

Issue Brief

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Participants' Perspectives During Reentry Project Programs

Stable employment is critical to successful reentry (Bertram and Wang 2022). The Reentry Project (RP) grants aimed to help individuals leaving incarceration engage in pro-social activities, including employment (U.S. DOL, 2018). Justice-involved individuals experience staggering rates of joblessness (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021) due to unique barriers when attempting to rejoin the workforce after incarceration. This brief draws on data collected from 37 participant interviews conducted during virtual site visits with 24 grant programs as part of a comprehensive implementation study to explore the development of and services provided by grantee organizations.²

Study background

This issue brief is part of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office that explores the implementation and impact of the Reentry Project (RP) grants. DOL's Employment and Training Administration awarded a total of 116 grants in 2017, 2018, and 2019. These grants aimed to improve employment and public safety outcomes and reduce recidivism for individuals previously involved in the criminal justice system.

Chief Evaluation Office
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR 

RP virtual site visits

The evaluation team conducted 27 virtual site visits with selected 2018 and 2019 RP grantees between December 2021 and April 2022. Sites were chosen by examining certain grantee characteristics (such as population served, geography, and program features) to ensure selection of a diverse set of grantees to inform impact study results and explore promising practices of interest to DOL.¹ Site visits typically included interviews with RP program staff, employers, a training provider, a justice system partner, an American Job Center partner, and program participants.

This brief highlights the service needs that interviewed RP participants³ reported when leaving incarceration; their barriers to employment; their experiences during and after they participated in the programs; their perspectives on program elements such as vocational training, supportive services, and job placement; and their recommendations for improvement. Drawing on insights provided through participant interviews, this brief seeks to understand how select participants experienced RP services, as well as learning from them to understand potential challenges participants face when engaging in reentry programming and practices they perceived as successfully addressing their needs. The findings included in this brief are not representative of RP participants, as they reflect the views of select participants from the subset of grantees included in the virtual site visits. This brief relies on the voice of participants to learn more about the RP programs and to highlight and elevate participant voices. Interviews with RP

¹ Additional information about the [Reentry Projects Evaluation](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Reentry-Projects-Grant-Evaluation) can be found in the detailed implementation report for the evaluation. Available here: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Reentry-Projects-Grant-Evaluation>.

² Additional information about the [Reentry Project grants](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/reentry/pdf/Reentry_Projects_Fact_Sheet_4.9.2021.pdf) can be found at: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/reentry/pdf/Reentry_Projects_Fact_Sheet_4.9.2021.pdf

³ Throughout this brief, we use "participants" to refer the RP participants who participated in interviews during virtual site visits.

participants were conducted from December 2021 to April 2022 over video. Among the interviewed participants, 34 participated in RP programs after incarceration, and 3 began participating while incarcerated.

How did participants learn about RP services?

RP programs worked with referral partners, including criminal justice system partners, to enroll individuals following their incarceration. Most participants (34) indicated that they enrolled in RP programs following incarceration. Three participants heard about the RP program and enrolled while incarcerated. Among those interviewed, 25 participants reported learning about their local programs through one of three main channels:

- **Word of mouth.** Participants most often reported (11 participants) hearing about their local RP programs through “word of mouth,” meaning that friends or family shared information about the program. Participants who heard about programs this way did so through community networks or from an acquaintance with first-hand program experience. For example, one participant heard about the program from a friend who had graduated from RP-funded training and began work as a union apprentice. Although the participant learned about the program while employed, the friend’s recommendation and the prospect of a better job prompted them to enroll.
- **Community organizations.** Nine participants reported hearing about RP through other community organizations or program partners. These participants learned about the programs from probation officers, nonprofit staff, or halfway house program staff.

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I joined the RP program because I went to prison and when I got out, I went to a halfway house. The RP program came to us and talked to us, and I decided to try it to see if I even wanted to be involved.
RP participant
- **Outreach from the RP program.** Finally, four participants heard about the RP program through the programs’ outreach efforts, such as flyers or RP program staff who gave presentations about services at organizations like halfway houses.

What motivated participants to enroll in RP programs?

Nineteen participants cited various reasons for joining their local RP program. The most commonly identified reason, noted by eight participants, was to improve their lives. As one participant explained:

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I joined to try to come out and do better. To get a better job, to look forward for my future, and my family. Take care of them the right way, and stop going back and forth to jail... and I mean, like now I have been doing that, because I have been taking classes, getting certificates... I am trying to better myself.

Building connections to work motivated six participants to enroll in RP programs. Three of these participants hoped to find employment leading to wages higher than minimum wage and career advancement. Five other participants joined RP so they could enroll in a specific vocational training, such as for a commercial driving license or flagger’s license.

What were the immediate service needs of individuals exiting incarceration?

RP participants stressed their motivation to improve their lives and identified service needs immediately following their release from incarceration that could help them achieve that goal. The most-cited need, identified by 10 interviewed participants, was finding a job. Participants' reasons for needing to immediately enter employment included meeting a requirement of their probation, earning an income to meet their own basic needs (such as for housing or food) or those of their family, and because jobs were perceived as an important component of their readjustment. Two of these participants also highlighted the need for good jobs as opposed to just any job. Another interviewed participant reported that a job "helps to make sure he has no time to get into trouble" and another added that:

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I think a main reason why guys go back to the street and go back to doing illegal activities is they come out here and they feel like they can't find a job doing anything, so they feel like they do not really have any other choice...you give guys options, I think... the recidivism rate goes down.

Pressing needs participants highlighted included:

- **Meeting basic needs.** Seven interviewed participants said that, after exiting incarceration, they faced challenges meeting some of their basic needs. The key basic needs they identified were housing (four participants), financial support (two participants), and clothing (one participant). One participant who mentioned the need for housing noted other individuals released from incarceration at the same time as they were continued to experience homelessness. Another participant emphasized that "housing was the number one" need. Participants did not elaborate on the kinds of financial support that could help them meet their basic needs, but four shared that they found the financial incentives and stipends provided by their programs were the most useful program elements.
- **Mental health support services.** Seven interviewed participants viewed mental health services as the most pressing need when leaving incarceration, and two of those participants described that support as necessary for readjusting to life outside of prison. Two participants also emphasized that mental health services help address the trauma justice-involved individuals experience before incarceration, which increases during incarceration, or trauma experienced during incarceration. Two participants explained that mental health services could help during the readjustment period after incarceration, and the other three noted that readjustment is a difficult process.

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It is hard to live out here, sometimes I wish I were back in prison. The psychiatric part of life needs to be better addressed.

RP participant

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If you did 10 or more years, you do not know what living outside is like anymore. You think you do. That is important. You think you do.... It was kind of weird. I felt isolated here.

RP participant
- **Legal services.** Four interviewed participants identified legal services, specifically record expungement, as a pressing need. Two of those participants expressed that criminal records made it

difficult to find a job, and two other participants added that their record made looking for housing challenging.

- **Vocational training.** Two interviewed participants viewed accessing vocational training services as a pressing need, because obtaining skills “help[s] people move forward in life.”
- **Services in the preferred language.** One participant observed the pressing need in their local area for services in their primary language. In their case, they felt some justice-involved individuals were underserved because staff at the RP program did not speak their primary or preferred languages.
- **Other supportive service needs.** Interviewed participants also identified transportation, education, child care, mentorship, awareness of services, and having more available RP programs as pressing needs for people leaving incarceration, but they did not elaborate on the importance of these needs.

What barriers to employment did RP participants face?

Though interviewed RP participants often prioritized finding employment, they also shared their perspectives on barriers they faced finding and retaining work. One of the biggest barriers, mentioned by 14 interviewed participants, was their background with the justice system. They explained that they perceived their backgrounds as eliciting a negative bias from employers (seven participants), a belief that certain types of prior offenses precluded them from certain fields (three participants), and a belief that they were denied jobs because they did not pass the employer’s background check (four participants).

For those who talked about employers’ perceived biases, they felt that on job applications “people judge you by your past” and that employers perceive individuals with a record as “untrustworthy, irresponsible [or] lazy.” One participant added that they were denied a job because of their background and that it was a “battle when you keep getting denied and denied.” They emphasized that, after so many denials, “you do not know where to go. So, most people turn to what they know. Turning to drugs, robbing, and stealing.” Another participant perceived that their background was a demerit on their application, and they felt they needed “training, certification, and OSHA classes” to stand out, given their background.

At least seven participants indicated that the poor quality of available jobs created a barrier to finding and retaining employment. These interviewed participants aspired to good jobs, which they described as



We are more likely to get a temporary job and get hired on there, than go out there and get regular job like Amazon or some big warehouses that pay well – they give us the low barrel drop based on our background. I feel like we could just be treated equally; we did our time, and we are back in society. They should treat us like ordinary citizens.

RP participant

Defining a good job

Participants’ conceptualization of a good job was similar to how the Economic Development Administration (EDA) defines a quality job. The EDA defines a quality job as a job that exceeds the local prevailing wage for an industry in the region, includes basic benefits (for example, paid leave, health insurance, retirement/savings plan) and/or is unionized, and helps the employee develop the skills and experiences necessary to advance along a career path (U.S. Economic Development Administration 2021).

providing a pay “you can survive on,” offering opportunities for upward mobility, and doing something meaningful or being appreciated. Additional barriers to employment that participants reported included:

- **Unreliable transportation.** Seven participants stated that not having reliable transportation, for example, because they lacked a driver’s license, made it difficult to get to and from work and training. One participant added that they could not attend an interview because they could not coordinate transportation there.
- **Lack of self-motivation and/or self-confidence.** Five participants mentioned that a barrier to employment was their own lack of motivation or confidence. One participant said that RP helped them develop the positive mindset needed to enter a work environment.
- **Age.** Two participants noted that their older age prevented them from entering the union apprenticeship of their choice, or the labor-intensive type of work the program offered.
- **Lack of reliable communication methods and access to technology.** One participant indicated that a lack of reliable communication methods made it difficult to contact (or hear from) employers about work. Another participant added that they did not have access to a computer at home to be able to apply for jobs and that “it would be a barrier if [I] did not have access to the RP program.”

What did participants think about RP services?

Interviewed participants described receiving a variety of services through RP that met their needs and addressed barriers to employment. Although each RP program offered unique sets of services, participants reported receiving services such as: occupational training and high school equivalency test completion support, staff encouragement and moral support, job search preparation (such as creating a resume and preparing for interviews), transportation and housing support, legal services, health services support (such as referrals to health insurance and counseling or therapy), support services (such as clothing and food), financial literacy training, and a stipend while in training. Interviewed participants identified a range of services that were useful for their futures and helped meet their needs. These services included vocational training, support from program staff, job readiness, legal services, and support services (e.g., clothing, housing). One participant described how the combination of training and other services helped him:



They asked what I wanted a career in, and showed me a list of things to do in school. I found plumbing more interesting than any other things. I was planning on being a technician but decided to go to the plumber’s way. They paid for my first semester of plumbing apprentice 1. They helped a lot because I was taking the bus a lot at the time, so they bought me a bike so I could get to school. I went to school for one whole year and they gave me a certification from RP Program and I got a certification from the school that I passed the semester so I can get a job way easier. They helped me get a better job that’s now paying me \$25/hour. They really helped a lot. They’re good people. If it wasn’t for them, I’d probably be on the streets.

Training and certifications

The service that participants most commonly reported as useful for their future was training and certifications (10 participants). Seven participants also reported that training services helped meet their

needs. These services included high school equivalency test preparation and occupational skills training. Participants valued the high school equivalency preparation classes because they served as the foundation for occupational training and further education. One participant explained, "...the [high school diploma] is what's going to get me far." Another participant explained the help she received with GED completion was useful because "in the world we live in you have to have a high school diploma in order to do anything."

Participants also stressed that they valued the training and certifications they received because they helped them gain the skills and credentials needed to find employment. As one participant described:

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You give a guy a vocational skill like heating and air conditioning or welding or truck driving, you give a guy a skill like this, this guy is going to make himself employable, he's always going to be able to find some employment.

Other participants appreciated training and certifications because they provided portable skills and credentials. One participant who specialized in plumbing further explained:

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I can always take calls for plumbing. It will always help you in the future because let's say, if my water doesn't work, or my sink is backed up, anything that deals with pipes goes wrong in general, I can fix it myself. [The RP program] set me that way. They paid for my school, to go to school to be a plumber, and that motivated me to become a better man. I'm going to get all that they paid for. If they paid for my school, I'll be the best plumber there is. And in the future, I can fix anything in my house right now because I went to school for it. The best part about it is I can set my own prices.

Two participants valued the certifications earned after completing their training. As one interviewed participant described it, "The information for the CDL [commercial driver's license], me getting my forklift certification, they were very helpful as far as trying to help me look for work." Similarly, another participant said, "Getting my forklift certification; they sent me the same day and show that I can pass it. They definitely helped me and a lot of forklift jobs. Checking on me all day. If I miss a call, I will call them back."

Support and encouragement from program staff

RP participants valued the encouragement provided by RP program staff, in addition to the services that staff provided. Eight participants called particular attention to the support and encouragement they received from RP program staff. Six of these participants highlighted that the moral support they received from their case managers helped address their needs. Participants expressed appreciation for the guidance, encouragement, and safe spaces program staff provided. As one interviewed participant explained:



What I've learned, from then to now, from the [RP program], is that you always have somebody to come to and that will support you and that will support your dreams and be a crutch, sometimes, in your life...I think I can multitask better now than what I could do before. Because, one time, I couldn't focus on two, three, four, five things. Now I can multitask myself. And now I got this. I got that. I got two, three classes. I got homework. I got kids. I got to balance everything out. And, that being said, I just... All those things they helped. And they balanced out the work in my life, some way, shape, or form.

Participants described how they took great comfort in knowing that program staff would catch them if they fell. As one interviewed participant described, “Well, I'm not trying to be funny, just them [the staff] in general, they[’re] motivation. It's the family vibe for me that helped me the most.... Like the family vibe, like how they treat you and stuff, basically, that what got me hooked.”

Similarly, 26 interviewed participants identified program staff as what they liked most about the program. Participants described several reasons for their satisfaction with program staff, including:

- **Staff lived experience.** Five participants appreciated that staff came from a similar background as them and could share helpful wisdom from their lived experience. As one interviewed participant described, “Well I mostly like the fact that there are people running the program who have already been through what I have been through and have been successful in society. And after incarceration for years [they] are able to help guide me through whatever I come up against and have worked with enough people to have been aware of a lot of the situations I may run into.”
- **Lack of judgment from staff.** Interviewed participants also highlighted how staff did not judge participants and gave them a chance to show they had changed. As one interviewed participant described, “To be honest, what I liked about the [RP] Program is that they don’t judge. They don’t judge you for your background, they don’t judge you for what you did do. They pretty much give you a chance to show them that you are a changed person, that you are ready for a different path in life and that is what I like about them.”
- **Staff provided encouragement and support.** Participants also liked how staff encouraged and supported them in meeting their goals throughout the program. One interview participant described the support as, “The greatest thing is having a dedicated CM [case manager] and the support. Cause even when you have family members and friends supporting you, when you have a CM that is supporting you strongly, it pushes you to great lengths.”

Job readiness and support services

Participants recognized job readiness and supportive services as valuable and viewed them as helping to address their needs. Among those interviewed, participants identified multiple supportive service needs. Eight participants expressed appreciation for job readiness services and 10 for supportive services. With respect to job readiness, one participant explained that “the readiness helped me out a lot. Like the format of it and practicing all of them. Knowing what to say and how to answer questions, it helped me a lot because I had never done nothing like that before.”

Participants most often identified financial literacy information (3 participants), transportation support (2 participants), and incentives provided (which are often gift cards) (2 participants) as useful. Others mentioned housing support, health insurance, and stipends provided during training. Similarly, two

interviewed participants identified support services as meeting their needs for clothing, housing, legal services, and therapy/counseling. As one participant described:

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They're helpful in every aspect. I mean I don't have any negative comments about them. I mean everything that I asked for, even rental assistance, they helped me with. When I was not able to pay my rent, they actually helped me with my rental assistance. There is nothing that I came at them with that they haven't helped me with.

One interviewed participant considered the combination of job readiness and support services facilitated participants' getting back to work. As they described:

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They help you to the point that you just got to show up to your interview to that point you just have to... And then even to your interview, if you don't have no way to your interview, sometimes they figure out, "Okay, well let's get you a bus ticket or some transportation to get there. If we need to come pick you up ourself to come get you to get there," then they will. And then say, if you have a car, you have your license or whatever the process is. If you say, "Oh, I don't have gas or anything." Sometimes they can help you out with a gas card to get to work.

Comprehensive services

Eight interviewed participants considered the comprehensive program services helpful. These participants explained that they appreciated the comprehensive nature of the program because it allowed them to get the services they needed, gain life stability, and obtain a job. One interviewed participant articulated this sentiment:

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They have a lot of programs. They got me enrolled in school. And they actually paid for me to go to school. I did not know if that would fall back on me. They are actually a big help. They actually got my case expunged and I really appreciate that as well. This program actually helps kids stay off the streets. Like the system take you and then they let you go for free and you still have to go back to court. This program actually keeps us from going back to our old ways. If it wasn't for this program, and I would have that gun charge and the charge would stay on me, I would been in the streets. I wouldn't have been no nurse. I wouldn't be going to nursing school. I would not be working. Like this program actually saved me and my little brother a lot. Cause my little brother was in a gang and is actually not in a gang anymore because of this program. They actually gave us jobs.

The RP grant programs appeared to help participants meet their needs in multiple ways including obtaining training, jobs, and support services that facilitated their return to work, based on insights shared by interviewed participants. According to one interviewed participant, it was the combination of services that was helpful:



[Program staff 1] filled out all my paperwork out. [Program staff 2] put everything together. They went into: Do you have housing? Do you need clothes? Do you need boots? When I say they armed me with everything I needed. I did not need a home. I already had a home. I just did not have that money to go to school. They sent me to [Truck driving school]. And what they did there, I got my CDL. I started my journey. I went to [Trucking company]. They gave me [my] first job.

The interviewed participants described RP programs as providing services that helped them transition from incarceration back to their communities, gain new skills, and find employment. They reported enrolling in RP programs because they were looking to change their lives and find employment, and while enrolled, they received services they needed to help them transition back to the community (such as housing, clothing, and transportation), learn new skills, and find employment. Interviewed participants indicated the most helpful and useful services were training, support from program staff, job readiness services, the support services they received (such as housing, transportation, legal services, and counseling), and the comprehensiveness of the program services.

What recommendations did participants offer to improve RP programs?

Overall, interviewed participants expressed general appreciation for RP programs (11 stated that they enjoyed the program and did not identify any shortcomings). However, other participants provided constructive feedback to improve some elements of RP programming such as training and job opportunities, outreach strategies, and supportive services. Their recommendations include:

- **Offering more variety for training and job opportunities.**

Overall, seven participants suggested broadening and diversifying the options available for training, certifications, and careers—to include careers that provide living wages and opportunities for growth.

- For example, two of those participants were older and stated that this was a barrier to entering the industry that the program was set up for. One of those participants suggested adding technology classes for less labor-intensive pathways and suggested that these classes begin before an individual is released from incarceration to prepare them.
- Two participants suggested the hands-on training could be expanded to be more advanced and/or more tailored to the career the individual is pursuing.



Look, I was 58 when paroled, I am 61 now. I am not going to be a plumber or a ditch digger. The vast majority of jobs that programs like RP have available are jobs for younger guys.

RP participant

- **Increasing RP program outreach.** Four participants suggested that the program could improve its outreach efforts.

- Two participants mentioned they would have liked to see more outreach occur during incarceration because “if you don’t have people out in the world for you, you won’t know that these programs exist.” One participant suggested that the program could go into high schools and do presentations there to recruit more young adults.

- **Increasing access to mental health services.** Two participants stated that the programs could benefit from expanding their mental health services to address readjustment and overcoming trauma. One participant felt they were “fending for themselves.” Another added that mental health services should be more accessible to Spanish-speaking participants, who they felt were underserved by the program.
- **Expanding transportation support services.** One interviewed participant noted that the program location was far away, and another participant identified the lack of transportation support as what they liked least. Those two participants suggested that the program should expand its transportation support services to address those issues.

Would participants recommend their RP program to others?

All interviewed participants would recommend the program to others. Exhibit 1 offers insights from RP participants on why they would recommend the program to others.) Several participants recommended publicizing RP programs more to enable more people to benefit from the programs’ services. As one participant described:

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Just getting the word out there because we have all these programs that are available for people like ex-felons and stuff like this and underprivileged people, and a lot of the people that the programs are for the people, the programs are targeting have no idea these programs are even out here... guys coming home from prison had never even heard, they have no idea these programs are even around. So, I don't know how we link the two together but if they could, if the two could be linked together, these things out here are life changing. You give a guy a vocational skill like heating and air conditioning or welding or truck driving, you give a guy a skill like this, this guy is going to make himself employable, he's always going to be able to find some employment.

Exhibit 1. Participants’ insights on reasons to recommend RP programs to others

Would you recommend this program to others?

During interviews, evaluation team members asked RP participants if they would recommend their local programs to others. Select participant quotes in response to this question included the following:

- Most definitely. I think just to reiterate what I said a couple times, it's just something that is definitely going to benefit someone if they know about it, whether it's to get a job, again, I don't know all of the resources that they have. I didn't use all of them, but for me personally, to get a job, to get schooling, to get a trade to anything into that nature just to get your life started.
 - Absolutely I would. It's gotten me a good job, and taught me a lot about how the job process works. And also, even if you have a job, you can probably find something you can benefit from it.
 - I would recommend it. It's helpful. They do whatever they can to help you succeed. So they pick up 50% of the workload. Well, in my opinion, I would say all you got to do is show up and be willing to learn and better yourself. They got everything else.
 - Yes I would, yes I would. Because I think it's a good thing. They can achieve out of life, being with [the RP program], because I mean [the RP program] help you, they help you get on the right track of your life. Résumés, job applications, this is something you want to do. You know what
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I'm saying? Or you want just be on the street? But as far as them, they want you to get on the right track. The right track of your life, doing the right thing.

- Yeah. Anybody that I know, because I still communicate with a lot of people that's in prison. So anybody that I know that's coming home from prison or that's needed a job or anything like that, I recommend them before anybody. Before even go into your apps or anything like that, I recommend that [the RP program]. And usually when people see what I'm doing, they already... They believe it and they go through it. So they see how I'm living. The process that I already been through. I just got out of prison eight years, within two years, I got everything that a lot of people out here still don't have.
 - Tell them come to the [the RP] program. They're good people that will help you. And, if you need any help, they're helpful. They're very helping people. They're very good people. I have nothing bad to say about the [the RP] program. Because the [RP] program has brought me nothing but good. So, in my book, it's thumbs up for the [RP] program.▲
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Conclusion

Interviews with RP participants provided an opportunity to better understand how RP participants experienced services in select sites. While these findings cannot be generalized to all RP participants, they help illuminate the interviewed participants' service delivery needs, characteristics, and barriers faced when engaging in services and seeking to enter employment. Their insights further highlight factors reentry programs might consider when designing their services to ensure that they align with participants' needs and goals as well as considerations when hiring staff to work with individuals with prior justice involvement.

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Additional briefs and reports developed for the [Reentry Projects](#) evaluation are available here: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Reentry-Projects-Grant-Evaluation>

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