

“An Opportunity for a Reset”: The Experiences of Jail-Based American Job Center Customers Before and After Release

Issue Brief – Lessons from LEAP

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In 2015, 20 LEAP grantees across the country began developing and operating jail-based AJCs. The jail-based AJCs they set up aim to break the cycle of recidivism by linking participants to work and the workforce system early, before and immediately upon participant re-entry into the community. Preparation for employment and assistance with the job-search process were the core of jail-based AJC services, but according to participants, offerings went “way beyond resumes and interviews.” Participants described an array of assistance, including help reframing their thinking, access to supportive services, and comprehensive case management. This brief describes participants’ experiences, their impressions of the staff they encountered, and their suggestions for improvement, based on data from 18 pre-release and 9 post-release focus groups. Of the 3,110 LEAP participants enrolled as of June 2017, 104 attended the focus groups.

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

- Participants valued job-search preparation and assistance, instruction in cognitive-behavioral change, and supportive services such as help obtaining identification cards and transportation.
- Participants “felt human” in the jail-based AJCs, primarily because of their interactions with staff.
- Participants overwhelmingly reported strong, positive relationships with AJC staff, though in some sites they reported staff members were stretched thin.
- Participants requested more occupation-specific skill training and better coordination between jail- and community-based AJC staff and corrections staff to facilitate participation in post-release services and employment.

“We come here to prepare to find employment”: Participants valued job-search preparation and assistance

When reflecting on the most useful AJC services, focus group participants often mentioned guidance that enhanced their job-search skills or helped with the job-search process: help preparing resumes (and cover letters, job applications, and thank you notes), developing interviewing skills, identifying career interests, learning about the local labor market, and searching for work. Participants who had never received such instruction expressed particular enthusiasm: “It’s great—I never knew how to be interviewed,” said one post-release participant. “It was really my first time and I was kind of excited about getting my first resume done,” said another. Several said that guidance on when and how to appropriately discuss their conviction history was especially helpful.

Due to their varied levels of experience with job search activities, a few participants reported dissatisfaction with job-search preparation and assistance activities. In some sites, pre-release participants said they were already familiar with the content, while in other sites, participants thought that more class time should be devoted to these

core skills. After their release, several participants also expressed frustration that despite having developed job-search skills, they could not find work. “People won’t give me the opportunity,” remarked a post-release job seeker, concerned that he would continue to be rejected from jobs because of his criminal record.

Who were the jail-based AJC participants?

Participants in LEAP-funded AJC services were adults 18 years of age and older who had been sentenced and were within 180 days of their release date, and who had not been convicted of a sexual offense other than prostitution. Most (85 percent) were male, according to administrative data. About half had not completed high school (51 percent); some (21 percent) had attended college. Participants were of all racial and ethnic backgrounds: 55 percent identified as white, 32 percent as black, and 19 percent as Latino. Participants were incarcerated on charges that included property crimes, drug crimes, and public order offenses. This brief draws on the perspectives of 104 participants invited by staff members to voluntarily attend focus groups; as a result, this group may have been more engaged with services than the average participant.

“All I need so I can keep on going”: Participants said supportive services were key components

Before and after release, participants across sites reported receiving help securing identification, health and mental health services, transportation, public benefits, and housing in the community. “While the program focused on employment,” one participant noted before release, “it has also provided help and services well beyond those which relate to employment.”

Some participants considered supportive services a necessary precursor to securing or keeping a job. “I don’t know what’s going to happen... about me having housing,” said one participant before his release, “but I’m hoping that [the staff] tells me ‘you know what, we got a bed for you.’ And that’s all I need so I can keep on going.” After release, a participant explained that without supportive services, she would not have been able to work. Her driver’s license was suspended as part of her sentence, but she needed it to commute to her job and AJC staff helped her to reinstate it. Participants repeatedly said the help AJC staff provided to secure driver’s licenses, social security cards, and other forms of identification (before and after release) was one of the most helpful AJC services. Indeed, one focus group came to the consensus that the range of social service assistance was as beneficial as help with resumes or interviewing. “Social service help was big,” a participant remarked, “That stuff takes forever. Our food stamp cards were waiting for us when we got out.” With other needs dealt with, they could devote more energy to searching for work.

“Brushing up on believing in myself”: AJC services helped participants change their frames of mind

Several AJCs used curricula designed to enhance cognitive-behavioral skills, such as *Thinking for A Change*. Regardless of curriculum, participants across sites commented that what they learned changed their mindsets.

Cognitive-behavioral change. Participants repeatedly stressed that AJC services helped them to see themselves as potential employees and to change their thinking in a broader sense. “[It helps us] stay out of the prison thinking process,” said one participant before release. Participants placed high value on the skills they developed for managing stress, making better decisions, and controlling their emotions—skills they said would help them stay employed. A pre-release participant described a self-paced computer program he used in the AJC: it presented workplace scenarios that he used to practice handling workplace conflict. The program, he said, helped him “think beyond the [jail] walls.”

“I looked good in a suit and tie.”

A pre-release participant describes wearing business attire for the first time as part of a mock interview

“He talks to us like humans.” Several participants commented on the significance of being treated as AJC customers rather than as inmates. Many reported feeling “human” or being treated as “a person” in the AJCs. One pre-release participant noted that staff members “don’t look at us any different even though we are in jail. They just look at us like another person looking for help.”

“Confidence that I can get a job.” AJC programming “gave me the confidence that I can get a job with my record.” This refrain was echoed across focus groups. A pre-release participant who had never been employed described developing a sense of his own skills:

[An AJC staff member] asked me, ‘So, what do you like to do?’ [I responded] ‘I like to cook; I like to cut hair.’ She said, ‘Have you ever cooked anywhere?’ [In jail] I was in the kitchen. I was the prep cook, the cook, the chopper, dishwasher. She said, ‘Look, see you got skills right there you just didn’t know it.’ So shedid my resume, and I was a prep cook, washer, and server. I never knew I had those skills ‘til she helped me open up and dissect what I have.

A post-release participant with extensive work experience also appreciated the confidence boost: “[the AJC] helped me gain a little bit of confidence [to go] directly from jail into the workforce. [It] helped me with skills that I needed to do an interview, or even proper attire, and basic stuff like shaking their hand, or eye contact.”

“I ran into some good people”: Participants described strong relationships with caring staff

Participants held staff in high regard. When describing staff, participants used phrases like “dream maker”; “efficient, responsive, and real”; “very inspiring”; “a real breath of fresh air”; “real genuine”; “willing to bat for you”; and “someone who has become a friend and who I can confide in.” One participant said staff “actually care and want to keep people out of jail.” Another attributed his positive AJC experience fully to the staff: “I didn’t run into a good program,” he remarked, “I ran into some good people, which [enabled] me to move forward.”

Participants gave specific examples of ways staff assisted them. “[The case manager] always calls and checks up on me to see what I need,” said one post-release participant. Another noted a small gesture that had a big impact, “[A staff member] picked me up from the bus stop when [it was] raining.” Especially important was staff follow-through. A post-release focus group participant said: “There hasn’t been anything [the reentry specialist] said she could do for me that she hasn’t done.” Those words were echoed by others. Staff dedication appeared to ease the transition to post-release services: one participant noted that connecting to the community AJC was a way for participants “to show [the staff] that they respect the program.”

“[The staff] care. It’s not just something they say but it’s something we can see.”

Participants also appreciated the warmth of staff members. “I’m not used to asking for help,” a post-release focus group participant said, “So talking to them and feeling comfortable [makes it] a lot easier ... to ask for help.” One pre-release participant remarked “[The staff] care. It’s not just something they say but it’s something we can see.” When participants had histories of trauma, this feeling of genuine support was important. “I didn’t grow up with a mom or dad,” remarked another pre-release participant, “I never knew that love. I finally feel like somebody cares what happens to me.” Participants felt an especially strong rapport with staff members who had histories of justice involvement with several describing a formerly incarcerated staff member as “a role model for me.”

Some staff were stretched too thin. Participants in some sites said program staff were overburdened with large caseloads (staff in three of these sites reported caseloads of more than 80). One post-release participant shared that she would like “a case worker that can call [her] back.” Another said, “To keep it real, she didn’t really get around to me to make my resume... she was so busy with a lot of people she didn’t get a chance to work with me.” Participants suggested that a lower participant-to-case-manager ratio would improve follow-up, communication, and case management. Yet, participants in several sites noted that more inmates could benefit from AJC services, such as inmates held for long periods before sentencing who were not eligible for services.

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“It would be nice if...”: Suggestions for improvement

Participants expressed a desire for additional services, improved operations, and better coordination with the corrections system.

Additional services. Many participants requested additional services from their jail-based AJC (see box). AJC services varied across sites, so services that were requested in some sites were readily available in others. For example, participants noted the need for more specialized and advanced training and wanted AJC services that could help them develop new skills, such as computer classes and professional classes that provide certificates upon completion. As we describe in a companion brief, *“Providing Services in a Jail-Based AJC,”* some sites did offer pre-release occupational skills training. A participant who completed Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) training before release noted that this type of training “gives you a leg up on the competition.” Participants also requested financial and other assistance with preparation for college-level courses and registration in college.

Better coordination with corrections. Some participants noted areas for improvement to the operation of the jail-based AJC (see box). A common theme in these comments was that the jail and parole systems did not always facilitate service delivery. “The program wants to help people, but parole doesn’t let it,” one participant said, explaining that the Department of Corrections “is the hurdle inside, and parole [is the hurdle] outside.” Some

Requests for more or additional services

- More specialized and advanced training
- Career assessment
- More computer and Internet access
- Job search and applications before release
- Mock interviews with and stronger connections to employers
- Work clothing
- Help obtaining high school equivalency and college entry
- Assistance obtaining driver’s licenses and other transportation assistance
- Networking with former participants
- Cash assistance on release

Frequently suggested changes to jail-based AJC operations

- Better alignment with corrections
- More time in class and opportunities to present
- More promotion of AJC services in the jail and larger class size
- Better communication about services offered

participants described difficulty accessing the jail-based AJC—for example not being promptly escorted to class. After release, the requirements of parole could conflict with the obligations associated with AJC participation and employment. “You have to meet with your [parole officer] once a week, you got to do this or do that, and then you got to work, and then you have to go to another [program]. It’s hectic. [You] have to make a serious decision: ...Am I going to miss this or that?” To address these challenges, one AJC worked with parole so that participants who worked during the day could check in during the evening.

Conclusion

Participants in pre-release and post-release focus groups agreed that AJC services gave them hope and helped them prepare for successful reentry. One pre-release participant repeated the words a staff member had spoken: “This is an opportunity for a reset.” Although participants in some sites noted the need for some improvements, in many cases, the comprehensive AJC case management helped participants set and work toward goals. “My goal,” one participant said before release, “[is] to walk out of these doors and not come back, to keep my mind focused on getting a job, and have support and a fall-back network.”

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