



ACTION BRIEF

Taking Action on Workforce Development

Every returning prisoner will have access to the training and support needed to secure and maintain stable employment.

Overview

Michigan's struggling economy has brought to the forefront the value, as well as the challenges, of securing stable employment. For prisoners returning to Michigan communities, the challenges are even greater and the stakes are higher. When these former prisoners are unable to find work, communities feel the impacts of increased crime.

Unemployment has been identified as a contributing factor to many new crimes committed by returning prisoners (Philadelphia Consensus Group, 2002). Although unemployment cannot be separated from multiple factors as the single explanation or cause of criminal behavior, the inability to meet basic needs through legitimate employment may facilitate an individual's return to crime. As little as a 10 percent *decrease* in an individual's pay has been associated with a 10 to 20 percent *increase* in criminal activity; the higher the wages, the less likely parolees will return to crime (Bernstein and Houston, 2000; Grogger, 1998; Michigan Poverty Law Program,

2007; Travis, Solomon, and Waul, 2001).

On the positive side, research has consistently shown that finding and maintaining a legitimate job after release is one of the most effective factors in reducing recidivism (Harer, 1994; Lipsey, 1995; Sampson and Laub, 1993, 1997; Uggen, 2000). Furthermore, studies show that participation in prison education, job training, and placement programs is associated with improved post-release outcomes, including reduced recidivism (Adams, 2001; Gaes, 1999; Hull, 2000).

Despite the potential benefits gained from improving employment readiness and job opportunities for returning prisoners, achieving these outcomes requires significant effort on the part of returning prisoners, corrections agencies, service providers, community leaders, government agencies and policy makers to overcome myriad challenges. Individuals returning from prison, in comparison to the general population, tend to have less

work experience, less education, and fewer marketable skills (Coppock, 2007). These individuals frequently return to low-income, disadvantaged communities, where job prospects and access to employment services are limited. Because many of their neighbors are also unemployed, contact with a social network that can provide job leads is scarce (Reentry Policy Council, 2005). Aside from these individual and community-level challenges, returning prisoners are subject to discriminatory hiring practices. A study of all employers in five major U.S. cities found that 65 percent would not knowingly hire an individual with a criminal record, regardless of the nature of the crime (Justice Policy Institute, 2007). These and other challenges are compounded by a poor economy. In an economic climate, where the available jobs are in short supply for the general population, increasing work opportunities for this at-risk population becomes even more difficult.

This brief reviews the national research on workforce development strategies that are effective with returning prisoners, summarizes examples of the promising approaches emerging in Michigan as a result of MPRI implementation, identifies remaining gaps and barriers to achieving great success in this critical area, and calls for stakeholders to take specific action to improve community safety by increasing the success of former prisoners entering the workforce.

Promising Approaches

The many challenges faced in attempting to improve employment outcomes and reduce crime among returning prisoners are not insurmountable. As state prison populations reach critical levels across the nation, the drive to identify effective strategies for reducing crime committed by returning prisoners is yielding encouraging results.

The growing body of evaluative research in this area includes several recent reports on the positive impact of employment and education services for prisoners before and after release. For example, a three-state, longitudinal recidivism study of Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio prisoners released between 1997 and 1998 determined that 3,600 prisoners who participated in correctional education programs while incarcerated had a 29 percent lower recidivism rate than nonparticipants within three years following release (Steurer, Smith, and Tracy, 2001). Additional research found that prisoners participating in work programs while incarcerated were more likely to be employed following release and to have higher earnings than nonparticipants (Adams, 2001; Steurer, Smith, and Tracy, 2001). Furthermore, studies have consistently demonstrated that when pre-release preparation is combined with transition planning and immediate employment opportunities upon return to the community, individuals are more likely to maintain gainful employment (Reentry Policy Council, 2005).



The MPRI Approach

Consistent with the MPRI goal to promote public safety by increasing the success of prisoners transitioning from prison to the community, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), collaborating state and private agencies, and local communities are committed to ensuring that every returning prisoner will have access to stable employment or services designed to help secure and maintain stable employment (i.e., transitional employment, job-seeking assistance).

Michigan's workforce development strategy for prisoners builds on the MPRI commitment to improving assessment, programming, and case management practices at critical decision points in the custody, release, and community supervision/discharge process. The process is broken down into three components: getting ready, going home, and staying home. Prisoners' workforce development needs are identified and addressed at each phase of the process to build the skills needed to secure and maintain employment in the community following release.

Collaboration between state and local stakeholders ensures that planning and implementation are not only unified around the evidence of what works, but also responsive to local variation. Through the MPRI, 18 local sites, encompassing every Michigan community, developed comprehensive plans to guide the delivery of workforce development services for returning prisoners. As a result of these local, collaborative planning processes, sites have created workforce development strategies that are responsive to local workforce environments, thereby increasing the opportunities to meet the needs of both returning prisoners and local employers.

Even effective education and skill development do not impact the availability of jobs in the community. Research demonstrates that outreach to employers and job development activities are also

necessary components of a comprehensive strategy to improve employment outcomes for returning prisoners (Coppock, 2007).

Although much of the research on effective practices within re-entry workforce development services is still in development, the following are descriptions of specific elements that, when incorporated into an overall workforce development strategy, appear to produce positive outcomes, both in post-release employment and reduced recidivism.

Pre-Release Programming

In order to improve employment rates among returning prisoners, it is important to address individual deficits in education, skills, and work experience prior to release from prison. At the present time, there is little conclusive evidence of which specific programs work for whom, especially in relation to employment outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2002). However, enough is known to begin identifying the components of pre-release employment-readiness programming that tends to have the greatest effects.

Based on a review of existing research, the Reentry Policy Council (2005) provides the following recommendations for employment-readiness services:

- Match programming with offenders' needs and capabilities
- Design programming to enable prisoners to be functionally literate and capable of receiving high school or post-secondary credentials



MPRI Phase I – Employment Readiness

The MDOC has a long history of providing programs and services aimed at improving prisoners' ability to obtain jobs after release. In addition to Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) courses, MDOC has provided various opportunities for skills training and work experience. *Prison Build*, which provides training and experience in construction and horticulture, is one example of this type of vocational preparation.

Prior to the launch of the MPRI, the elements of education and workforce development programming were operated out of different offices. In order to increase collaboration and build a unified strategy consistent with the MPRI Model, these elements have been brought together to form the new Office of Employment Readiness.

Starting with a comprehensive review of the MDOC's current education and employment programming, the new office is responsible for planning and implementing this unified process of employment preparation, beginning with intake assessment and continuing throughout the period of incarceration, resulting in prisoners that are better prepared for the workforce upon release. The process will be highly coordinated with the broader assessment, transition planning, and programming described in the MPRI Model.

- Provide vocational and skills training that match the workforce demands in the community to which an individual will return
- Provide cognitive skills programs and motivational enhancement programs to encourage participation in employment readiness activities
- When possible, engage community service providers and

employers to provide skill-building programming

- Provide opportunities for in-prison work experience that correspond to the needs of the job market

Frequently, prisoners have multiple needs, in addition to education and skills training, that impact their ability to enter the workforce (i.e., pro-criminal attitudes and beliefs, substance abuse, physical and mental health issues, etc.). It is important that these needs are also addressed through a system of integrated programming, where individual needs are targeted without different programs working at cross-purposes with one another (Lawrence et al., 2002).

Although we lack the evidence to identify specific programs as best practices or definitively quantify the impact of pre-release programming on employment and recidivism outcomes, results of early research are encouraging. According to Travis, Solomon, and Waul (2001), studies examining the recidivism rates among participants of pre-release educational programming found that these individuals were less likely than nonparticipants to return to prison, by as much as 59 percent in one study. Additionally, research has linked similar programming with an increase in the probability of securing and maintaining employment following release.

Pro-Social Support and Mentoring
Many prisoners enter incarceration with varying degrees of cognitive deficits that influence criminal



thinking and behavior, such as procriminal attitudes, procriminal associates, and impulsivity. Furthermore, while incarcerated, individuals may develop coping skills for the prison environment that are not appropriate on the outside, particularly in a work environment. Examples include social withdrawal, dependence on institutional structure, and adherence to exploitative norms of prison culture (Reentry Policy Council, 2005). Employment-readiness strategies that fail to address these attitudes and behaviors may improve the skill set of returning prisoners, but will likely have minimal impact on reducing crime.

One method for addressing these cognitive-behavioral needs is through increasing prisoners' and returning prisoners' exposure to and practice with pro-social interaction. Lawrence et al. (2002) found that "the success of prison managers in inculcating pro-social behaviors among prisoners may be as important as programmatic offerings" (pp. 5–6). Using volunteer groups from the community, including faith-based groups, to supplement the efforts of prison and parole staff through mentoring can greatly increase pro-social interactions. The Reentry Policy Council (2005) explains: "The example of others who have faced similar challenges and succeeded, the permission to talk about personal issues with and form attachments to a group of peers, a sense of religious faith, or other forms of inspiration can support an individual's mental resolve to complete a rigorous

substance abuse treatment regimen, to get and maintain a job, or to peacefully manage family conflicts" (p. 204).

Transitional Jobs

The period of time immediately following release from prison is marked by high stress and instability for many individuals attempting to transition back into the community. Pressing tasks, such as finding housing, meeting basic needs, re-establishing relationships, and adjusting to a culture that differs significantly from the culture inside prison, demand time and attention. Within this context, obtaining adequate employment can be difficult, even for those returning prisoners with marketable skills. For individuals returning with insufficient preparation and/or special needs, the possibility of finding traditional employment begins to seem impossible.

The transitional jobs (TJ) approach has emerged as an effective model for immediate job placement that provides increased stability post-release, income to meet basic needs, specialized training, work experience, and improved access to traditional, stable employment. TJ "is a practical workforce strategy that uses *time-limited, wage-paying jobs that combine real work, skill development, and supportive services* to transition participants rapidly and successfully in the labor market" (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2007). While maintaining these basic elements, TJ programs can be adapted to meet the specific needs of the target population. For



Capital Area – Collaboration with Peckham, Inc.

The Capital Area MPRI (Clinton, Eaton, and Ingham Counties) has developed a partnership with Peckham, Inc. to improve employment outcomes for returning prisoners with significant employment barriers. Using a transitional jobs approach, Peckham provides real-world work experience in five different affirmative industries that provide a supportive work environment while providing world-class services and products. Returning prisoners participating in the program have access to assessment, vocational training and rehabilitation, and education services. The goal with each participant is to build his or her potential to obtain and maintain stable employment.

Wayne and Monroe Counties – Ready4Work Construction Project

The Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), the MDOC, and the Wayne and Monroe County MPRI partnered to design the Ready4Work Construction Project, which includes paid work experience, supportive services, skill development, case management, and faith-based mentoring for returning prisoners. This program provides parolees with meaningful work experience building homes in Detroit for low-income families. In addition, participants learn and practice appropriate, pro-social work behavior and workplace skills necessary to maintain employment.

instance, the length of the subsidized transition period, the hours worked per week, the wage, and the type of employer (i.e., social service agency, for-profit business, foundation, etc.) vary by program. The common goal of all TJ providers is to assist participants to transition into a permanent, unsubsidized job,

whether with the same employer or a different one (Coppock, 2007).

Multiple studies have highlighted the benefits of the TJ approach, particularly for hard-to-employ populations, including returning prisoners. Participation in TJ programs has been linked with:

- Increased rate of stable employment (Kirby et al., 2002).
- Increased job retention (Coppock, 2007).
- Increased income (Burchfield, 2002).
- Decreased felony convictions, parole revocations, incarceration for new crimes, and overall incarceration (Bloom et al., 2007).

Engaging Employers

Successfully transitioning returning prisoners into stable employment requires employers that are willing to hire returning prisoners. Although most employers understand and appreciate the benefits of safer communities, those benefits often are not enough to overcome employers' reluctance to hire individuals with criminal records (Justice Policy Institute, 2007). In other words, it is not enough to increase the supply of qualified workers if the demand for those workers remains low.



Berrien, Cass, and VanBuren Counties – “In-Reach to Employment”

The Berrien/Cass/Van Buren MPRI has focused its workforce development efforts on creating a seamless “in-reach to employment” strategy. The strategy starts pre-release when the local Transition Team meets with returning prisoners to explain the employment expectations and begins assessing and addressing potential barriers to employment and workforce skills and experience. Following release, the work started during in-reach continues with community-based services to address remaining needs, assistance with job searches, and ongoing supportive services. Throughout the process, the local Steering Team and service providers maintain direct communication with area employers and adjust programming and services to meet the needs of area businesses. The expectation is that the process will culminate in sustained employment.

Integrating employer engagement into workforce development strategies is one way to decrease misperceptions and discrimination and increase demand for qualified workers, regardless of criminal record. In reviewing three highly-successful employment services programs, Clymer (2003) identified four key principles of effective engagement of employers. First, quality counts. Successful programs were able to demonstrate consistently that they prepared highly-qualified employees that met the needs of local employers. Second, the organizations operated in a manner consistent with the business community. Employers were more likely to engage with organizations that shared common

beliefs and practices. Third, program staff worked hard to get to know the needs of employers. Through regular contact with local businesses and research of market trends, employment programs were better prepared to match employee skill-building activities with current employer needs. Finally, the organizations reviewed brought employers into all aspects of their operations, including board membership, volunteer opportunities, and program and curriculum design and delivery. Increasing the participation of employers increased their investment in the success of the program. By building on these four elements, very different organizations from different parts of the country were able to achieve target outcomes for employment placement and retention among program participants.

Gaps and Barriers

Although there is a growing list of promising approaches, both within Michigan and across the country, there are many remaining gaps and barriers to overcome. Research has identified a number barriers facing returning prisoners, including the stigma of a criminal record, inconsistent work histories, low education and skill levels, and physical and mental health issues (Hirsch, 1999; Holzer, Raphael and Stoll, 2003; Kramer, 1998; Sachs, 1999). Individuals without basic education and marketable skills are unlikely to succeed even at the most basic level (New Jersey Reentry Roundtable, 2003).



Kalamazoo and St. Joseph Counties

The Kalamazoo/St. Joseph Workforce Development Program provides returning prisoners with job skill assessment, job search strategies and soft skills development, transitional employment, and support services to overcome workforce development barriers. The combination of these four approaches has led to a reduction of high-risk behavior and job termination for MPRI parolees.

As a part of Taking Action on Workforce Development, MPRI local and statewide partners identified the most significant gaps and barriers faced by returning prisoners attempting to re-enter the workforce. They include:

- Employers' reluctance to hire individuals with a felony record
- Minimal community and/or family acceptance of returning prisoners
- Federal and state policies restricting the hiring of returning prisoners
- Laws restricting employment and housing options for sex offenders
- Insufficient soft skills, life skills, and basic education on the part of many returning prisoners
- Insufficient reliable and affordable transportation options
- Lack of proper identification
- Increased competition for low-skill jobs
- Lack of relevant work history and experience

A Call to Action

In conclusion, there are many promising approaches to help guide a seamless workforce development strategy. These strategies must be

implemented with a high level of quality to have positive outcomes for returning prisoners and their communities. At the same time, it is also important that action be taken to address the obstacles that continue to prevent MPRI sites from successfully linking returning prisoners with employment opportunities.

The following action steps are recommended for serious consideration by MPRI stakeholders.

State Action

- **The MDOC, in partnership with DLEG, should implement a national career readiness certificate process (based on ACT WorkKeys) with prisoners prior to release.¹**
- **MPRI stakeholders should review statutory and administrative barriers to employment and request that they be removed.**
 - Conduct a comprehensive review of barriers in Michigan to determine the extent to which this impacts returning prisoners.
 - When public safety is not compromised, advocate for the elimination of policies and procedures that create unjustified barriers to employment.
 - Where statutory or administrative barriers exist,

¹ For more information on the statewide effort to implement the national career readiness certificate recommendation, visit www.michigan.gov/cleg.



provide for a case-by-case exemption or waiver process that allows returning prisoners to demonstrate their fitness for employment. *Early efforts should focus on the statutory prohibition on hiring former prisoners to work for MDOC, regardless of offense and current qualifications.*

- Because of the likelihood of employer misunderstanding, advocate that criminal records reports include only conviction information, not arrest and charge data.
- Advocate for automatically sealing arrest information that does not result in conviction.
- Consider whether some conviction information should drop off after a period of time.
- When public safety is not compromised, new policies should allow former prisoners who have demonstrated rehabilitation to access criminal record expungement.
- When public safety is not compromised, parole conditions that restrict employability should be reviewed to see if exemptions are warranted.

■ **The Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG) should take an active role in addressing employer concerns by:**

- Simplifying, publicizing, and enhancing employer incentives.
- Removing disincentives to hiring people with criminal

records (i.e., DLEG's Office of Financial and Insurance Services should consider protecting employers who responsibly hire people with criminal records from negligent hiring lawsuits).

■ **MPRI statewide and local stakeholders should conduct public education and outreach to inform employers that “no-felon” policies may violate federal antidiscrimination laws.**

■ **The MDOC should ensure that returning prisoners have valid identification cards at the time of release.**

- State identification and birth certificates should be collected during the pre-sentence investigation process and maintained in the prisoner's records until release.
- Ensure that prisoners are released with documentation required to secure a valid State of Michigan identification card.

■ **The MDOC should modify parolee reporting requirements for individuals who work during the day to avoid interference with employment opportunities.**

Local Action

■ **MPRI sites should engage in ongoing efforts to increase the number of employers who are willing to hire returning prisoners.**



- **MPRI sites should develop processes that ensure that returning prisoners can meet basic needs while searching for a job and during the first weeks of employment.**

- **MPRI sites should utilize a combination of workforce development strategies to help provide a continuum of services for returning prisoners. Services should include:**
 - Pre-employment assessment and training.
 - Paid transitional employment.
 - Job development and job-placement strategies.
 - Ongoing support and training to increase job retention, including development of soft skills.

- **MPRI sites should ensure that workforce development strategies are coupled with cognitive behavioral programming that address additional thought and behavior patterns related to increased criminogenic risk.**



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Contact Information

For more information on developing a strategy to find employment for returning prisoners, please logon to www.michpri.com or contact:

The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC)

Le'Ann Duran
Office of Offender ReEntry
206 E. Michigan Avenue
Grandview Plaza
Lansing, MI 48933
Ph: (517) 373-3653
E-mail: DuranL@michigan.gov

The Michigan Works! Association

Luann Dunsford
Michigan Works! Association
2500 Kerry Street
Suite 210
Lansing, MI 48912
Ph: (517) 371-1100
Fax: (517) 371-1140
E-mail: dunsfordl@michiganworks.org

The Reentry Law Project

Miriam Aukerman
Reentry Law Project
Legal Aid of Western Michigan
89 Ionia NW
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
Ph: (616) 774-0672 x114
E-mail: maukerman@legalaidwestmich.net



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