

CONNECT News

Community Support, Networking, and Assistance for Environmental Career Training



The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute of Eastern Iowa Community College (HMTRI-EICC), with a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA), assists communities establish environmental job training programs. To better exchange ideas, HMTRI-EICC distributes CONNECT News, featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA Brownfields Environmental Job Training (BJT) grant program.

This month's issue presents consequences and impacts the criminal justice system has on community residents participating in the BJT program. It also discusses strategies grantees may consider when training this challenging population.



Training Returning Citizens Impacted by the Criminal Justice System

Since 1990 the number of incarcerated individuals has been rising exponentially. The “war on drugs”, “three strikes and you’re out”, get tough on crime policies, minimum sentencing guidelines, and economic conditions among underserved communities have resulted in over 70 million people with criminal records. Every year over 700,000 individuals are released from our nation’s jails and prisons. Many of these men and women are returning to underserved communities motivated and anticipating reentry into the workforce. However, reentry for the formerly incarcerated is challenging and often discouraging for those touched by the criminal justice system.



Often, formerly incarcerated individuals are treated as a single category of individuals unsuited for integration into a civil society. Only about 11% have been convicted of violent crimes with the majority ready to restart a living outside prison walls. Returning citizens interested in reestablishing a productive life presents an opportunity for Brownfields Environmental Job Training programs to stabilize and contribute to the wellbeing of communities where they may live.

When recruiting individuals touched by the criminal justice system, Brownfield Job Training managers need to develop an appreciation of the consequences faced by previously incarcerated individuals and the challenges faced in training and successfully placing graduates.



Are BJT programs sufficiently addressing special needs of returning citizens?

While many BJT programs include ex-offenders as part of their underserved target community, several programs have extensive experience dedicated to transitional training and workforce reentry. Programs including RecycleForce, The Fortune Society, The Pauline Auberle Foundation, and others such as The Cypress Mandela Training Center have many years of experience training and placing previously incarcerated participants. This

issue of CONNECT summarizes lessons learned from experts in transitional training in the following areas.

- Collateral consequences and restrictions faced by formerly incarcerated individuals reentering the workforce.
- Challenges faced by participants during reentry training.
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- Placement issues that may set graduates up for failure.
- Strategies to consider when training returning citizens for environmental jobs.

After reviewing special needs and issues facing formerly incarcerated participants, BJT programs need to determine if they are providing sufficient support when transitional training is included as part of their program.

Collateral Consequences and Restrictions Faced by Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Reentering the Workforce

It is important for BJT program managers, trainers, and placement staff to understand the collateral consequences returning citizens convicted of crimes carry with them as they attempt to reenter society.

The National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of



Conviction (NICC) terms collateral consequences as follows. “Collateral consequences are legal and regulatory restrictions that limit or prohibit people convicted of crimes from accessing employment, business and occupational licensing, housing, voting, education, and other rights, benefits, and opportunities.”

Some collateral consequences apply without regard to when incarceration occurred. For example, the revocation of a business license or certification after conviction of a felony any time in an individual’s past.

Consequences of conviction vary widely by state and type of crime with Vermont having the fewest number of restrictions and Louisiana having the most. Sometimes consequences are instituted to protect the general population, other times to deliver additional punishment to the perpetrator of crime. Example restrictions include:

- Restrictions on employment or volunteerism
- Occupational restrictions
- Licenses that may include a commercial driver’s license
- Government employment
- Ability to secure loans or grants
- Ability to receive SNAP benefits
- Fines, restitution, and civil liabilities

An excellent resource developed by the National Bar Association and updated with support from the Department of Justice is an online searchable database that identifies and categorizes the statutes and regulations that impose collateral consequences in all 50 states, the federal system, and jurisdictions governed by US law.

The site has State-by-State news and resources related to ex-offenders, incarceration and overcoming the burdens brought on as a result conviction. The National Reentry resource Center can be accessed at the following site:

<https://niccc.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/consequences>



Challenges Faced by Participants During Reentry Training

Food and housing are the first and second highest priorities faced by returning citizens. In most cases, released inmates return to their home communities, hoping for support from family and friends. No job, no money, a bad reputation, and a return to peer groups that brought them to prison are just the beginning of a long road to productive citizenship.

- Some participants are homeless with no transportation.

- In addition to mental issues, PTSD from incarceration is becoming more prevalent.
- Some participants have persistent health issues.
- Certain states require reentry candidates bear all costs of administration and tracking such as court costs, restitution, and ankle bracelets.
- Returning citizens may have an additional liability or “street debt” that needs to be repaid.
- Without employment basic life skills and personal hygiene are sidelined.

For these and many other challenges, almost 25% of prisoners return to prison within the first 3 years of release.



Challenges Faced by Instructors and Program Staff

Challenges faced by returning citizens are shared by those trying to assist in their transition to a productive life. BJT program staff and especially trainers may not be accustomed to working with transitional training. This issue is extremely important when understanding the issues faced by returning citizens attempting to start a new career.

- Many participants are still involved or impacted by drug use.
- Released inmates often seek out their previous peer group rather than positive mentors.
- Many returning citizens have not been in a classroom environment for years.
- Verbal and math skills may need attention when presenting the BJT curriculum.
- Language and gang affiliations have a potential for personality conflicts.
- Recently, the number of participants with mental/PTSD related issues is increasing.
- Release commitments are likely to conflict with training schedules and attendance.

Most returning citizens will require wrap around services including case management, legal advocates, life skills training, remedial training, and peer-to-peer mentoring.

Placement Issues that may Set Graduates Up for Failure

The unemployment rate of those attempting to re-enter the workforce is 60-70%. Here are a few of the challenges associated with placing graduates with criminal records.

- Some participants will need from 10-15 hours per week related to oversight, probation, counseling, and other legal issues.
- Employers are reluctant to take a chance on incorporating reentry workers into the existing workforce.
- Employers and the current workforce must be committed to assisting new hires that may have special needs.
- Transportation and housing may impede the productivity of returning citizens.
- Some employers may have concerns with legal liability associated with employing ex-offenders.
- Employers may be concerned, from a public relations perspective, employing workers with criminal records.



Strategies to Consider When Training Returning Citizens for Environmental Jobs

Strategies and best practices for BJT program working with returning citizens is an ongoing topic. HMTRI will be addressing this topic in future PLCs, grantee scans and All Grantee Meetings as it is an integral component when working with underserved populations. Failure to address the special needs of returning citizens could result in decreased retention rates among BJT grantees not aware of the challenges and strategies discussed.

Strategies for Recruitment and Assessment of Returning Citizens.

A difficult question for program staff to ask is the following. Is the BJT program sufficiently funded and partnered to address the needs of reentry applicants. The answer may be “no”. In such cases, program recruiters must determine who will be selected for the few seats available for BJT instruction and certification. With 20 seats per cycle, opportunities must be given to the worthiest and most likely to succeed in employment. It is of no value to a participant if he or she cannot graduate, obtain sustained employment, or disrupt opportunities afforded to others. Student recruiters and screeners must determine if the BJT program can provide returning citizens with the wraparound services they may need. Additional issues to be addressed include the following.

- What level of offense is considered acceptable for entry into the BJT program?
- Can returning citizens put former issues, toxic relationships, and personal behavior behind?
- Will housing and transportation be an issue in attending classes?
- Are program offerings flexible enough to accommodate participant absences?

- Will participants with special needs disrupt schedules, training, and certification?
- Are participants committed to program requirements, rules, and expectations?



Strategies for Instructors and Program Staff to Increase Student Retention

- Have instructors had sufficient experience working with reentry classes?
- Can the curriculum be presented graphically and with demonstrations?
- Will language become an issue to successful completion of the curriculum?
- Can leveraged partners and supporters provide remedial and wrap-around services when needed?
- Are legal services available to aid and assist participants?
- Are local health and wellness facilities available to participants?
- Are local partners able to deliver lunch daily if required?

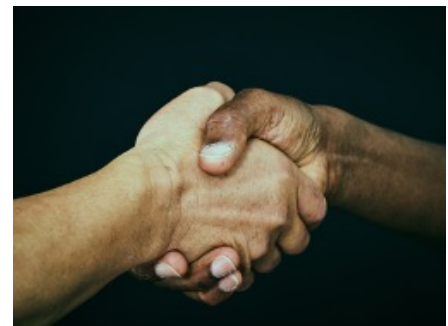
Strategies experienced BJT grantees have found successful include the following:

- Extensive use of peer-to-peer networking including volunteer mentors providing support and guidance.
- When possible, provide paid transitional work to supplement training.
- Encourage and support team building exercises.
- Engage in exercise before each session to begin the training day.
- Encourage graduates to return to the program and mentor a new participant.
- Institute the issuance of uniforms to mitigate gang rivalries.
- Always have a clear path from participant to program staff.

Strategies that Set Up Graduates for Success

As previously noted, failure to place BJT graduates is a failure of planning. Employers interested in interviewing and employing ex-offenders need to be recruited prior to accepting returning citizens for training. Graduate placement is the final deliverable for Brownfield Job Training grantees.

- Never let a graduate go for an interview without reviewing reentry challenges with potential employers.



- Many employers are interested in returning citizens who have been vetted, screened, and trained.
- Some employers are returning citizens themselves eager to help others and “make a difference”.
- Seek out employers with special programs for returning citizens.
- Participants completing the course of study have demonstrated reliability and determination.
- BJT graduates are vetted, screened, and carry with them as much as \$5,000 worth of certifications.
- BJT graduates have demonstrated their desire to begin a new life.
- Employers should plan on 10-15 hours per week related to oversight, probation, counseling, and community service if they informed of schedules in advance.
- Consider smaller employers likely to take a chance of reentry workers.
- Consider manpower firms able to indemnify their workforce.
- Many states have special employment incentives for reentry workers. Federal and State security bonds may be available to ease employer concerns.
- Previous graduates are the best sales force for BJT graduates.
- Allow a path for reentering the program if circumstances are beyond applicant control.

Clearly, there is lot to unpack when considering transitional training. Reentry into the green economy is an ongoing topic. Moving forward, HMTRI and BJT grantees will expand strategies and best practices when working with this special underserved and challenging population.

Additional Resources for Reentry Strategies

Green for All has published a best practices guide titled *Best Practices in Re-entry Strategies*. As part of the publication, Green for All cited the following best practices for organizations working with re-entry populations.



Best practices for assisting re-entry of justice involved individuals.

- Training Opportunities During Incarceration
- Transitional Jobs: Immediate Work and Income Upon Release
- Wrap-Around Support Services
- Soft Skills Development
- [Industry Certifications](#)
- Pre-Apprenticeship Programs

- Foster Relationships with Employers
- Retention Services

To access Best Practices in Re-entry Strategies go to:

<http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/greenforall/pages/5043/attachments/original/1430777271/GFA-Reentry-Paper.pdf?1430777271>

An Addendum and Update to the 2011 Report

An addendum and update to the 2011 report, *Best Practices Guide for Green Re-Entry Strategies*, researched and written by UCLA's Institute of the Environment and Sustainability (IoES). Since 2011, governmental, academic, and nonprofit entities have expanded efforts to close the "revolving door" of recidivism via green re-entry programs and initiatives. This addendum seeks to capture some of the key developments including:

- Updates on policy developments and economic changes.
- Barriers and opportunities for employment for re-entry populations.
- Best management practices for re-entry within the framework of green infrastructure.
- Recommendations. - Experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals and case studies from organizations.

For the full report go to:

<https://www.ioes.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/facilitating-reentry-of-justice-involved-individuals-into-the-green-workforce-final.pdf>

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HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community College providing technician training and environmental workforce technical assistance since 1987. For more information on HMTRI-EICC technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact us at: HMTRI@eicc.edu.

