

INDIVIDUALIZING PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS FOR CITIZENS RETURNING FROM PRISON



KEY TAKEAWAYS ON INDIVIDUALIZING SUCCESS FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

- Many justice-involved youth and adults face numerous barriers and have been exposed to traumatic experiences in and outside of the criminal justice system, requiring reentry-focused faith-based and community organizations (FBCOs) to combine strong assessments of participants with individualized supports.
- Strong assessments include analyses of employment and education strengths and weaknesses, as well as criminogenic need and risk factors.
- Effective individualized services target the highest intensity supports to the greatest need participants.

Governments and Philanthropy should:

- Support FBCOs with strong systems and practices that assess participants and individualize services.
- Build capacity for FBCOs to access and use research-validated assessment instruments.
- Build capacity for FBCOs to become trauma-informed.

Americans' beliefs about individuals who are incarcerated, their reentry into society, and strategies for reducing recidivism are changing rapidly. A February 2016 poll by Pew Charitable Trusts found that American voters across demographic groups (and party lines) support significant shifts in criminal justice laws and sentencing. More than 75 percent of those polled supported ending mandatory minimum sentences in all cases. Over 80 percent supported abridged sentences for those participating in pre-release job training as a way to reduce recidivism.¹

These shifts in public opinion occur in the context of persistently high incarceration rates—state and federal facilities currently house over 1.5 million prisoners, and nearly 450,000 people enter these systems each year. An equal or greater number of individuals return to their communities annually; about 620,000 returned home in 2014.²

Returning citizens face significant challenges. Finding work is often one of the most difficult tasks; many have limited job skills and education and encounter employer reluctance to hire individuals with criminal records. About 75 percent of returned citizens are jobless a year after release, a key contributor to risk of future justice system involvement.³ Work-related barriers are compounded by other individual and family circumstances (e.g., substance abuse and mental health problems, prior exposure to violence and trauma, and the absence of family supports) that increase the risk of re-offending.⁴



Overview of the Reentry Employment Opportunities Benchmarking Study

For the last decade, faith-based and community organizations (FBCOs) funded through the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Reentry Employment Opportunity (REO) grant programs, have been working to reduce barriers to reentry, while also addressing the wide variation in returning citizens' strengths, challenges, interests, and needs. Recognizing that each returning citizen's motivators, facilitators, and barriers are unique, FBCOs seek to individualize pathways to employment success through a range of assessment and support services that can be tailored for each program participant.

The purpose of the REO benchmarking study was to learn more about promising practices used by high-performing REO grantees. Our qualitative review began with a comprehensive assessment of self-reported performance data from 121 organizations that received one or more grants between 2005 and 2015 across 19 REO grant funding opportunities. Looking across five self-reported DOL data elements⁵ relating to employment, wages, and recidivism, 14 grantees were identified as high performing, with metrics in the top 30 percent within and across their grant cohorts in two or more DOL data-reporting categories. Then, based on DOL progress reports, program applications to DOL, grey literature, program evaluations, and self-reported data, five were selected to participate in semi-structured phone interviews. The adult-serving high-performing grantees achieved, for example, an average of 20 percent higher employment placement rates, 25 percent higher employment retention rates, and 12 percent lower recidivism rates compared to all REO grantees. Of those five, two high-performers also hosted site visits and focus groups, sharing common approaches in individualizing services that guide returning citizens to work and self-sufficiency.⁶

This brief shares those common elements from the five high-performing grantees interviewed and is based on their self-reported data. It identifies promising practices to inform policymakers and program administrators as REO funding opportunities are considered. Each promising practice and the research and literature base supporting it is also discussed at length in this study's final report, available here: www.icfi.com/REOReport Other products from this project include a companion policy extract www.icfi.com/SuccessfulReentryExtract, and a forthcoming research proposal for further exploration into FBCO employment-based reentry services.

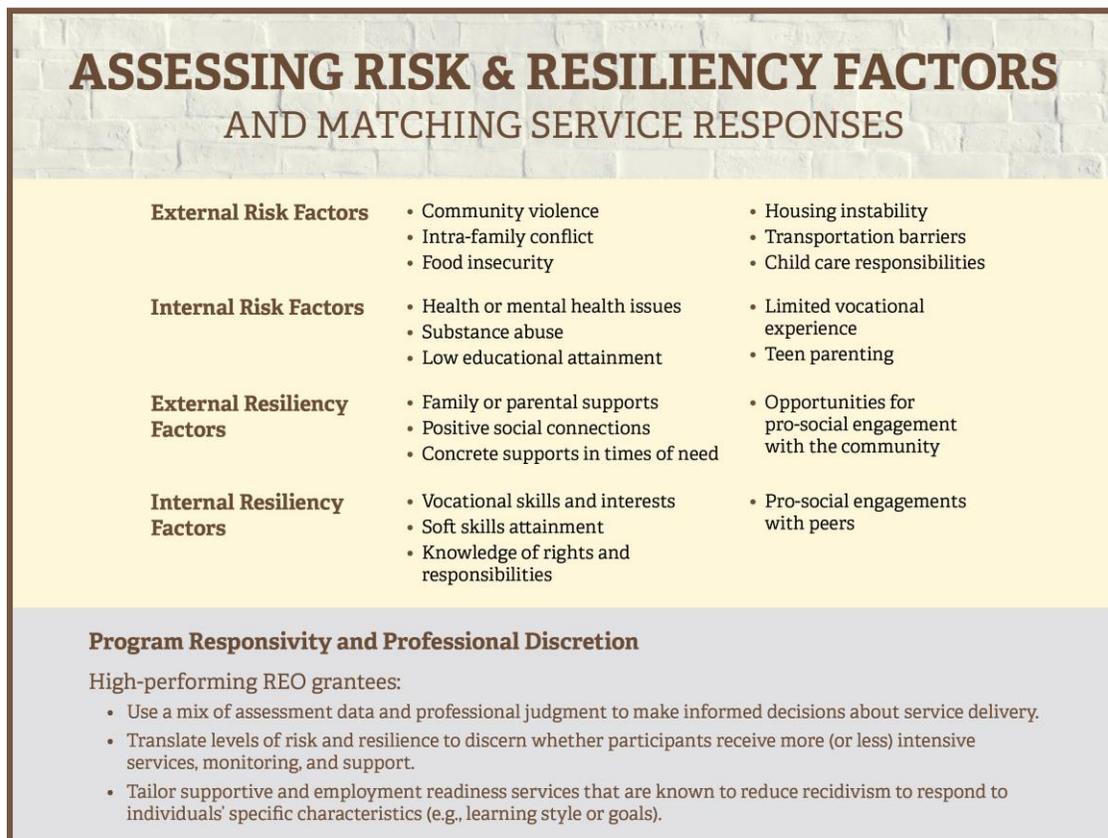
Comprehensively Assessing Assets and Risks

Studies suggest that many involved in the criminal justice system have faced serious adversities and traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence (including exposure to family violence and abuse⁷), patterns that are often reinforced and exacerbated by the experience of incarceration. Emerging research in the fields of neuroscience and psychology illuminate how these experiences, when severe or chronic, can influence how the brain matures, impairing problem-solving and emotional regulation skills.⁸

Despite these challenges, focus group participants, most of whom experienced significant trauma and adversity, remained resilient. The DOL-funded FBCOs sought to understand risk factors and leverage the strengths of their clients to improve outcomes for justice-involved youth and returning adults.

High-performing REO grantees begin this assessment process with strength-based interviewing techniques (such as motivational interviewing) and a substantial inventory of formal assessment instruments. They also rely on staffs' professional judgment to identify needs, build trust early, and help prioritize service delivery. Many, such as The Dannon Project's reentry employment program in Birmingham, Alabama, use informal, but critical, early conversations to identify and address very basic needs (e.g., shelter and food). This "clears the decks" of urgent issues and helps ensure clients are physically and emotionally ready to engage in planning and services that address longer-term needs. Add note: (See Figure 1 for more information.)

Figure 1: Assessing Risk and Resiliency Factors and Matching Service Responses



After addressing these urgent, primary needs, high-performing organizations in this study administer a range of commonly used assessment instruments, as well as those that they have customized or developed on their own, to identify risks and strengths across employment, education, and other arenas. Most use DOL's My Next Move (a career interest inventory) and the TABE test (to assess education level and aptitudes). Some, like OIC of South Florida, use tools (e.g., the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory) to increase their understanding of barriers relating to health, mental health, substance use, and criminogenic risk.⁹

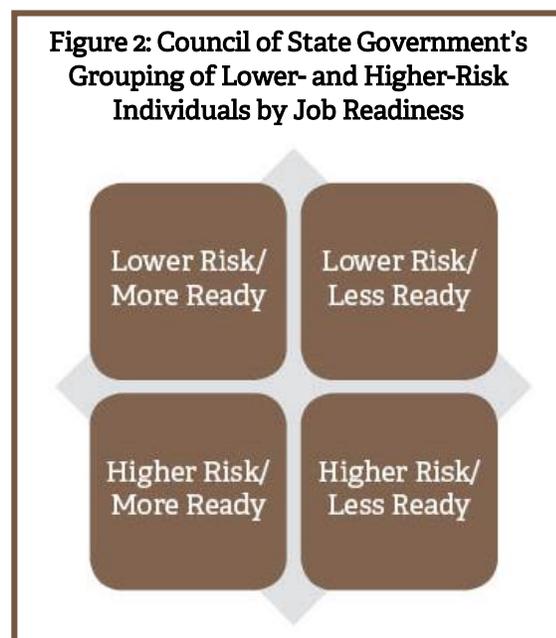
Assessing criminogenic risk (or the mix of dynamic factors that lead to criminal behavior) has helped several programs maintain lower self-reported recidivism rates compared with other REO-funded programs. Studies support these results, suggesting that case planning focused on identifying risk and need and providing responsive services can reduce recidivism by as much as 50 percent.¹⁰ Recidivism drops when services are offered according to each participant's risk level and matched to specific criminogenic needs. This match, studies have found, is a critical variable, suggesting the importance of linking services to empirical risk assessment data.¹¹

High-performing REO grantees are also cognizant of balancing their comprehensive assessment processes with their ability to leverage and access pre-existing assessment data on individual participants. To streamline and improve efficiencies, as well as maintain participant engagement, programs actively seek out information from previously administered assessments, including those conducted by corrections systems. While these have proven difficult for programs to access, they are helpful in shaping service delivery and avoiding duplicative efforts that consume resources and discourage clients faced with multiple interactions and assessments required by a variety of service providers.

The combination of informal and formal assessment, supported by information from previous providers, gives REO grantees a starting point from which to work with participants on realistic expectations, identify viable career pathways, and begin to address barriers. REO grantees’ increasing interest in understanding exposure to trauma and its implications also provide new opportunities to build program capacity to further improve assessment processes

Individualizing Services

The concept of risk assessment leading to individualized services is not new and is frequently challenged by the realities of limited resources and caseload demands. High-performing REO grantees like OIC of South Florida seek to overcome these problems through use of a systematized quadrant approach to direct service delivery along high-/low-risk and high-/low-employment readiness continua. This approach, shaped by the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center framework (Figure 2), calls for an integrated strategy that coordinates workforce development supports with justice-driven recidivism-reduction services: triaging limited resources into like-intensity cohorts of intervention.¹²



Others take a less systematic approach, but still support a natural “trialoging” of the highest-need customers toward the most intensive services. The Dannon Project uses a mix of risk assessment results and informal information gathering that directs participants down one of several service intensity pathways. For example, those with limited education, socialization, and family supports often receive more intensive services, while those who have finished high school, have some post-secondary schooling, documented work skills, and family support, require less.

While the types of support services high-performing REO grantees offer vary based on need, the underlying menu of options are similar, including training and credentialing in select high-growth job sectors; adult basic education and GED supports; mentoring (group and individual); soft-skills training; tutoring; transportation; and referrals for housing,

mental health, substance abuse, and child care. To ensure the appropriate delivery of those services, some programs, such as Volunteers of America Greater Los Angeles, designate a specialized case manager for participants with the highest needs. At Volunteers of America, a specialized case manager carrying a reduced caseload of eight participants at a time (compared to a standard 25) seeks to stabilize and motivate first, providing upfront and intensive supports that focus on getting select participants socially and emotionally ready for work. The program then remains flexible in moving participants on and off this caseload as challenges are overcome, but also as new ones arise.

“One of the most important things we can do is to ensure these men and women feel like they matter. Our first job in helping them return must be to build their self-esteem, to help change their self-perception and ensure they feel and *are able to show* their value.”

Bo Johnson, Career Readiness Manager, The Dannon Project

Prior to REO program enrollment, many returning citizens haven't had personal or professional champions. This dependable encouragement and genuine engagement, focus group participants shared, can make a significant difference.¹³ High-performing REO grantees interviewed combine coaching between staff and participants with an individualization of services that directs individuals to the supports they need most as they move toward job attainment.

Conclusion

As hundreds of thousands of individuals leave prison each year, reentry employment programs are poised to guide youth and adults toward successful work and community pathways. High-performing DOL-funded programs wrap returning citizens in a range of one-stop services that aim to streamline and ease an often difficult re-assimilation, while simultaneously supporting participants with credentialing and job placement. This approach holds considerable promise for additional future investment by government and philanthropy to help strengthen and refine such targeted interventions. Funders may also wish to pay close attention to new and emerging opportunities to support FBCO reentry organizations that incorporate the insights derived from research on trauma and violence exposure into service delivery strategies.



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- ⁴ Visser, C. A., Debus-Sherrill, S. A., & Yahner, J. (2011). Employment after prison: A longitudinal study of former prisoners. *Justice Quarterly*, 28(5), 698–718; Resnick, M. D., Ireland, M., & Borowsky, I. (2004). Youth violence perpetration: What protects? What predicts? Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 35(424), e1–e10; Lösel, F., & Farrington, D. P. (2012). Direct protective and buffering protective factors in the development of youth violence. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 43(2), S8–S23.
- ⁵ DOL performance metrics analyzed for this study include those on credential attainment, employment or education placement, employment retention, employment earnings, and recidivism. The performance data used to select high-performing REO grantees was self-reported to DOL and was not verified by administrative data. In their longitudinal study on first generation REO (formerly Re-integrating Ex-Offenders [RExO] grantees) Social Policy Research Associates found that the self-reported data obtained by the participating grantees were more positive than the outcomes the administrative data confirmed. In general, self-reported recidivism rates were lower and employment and wage reports were higher than those obtained through administrative sources. However, these challenges of obtaining accurate self-report data were consistent across REO cohorts. This highlights the need for further implementation research combined with an impact analyses to conclusively identify direct service practices that lead to stronger employment gains and reduced recidivism. This study and extract detail practices of organizations that achieved strong outcomes relative to one another through their REO funding and are key considerations as new funding is considered.
- ⁶ Information for this extract is taken from a series of semistructured interviews with five high-performing REO programs, each of which were interviewed in two-part 60- to 90-minute sessions between December 2015 and February 2016. Phone interviews included program leadership, case management, research, and job development staff. In January 2016, one-and-a-half-day site visits were also performed with two programs, OIC of South Florida and The Dannon Project. These included semi-structured individual and group interviews of staff and leadership, as well as adult and youth focus groups of between two and six participants each.
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- ⁹ LSCMI does not focus on housing needs, however, OIC's case planning checklist and quality of life inventory are used by staff to make determinations about housing needs.
- ¹⁰ Loung, D., & Wormith, J. S. (2011). Applying risk/need assessment to probation practice and its impact on the recidivism of young offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 38, 1177–1199; Vieira, T. A., Skilling, T. A., & Peterson-Badali, M. (2009). Matching court-ordered services with treatment needs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 36, 385–401; Dowden, C., & Andrews, D. A. (1999). What works for female offenders: A meta-analytic review. *Crime and Delinquency*, 45, 438–452.
- ¹¹ See Vincent, G. M., Guy, L. S., & Grisso, T. (2012). *Risk assessment in juvenile justice: A guidebook for implementation*. Chicago: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (discussing Lipsey, M. W. (2009). The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders: A meta-analytic overview. *Victims & Offenders*, 4, 124–147; Vieira, T. A., Skilling, T. A., & Peterson-Badali, M. (2009). Matching court-ordered services with treatment needs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 36, 385–401.)
- ¹² Duran, L., Plotkin, M., Potter, P., & Rosen, H. (2013). *Integrated reentry and employment strategies: Reducing recidivism and promoting job readiness*. New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center
- ¹³ The Dannon Project, focus groups, January 19, 2016; OIC of South Florida, focus groups, January 21, 2016 (participants across youth and adult focus groups shared that one of the single greatest factors in their successful reentry was relationships built with FBNO program staff).