail areas tended to have designs and layouts that were more compatible with an emphasis on rehabilitation and reentry programming, and thus were more suitable for a jail-based AJC.

- **Most grantees did not have a choice of jail spaces for the specialized AJC, so they used what was available.** Availability was the dominant factor in identifying space for the jail-based AJC. When there was a choice of spaces, grantees considered such factors as proximity to target populations (such as work release inmates) and the need for inmate escorts, which had considerable logistical and financial implications for the jail. Eleven of the jail-based AJCs visited had access to at least some space that they did not share with other programs, whereas the other nine either shared all of their spaces or were still determining sharing plans as of March 2016.

- **Jail-based AJCs were often located in or adjacent to housing units and/or educational areas.** Educational areas often included classrooms and programming space such as a library, computer lab, vocational shops, a chaplain's room, or a medical office. For nearly half of the sites, the primary jail-based AJC space consisted of a single room, often a classroom. The remaining sites had access to
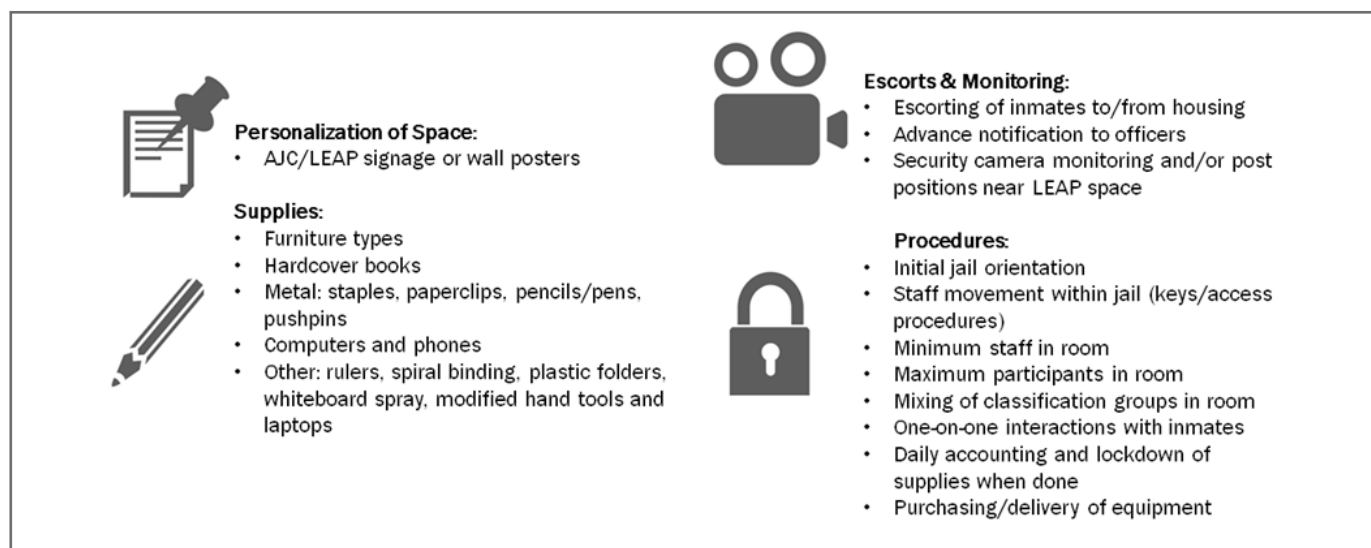
multiple primary spaces, including classrooms, computer labs, libraries, and/or staff office spaces. Most spaces lacked exterior windows, but had interior windows for monitoring. Three sites used a gym, multipurpose room, or open space in a housing pod. Only one site had its primary AJC space in a standalone building for inmate programming.

- **Jail areas intended for reentry programming needed little remodeling.** Jail-based AJCs located in spaces not intended for reentry programming had to undergo various renovations, including replacing old furniture, painting, and wiring for computer and Internet access (see companion brief *Internet Access for Pre-Release Job Training* for information on securing Internet access in jail-based AJCs).

In addition to being affected by the jails' existing layout, security level, and reentry focus, specific policies and restrictions also influenced how the jail-based AJC space could be configured, operated, and utilized. Figure 1 illustrates how jail policies, which vary considerably across jails, could influence operation of a jail-based AJC.

Figure 1. Areas of jail-based AJC operation that may be affected by jail policies

Personalization of Space:
- AJC/LEAP signage or wall posters

Supplies:
- Furniture types
- Hardcover books
- Metal: staples, paperclips, pencils/pens, pushpins
- Computers and phones
- Other: rulers, spiral binding, plastic folders, whiteboard spray, modified hand tools and laptops

Escorts & Monitoring:
- Escorting of inmates to/from housing
- Advance notification to officers
- Security camera monitoring and/or post positions near LEAP space

Procedures:
- Initial jail orientation
- Staff movement within jail (keys/access procedures)
- Minimum staff in room
- Maximum participants in room
- Mixing of classification groups in room
- One-on-one interactions with inmates
- Daily accounting and lockdown of supplies when done
- Purchasing/delivery of equipment

- **Personalization of space.** About half of the jail-based AJCs had some simple AJC or LEAP signage such as a decal, poster, or banner. The other half were not allowed to personalize the space due to space-sharing considerations or rules prohibiting posters or wall decorations.

- **Supplies.** Allowable materials and supplies significantly influenced the use of jail-based AJC space. Many jails prohibited various forms of metal, including staples and pushpins, as well as furniture and supplies that could be repurposed as weapons such as hardcover books. Grantees and jail-based AJC staff had to coordinate closely with the jails to order furniture and supplies that met jail requirements.

- **Escorts and monitoring.** In developing their services, jail-based AJC staff needed to consider whether the jail required that escorts accompany inmates to and from AJC services and whether they needed to notify correctional officers in advance when inmates were scheduled to attend activities. Other forms of monitoring included security cameras and posted officer positions in or near jail-based AJC spaces.

- **Procedures.** A number of jail procedures guided staff's ability to prepare and use jail-based AJC spaces. These include minimum and maximum numbers of participants allowed in a room; rules against mixing security levels, genders, or individuals considered "incompatible" given combative history or gang affiliations; restricted access to restrooms for staff; and requirements to count and securely store supplies after class.

As a result, the jail-based AJCs visited for this study represented a wide range in atmosphere and features. Most were relatively sparse classrooms with desks, tables, chairs, and assorted equipment such as whiteboards, projector screens, computers, and filing cabinets. Many were also not strongly identifiable as an AJC, but a few grantees were able

to design the space to mirror the look and feel of their community-based AJCs to some extent—for example, with customized signage, inspirational posters, and employment-related materials. At least two sites also promoted the feel of a community-based AJC by securing permission for inmates to wear professional clothing while in the jail-based AJC.

Scheduling Jail-Based AJC Services

All sites had to adapt their jail-based AJCs not only to jail spaces but also to inmate schedules. Integrating AJC services into jail operations and inmate schedules required flexibility, coordination, and learning the ins and outs of jail procedures. This made it important to gain the buy-in of correctional officers—for example, by spending time at the jail prior to enrollment to network with officers or by holding an open house. While jail schedule details varied, they were always critical considerations for how and when to schedule jail-based AJC services.

- **Jail social service or programming coordinators often helped to schedule services.** Jail-based AJC staff usually worked with jail coordinators to determine an initial schedule and have it approved by jail leadership such as program directors or deputy wardens. At jails where enrollment in jail-based AJC services had begun shortly before the site visits, ongoing scheduling was relatively informal; staff might reserve time on a dry erase board or a paper schedule. As the number of participants increases and the AJC needs more time or space in the jail, jails may have to revisit the scheduling process.

- **AJC programming needed to account for other aspects of jail life.** Services had to be scheduled around head counts for inmates, lockdowns, mealtimes, laundry exchange, and visiting hours. Schedules also had to account for times inmates would not be available, such as when working in the jail or at work-release assignments for up to 40 hours per week, or when attending other jail programming. An instructor in one site divided a daylong class into smaller blocks of time over multiple days. AJC staff also reported working nights and weekends to accommodate participants' other commitments. Time required to escort inmates could also affect the schedule. In at least two sites, jails adapted their schedules to make it easier to find time for services—one moved laundry exchange to the evening and another allowed head counts while inmates were in class instead of requiring them to return to their bunks.

- **Staff need to be flexible in the face of unanticipated events.** Jail-based AJC staff reported having to accommodate any unexpected changes to their schedule. For example, if an inmate could not be located, a regularly scheduled head count could encroach on class time, requiring an instructor to catch up on material during the next session. Emergency lockdowns due to fights or security breaches could result in cancellation of a class altogether.

> Some workforce staff reported they had initially underestimated the complexity of scheduling and operations in a correctional facility.

- **Restrictions on inmate interaction further complicated scheduling.** As mentioned above, jails may not permit certain groups of inmates to interact, such as males and females. In response, jail-based AJC staff sometimes needed to schedule services in cohorts or in smaller groups than originally anticipated.

Establishing a jail-based AJC presented two core, interrelated challenges: the jail as a new working environment, and the jail's complex procedures and schedules. This required flexibility in an environment where security is top priority and schedules could change unexpectedly. In response, workforce staff spent early on-site time at the jail to: become accustomed to the environment without the pressure of service delivery; have candid conversations with jail staff about the feasibility of specialized AJC plans within jail parameters; and secure additional buy-in from jail staff, including correctional officers.

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