



# RE-ENTRY PROGRAMS



*Improving the Quality of Life for the Formerly Incarcerated  
Population While Reducing Recidivism*

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Funded by all or in part of, the Department of Labor/ETA WIOA Formula Grants and Wagner-Peyser; the Department of Health and Human Services TANF and Child Care Development Fund; and the Food and Nutrition Service SNAP Employment & Training.

According to the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, the unemployment rate of those who were formerly incarcerated is about five times higher than the national unemployment rate.<sup>1</sup> The number of formerly incarcerated people without a high school diploma, GED, or college degree is also disproportionately low compared to the national average, at about 25 percent.<sup>2</sup> With high unemployment rates and lower educational attainment opportunities, the formerly incarcerated population may benefit greatly from continued workforce development assistance in order to break down barriers, connect them with basic needs, and improve the quality of life for the individual and community at-large. This is especially important in El Paso County, where the poverty rate remains at about 20 percent.<sup>3</sup>

At Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB), justice involved students and young adults are a priority in our mission to serve our region. Individuals with a background face various challenges that require innovative programs such as a human and family centered approach to financial assistance, education assistance, interactive workshops to one-of-a-kind career exploration. We work with various community partners to tap into the potential of our talented population that is looking for a second chance. Our programs are funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). However, we are continuing to strategically pursue additional collaborative opportunities that will further our efforts to assist these individuals in the long-term.

### **About Re-entry Programs**

Through our services, WSB has found that an individual who has been incarcerated faces one of the top barriers to employment next to childcare. Because of this, WSB became interested in better serving the population that was formerly incarcerated, especially since serving time in jail is also an employment barrier that then qualifies an individual for federal programs. Formerly, Project RIO through the Texas Workforce Commission was a standalone re-entry program with dedicated career navigators. Since its dissolution, there have been no specific grant funds towards this population. Instead, WSB has relied primarily on WIOA funding for these efforts.

To better serve the needs of this population, WSB wanted to develop a more holistic program. We created an initiative under Project WORK (Working Opportunities with Resources and Knowledge) for all re-entry services. This allowed us to narrow our scope and focus on serving this population separately via a pilot program that could fully support their needs. We provided employment services as well as case managers to assist with basic needs such as housing or help with questions on job applications related to their involvement with the criminal justice system. These initiatives not only assisted the individual, but also helped employers identify employees, especially in industries that are experiencing a skills gap.

### **Program Goals & Funding Sources**

There are two goals for Re-Entry Assistance with Workforce Solutions Borderplex as noted below.

- **Goal 1: Promote Job Readiness**—Improve individuals’ hard skills (e.g., basic education, technical skills, or knowledge of technology) and soft skills (e.g., professionalism, the ability to collaborate, or oral communication) either through education, training, or work experience. Address non-skill-related barriers to employment (e.g., mental health, substance use, and logistical challenges such as housing and transportation) with in-house programming or referrals to community-based treatment and social service providers.
- **Goal 2: Find and Retain Employment**—Link individuals to long-term employment and continue to engage with them after job placement to promote retention, help with reemployment in the event of job loss, and assist with advancement opportunities.

The funding sources for this program have primarily been through WIOA, since this is considered a barrier to employment that creates eligibility for the federal program. However, we have learned that there may be a need for dedicated funding that will focus on delivery of services specific to this population. Additionally, collaboration with other local organizations that provide housing or other basic services could be an avenue to explore in the future. For example, a one-stop shop with experienced case managers could assist this population with all needs (i.e., employment barriers, housing, food insecurity and mental health services).

### **Program Challenges**

One of the main challenges related to re-entry programs is the need for dedicated funding. After completing the pilot program, we learned that the formerly incarcerated population would greatly benefit from dedicated staff that can tailor their assistance in a way that is specific to their needs. Earmarking additional WIOA resources towards this population can help fill industry skill gaps and improve the individual’s quality of life by providing them with employment opportunities. Creating more opportunities for collaboration with subject-matter experts in the community that are already working with the formerly incarcerated population (i.e. former inmates, local organizations, government entities, advocates) can also help us further assist individuals as they transition into the workforce.

### **Outcomes and Results**

Through the pilot program, WSB identified various lessons learned and future opportunities for improvement moving forward. The program was intended to serve 20 individuals and although the program did not yield a 100 percent success rate, WSB did find success in the following outcomes:

- 2 participants completed their Industrial Mechanic Certificate on 9/28/2020

- 1 participant is currently participating in a WBL in our WIOA Adult as an Industrial Maintenance Mechanic Trainee at Justin Brands Inc making \$14.00/hr
- 1 participant is employed at Global Hospice Care as a Nurse Aid
- 1 participant remains on track and is set to complete their Industrial Mechanic Certificate on 05/28/2021
- 1 participant completed they Electrical Technology training on 12/4/2020 and is looking for employment
- 1 participant remains on track and is set to complete their Electrical Technology training in May of 2022
- 1 participant is in a Work Based Learning internship as Chill Pro working as an Electric Helper making \$10.50

### **El Paso County Jail Survey Results**

As part of this program, Lisa Rice, a consultant, also conducted a survey at the El Paso County Jail for participants and gained valuable insights. The following sections break down the aspirations and challenges that participants experience. We also learned about the type of resources these participants have needed in the past as well as the type of resources they will need in the future to ensure their success.

***Dreams*** - *“If you knew you couldn’t fail, what would you like to do?” “What goals do you have?”*

Many program participants surveyed were interested in starting their own businesses, finishing schools, or pursuing a diverse range of careers such as technology, the arts, healthcare, education, and social services. Many wanted to give back to the community in various ways. We asked what participants would do if they knew they could not fail. The following list includes some example answers from participants in the County Jail:

- “Stay sober.”
- “Pursue a good career.”
- “I won’t fail, I would like to just work and stay busy.”
- “Bachelor’s degree, work, school.”
- “I would like to travel the world, experience new things and learn how to become a very successful businesswoman in everything I do regardless of what business I go ahead and involve myself.”
- “Be a better mother.”
- “Be a doctor and help others.”
- “I would like to be a teacher. Preferable first through fifth grade.”
- “Be a motivational speaker, community organizer.”
- “I would like to open up a homeless shelter and a place where felons are able to obtain help.”

- “Be an addiction counselor.”
- “Open own business, computer tech, learn how to build electronics.”
- “Photographer, makeup artist.”
- “I would like to help other individuals such as juveniles dealing [drugs], not to go through the same problems.”
- “Obtain master’s in psychology.”
- “Finish college, get a degree and get a well paying job.”
- “Help others.”

**Challenges** - *“What makes it hard for you to accomplish your goals?”*

Through our survey, we also asked participants to discuss the challenges and barriers in their lives that may prevent them from pursuing these dreams. Many listed the fact that they have been incarcerated as a challenge to achieving a new start. The following list includes a few examples of responses from participants:

- “Drugs.”
- “Incarceration.”
- “Being a felon, my record.”
- “Don’t understand the process for obtaining financial aid and enrolling in college, creating credit, getting a job, my criminal history.”
- “Incarcerated unjustly.”
- “Bad choices, addiction.”
- “Stress of not making enough money or the resources to help a little.”
- “Needing assistance with rides, assistance with disability.”
- “Not having anyone be supportive or positively influence self, situation.”
- “Possibility of being convicted of current charges, be excluded from pursuing RN. Starting all over upon release.”
- “Depression, low self-esteem.”
- “Feels the chance is not there given incarceration, being labeled and put down, desires a second chance.”
- “Financial status, no break in getting a job without judgement due to past and record.”
- “Transportation, not knowing where to start.”
- “They close the doors on you to be able to get a good job; only in construction.”
- “I’m a convict and no one believes in second chances. When released from prison, many of us face many barriers upon release due to the judgement from the community, problems finding good jobs, making us feel rejected so we resort back to a life of crime and drugs.”

**Needs** - *“What benefits have you received? What do you need to succeed when you get out?”*



Before the program, an overwhelming majority of participants had received SNAP benefits (food assistance) in the past. Some participants had also received housing, Medicaid, Social Security benefits, and/or military benefits. Although these services may still be essential for some members of this population, an overwhelming number of participants also expressed the need for different types of support (such as the opportunity for employment) upon their release from jail:

- “Just someone to give me the chance or opportunity to start a new chapter in my life.”
- “A job and a good support system.”
- “Need to prove to self to stay out of trouble, stay around positive people.”
- “A job or career path or diploma.”
- “A job or paid job training, personal transportation, or some type of small financial temporary assistance to get what I need to get a successful job or just a job to begin with.”
- “A job, a second chance in life, a good woman in my life, and lots of love.”
- “A job, an apartment, and support such as a mentor.”
- “Programs for ex-convicts when I get out to be back on the real world. How to apply for a job, do a resume. It is hard when you don't get any type of guidance and get back to do the same mistakes again.”
- “Just a chance to prove ourselves. We don't want to be ignored just on the way we look or for our felonies.”
- “Assistance finding work, assistance with transportation to different State, to see children and retain my employment.”
- “Belief in myself, Counseling, support from family & friends, Community programs such as help groups.”
- “Day care, financial aid assistance toward education.”
- “Support, Education, Grants.”
- “Family support, guidance.”
- “Finish College, try to get a good job if society lets me get back on my feet.”
- “Freedom and a second chance.”
- “Go back to school and either go tryout in college football or go to army.”
- “Good company, good friends, a job, car, home, church, clothes, food.”
- “The correct resources, that allow ex-felons to obtain proper employment along with support from the community.”
- “I need health, my family and desire to continue. “

As demonstrated by this survey, many inmates are looking for a second chance at employment and/or education, and the resources and support needed to start over and work towards their dreams.

### **Community Collaborations**

Despite our efforts to assist this population, we also understand that we cannot do this re-entry work alone. It takes a region of partners to serve this population effectively and we have already begun to work with some organizations and governmental entities. In February 2019, WSB became a member of the Rio Grande Re-Entry Council coordinated by Re-Entry Affairs Coordinator Al Jacquez at FCI La Tuna. As a council member, we coordinated several meetings with regional community organizations that serve re-entry populations—facilitated by a consultant we coordinated with the Re-Entry Council on a Human-Centered Design (HCD) project be used pre- and post-release for participants. HCD is a unique approach to problem-solving designed to get you to learn directly from the people you want to serve. The process starts with the individual - their hopes, fears, and needs, in order to quickly uncover their needs and goals. Two hundred survey responses were received that led to the planning, design/creation of a Career Planning Workbook for Reentry clients. We also participated in mock job fairs and job readiness training within La Tuna Federal Prison and El Paso District Parole Offices through our partnership with the Rio Grande Re-Entry Council.

On June 14, 2019, WSB also met with the Re-Entry Division of the Community Services Department of El Paso County. The initial meeting led to a partnership with Project Chance. Population pods were created within the jail for women, men, and Veterans. This partnership started the planning stages of our Human-Centered Design utilizing Project Chance as a beta project. In coordination with our service operations team, we went through training at the County Jail Annex, and we were able to start providing workforce services within the jail on January 27, 2020. However, in-jail programming was suspended on March 19th, 2020, due to COVID-19, and we have not provided services at the jail since. In-jail programming to resume when pandemic restrictions are lifted. Participants releasing from Project Chance need assistance with employment upon release. This may require vocational training to be provided pre- and post-release in better preparing individuals for employment upon release and when out in the community.

WSB also recently provided a letter of support to El Paso County for a grant application related to re-entry services. The \$1 million grant was ultimately awarded to El Paso County in order to provide the resources needed to identify assets and gaps in re-entry systems and improve the overall approach to re-entry. This program aims to help jurisdictions assess their re-entry system, identify strengths and gaps, and then build capacity for either improving re-entry systems generally or improving service delivery by implementing or expanding a re-entry program. As stated in our letter, we hope to support this project by providing job readiness services, assisting participants with employment, and providing training opportunities pre- and post-release.

The programs managed by WSB present an opportunity to proactively assist individuals with their needs as youth or adults and hopefully offer a breadth of social services that can simultaneously reduce recidivism before it even takes place. This is because we know that if we can fully equip individuals early on in their lives with housing, food assistance, and childcare, then there is still an opportunity to intervene in someone's likelihood to become involved with the criminal justice system. Knowing this, it is important, now more than ever, for WSB programs to continue to function efficiently, offer as many services as possible, and perform a full triage of participants to identify their needs. If WSB can take care of an individual's needs holistically, it can transform their life and have a ripple effect on their entire family and furthermore – the community at-large.

However, in order to best assist those who have already been involved with the criminal justice system, it may be beneficial to dedicate funding for re-entry programs and case managers that can provide experienced assistance to this population. Currently, WSB can assist these individuals simply because they are able to identify their status as 'formerly incarcerated' as a barrier to employment. If we can continue to offer assistance that is holistic and specific – then we could contribute towards a community goal of reducing recidivism.

Finally, for re-entry efforts to best serve the needs of this unique population, it is crucial to form a constituency group that can actively provide input and inform the future of these programs. Policy makers and social service providers should be at the same table with subject-matter experts, specifically the individuals who are formerly incarcerated or working with those who were formerly incarcerated, in order to better hear their needs and experiences first-hand. Listening sessions with individuals who have previously experienced barriers to employment and understanding the true needs of this population would have a profound impact on the formation of these programs.

### **About Workforce Solutions Borderplex**

Workforce Solutions Borderplex (WSB) is the public workforce system in the six-county Borderplex region that assists employers in finding quality employees, and training individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in the workplace. We administer a broad range of programs and services to effectively address local workforce issues. Workforce Solutions also establishes partnerships with various stakeholders within the region to improve education, employment, and economic development. Our organization aims to provide skilled workers for employers by advancing education, employment, entrepreneurship, and economic development opportunities in support of global competitiveness and regional prosperity. Ultimately, we are interested in empowering the most dynamic workforce to achieve global competitiveness and regional prosperity.

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