

Bridging Workforce Development and Corrections Cultures

Issue Brief—Early Lessons from LEAP

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November 2016

The creation of specialized American Job Centers (AJCs) in jails requires that workforce development agencies and corrections agencies learn about and adjust to each other's organizational cultures, including priorities, rules, assumptions, and decision-making processes. Although 16 of the 20 local workforce investment boards that received Linking to Employment Activities Pre-release (LEAP) grants had previously provided post-release services to transitioning offenders, only four had prior experience with providing pre-release services in jails. This brief draws on data from visits to all 20 LEAP sites and focuses on the strategies the grantees used during the early planning and implementation period to build common ground between jail and workforce staff in promoting successful reentry for participants.

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

- Bridging the different organizational cultures of workforce development and correctional systems required ongoing communication and support between key leaders and staff members from both systems.
- Although developing a jail-based AJC requires adjustment by both workforce development and jail partners, the level of accommodation and acculturation was generally higher for workforce staff who viewed themselves as “guests” who needed to conform to jail guidelines and rules.
- Formal staff trainings and co-location of workforce staff at the jail during the planning phase helped to strengthen the jail-based AJCs and acclimate workforce staff into jail culture and norms.

Context for Partnership and Collaboration

Workforce and jail staff generally had very positive perceptions of the quality of their relationships and saw the creation of a jail-based AJC as part of a longer-term effort to promote collaboration between workforce development and corrections partners. Three factors may have contributed to this perspective:

- **Previous collaboration.** In nine sites, workforce and jail staff had participated in local decision-making bodies such as “reentry councils” or “community corrections partnerships,” which helped to lay the groundwork for a jail-based AJC. These bodies brought together public agencies, private companies, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based organizations to address reentry issues. In eight sites (including five from the group just mentioned), workforce and jail staff had collaborated on a previous federal grant-funded reentry effort, such as Face Forward, Second Chance, or Project Rise, and on state- or county-funded reentry initiatives.
- **Supportive policy environments.** State and local policy environments often helped foster buy-in among different kinds of partners for an increased focus on rehabilitation and successful transition. For example, in California—a state where low-level felons are often housed in local jails rather than state prisons—reentry and realignment reforms have emphasized cross-sector partnerships while increasing resources for jail expansion and reentry services. Thus, key partners were looking for ways to collaborate when the LEAP funding was announced.
- **Resource limitations.** Jail staff in four sites embraced the LEAP grant as a way to close a gap in services. These jails were previously unable to offer reentry and workforce services in the jail because of limited staff and resources.

In all, staff at 12 sites indicated that the jail and workforce development systems shared a commitment to enhancing reentry services before the grant existed.

Bridging Jail and Workforce Cultures

Workforce and jail staff at jail-based AJCs emphasized the importance of providing time and space for workforce and jail staff to adjust to one another's organizational cultures. Both explicit and implicit assumptions and values that guided the work of each agency influenced staff members' interactions and decision making, and set the rules for implementing the jail-based AJC.

- **Distinct roles.** According to respondents, the differences between the organizational cultures of jails and workforce systems reflect the distinct roles of their agencies and staff. The primary role of corrections officers is to ensure safety and security, and they focus on “care, custody, and control.” To achieve these goals, jails are generally hierarchical; staff must clear decisions through a chain of command and use formal titles such as “commander” and “lieutenant” to refer to one another. Jails also have detailed procedures to regulate inmates' movement, schedules, and programming. In contrast, the primary role of workforce staff is to help clients find and maintain employment, which, in the context of a jail-based AJC, requires staff to help transitioning offenders envision their future outside of the jail. Thus, workforce staff members often tried to make the jail-based AJC feel different from the rest of the jail, with more lighting and brighter colors, motivational posters, and a more professional, business-like environment. They also focused on treating inmates as they would any client in a post-release environment.
- **Workforce staff adjusting to the jail.** Although both jail and workforce staff needed to learn about and adapt to different organizational approaches, workforce staff had to balance their desire to create a post-release culture with the need to conform to the jail rules and setting. A few grantees provided ongoing training and support to staff working in the jail-based AJC to help them navigate this acculturation process. In addition to mandatory jail safety orientations, one grantee instituted its own orientation for workforce staff on navigating jail procedures. Another grantee held weekly check-ins during the start-up period to allow jail-based AJC staff to ask questions, discuss solutions, and debrief about their experiences.
- **Orienting jail staff.** Some grantees found it challenging to get buy-in from corrections officers responsible for escorting inmates to the jail-based AJC if the jail staff did not understand the purpose of the center. To address this, one grantee had the jail staff tour a community-based AJC to see what an AJC looks like. Another grantee held an open house for other jail staff to tour the jail-based AJC space and ask questions.
- **Acceptable modifications to jail practices.** The workforce staff in some local areas successfully advocated for modifications to jail practices that were important for the jail-based AJC's atmosphere while ensuring compliance with the jail system's standards on security and strict adherence to protocol. This ranged from selection of paint colors for the walls to permission for inmates to dress in suits for mock interviews. The staff viewed these types of accommodations as essential for creating a space where participants could begin to transition from inmate to job seeker.
- **Variation across jails.** The degree of cross-cultural negotiation varied depending on the structure of the jail. Adaptation was generally easier in more flexible, lower security settings than in more traditional or higher security settings, even for workforce staff who had previous experience working in the jail. Settings where workforce staff reported adjusting quickly included reentry or community corrections centers where the focus was already on rehabilitation and transition back into the community, jail facilities that work primarily with work-release inmates, and jails with a direct supervision model that allows inmates more freedom to move about and interact with jail staff.

As guests within the jail, workforce staff saw it as their role to adapt to the jail culture.

Respondents emphasized that it takes time for the jail and workforce system partners to make the accommodations needed to develop a strong collaboration. Thus, LEAP's nine-month planning period proved vital for jail and workforce partners to adjust to each other's organizational cultures and build relationships between jail-based AJC staff and corrections officers. All respondents agreed that the effort is well worthwhile, as it enabled the two partners to actualize how best to achieve their shared vision of improving reentry.

Suggested citation for this brief: Lewis-Charp, Heather. “Bridging Workforce and Corrections Cultures.” Princeton, NJ, and Oakland, CA: Mathematica Policy Research and Social Policy Research Associates, 2016.

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This project was funded, either wholly or in part, with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Labor's Chief Evaluation Office under Contract # DOL-OPS-15-U-00196. The contents of the publication do not represent the views or policies of the Department.

