

Offender Workforce Development: A New (and Better?) Approach to an Old Challenge

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THERE IS LITTLE disagreement that employment is a critical issue for offenders, both for adults and for those juveniles who have left school. Offenders under probation or post-incarceration supervision (parole or supervised release in the federal system) are required by the conditions of their sentence or release order to hold legitimate, full-time employment. Work is also a core value in our society, and able-bodied adults are expected by the citizenry to work and pay their own way. From a purely practical point of view, probation, parole and pretrial services officers (PPOs) will testify from their experience that offenders who are working are far more likely to be successful under supervision and will require a good deal less work by the officer. It is not hard to see why there is such an emphasis on employment in community corrections.

The Evidence on Employment and Crime

Notwithstanding the broad support for offender employment noted above, it is important in this time of concern for evidence-based practices that we also look at the empirical evidence on the issue of offender employment and crime. Unfortunately, our recent history contains a number of examples of initiatives and programs that had broad political, public and professional support that ultimately proved to be ineffective. Programs like “Scared Straight” and boot camps are just two examples that did not live up to the widely held expectations.

Fortunately, the broad expectations concerning employment and offenders are supported by the empirical research. Employment is a critical variable in the process of dissuading offenders from crime in several ways. First, not being employed is a risk factor for reoffending. A quick review of risk assessment instruments in use in probation and in post-incarceration supervision shows that most include employment as a variable in determining the risk of future crime. In their meta-analysis of risk factors, Gendreau and his colleagues found that employment is a “moderately strong predictor of recidivism” (Gendreau, et al., 1998). The second aspect of the relationship between employment and crime is the impact of obtaining and maintaining employment. As part of the massive review of crime prevention programs conducted by the University of Maryland, Bushway and Reuter (1997) found that “employment remains one of the most important vehicles for hastening offender reintegration and desistance from crime.” Sampson and Laub (1993) found that obtaining a job was one of the most powerful factors in reducing future criminal behavior. In a study of federal offenders, Johnson (2007) found a high

correlation between employment and the outcome of supervision. Unemployed offenders were more likely to be revoked, while nine out of ten employed offenders completed supervision successfully.

The research is thus fairly clear on one of the primary goals of supervision B offenders should be employed. Accomplishing that goal is a challenge, one where the research has much less to tell us about the effectiveness of employment programs. Nonetheless, Uggen and Staff (2002) state “Y we find enough evidence of program effectiveness to conclude that employment remains a viable avenue for reducing crime and recidivism” (p. 14). The challenge remains B developing and evaluating programs to determine “what works” at increasing the employment rate of offenders under supervision.

Addressing This Challenge

The broad-based support for offender employment described at the outset of this article has existed for many years. As a result, PPOs have been working at this challenge for a good long while. While there have been some impressive innovations in recent years, the traditional approach to offender employment has often been passive on the part of the officer.

The *passive approach* is characterized by the officer telling the offender that employment is a condition of supervision and that he or she has to get a job. The onus is on the offender, and the PPO monitors and may take enforcement action if employment isn't secured within a reasonable period of time. Offenders might be required to file a specific number of job applications per week and provide evidence to their officer. Some officers keep a current copy of the classified ads in their office and have unemployed offenders look through them. Other officers might review the classifieds and pick out likely jobs. Some officers would visit likely employers and ask, or even beg for a chance for one of their offenders. Many times, offenders are referred to the local labor department, although only some of these are interested in and/or effective in working with offenders.

In this passive approach, there is an assumption that offenders have the skills to look for, compete for, and secure employment on their own, or with a minimal amount of assistance. What they need is the motivation, and the requirement of the conditions of supervision, enforced by the probation officer, will provide sufficient motivation. This assumption has not been borne out in reality. Many offenders do not have the necessary skills or experience to find, compete for, and secure legitimate, full-time employment, even if they are sufficiently motivated.

In recent years, a perceptible shift has occurred in the assumptions held about offenders and employment, and in the way that community corrections agencies and staff have approached the challenge. This has resulted in a much more *active approach* for the probation officer and the agency. The roots of this shift can be seen in those agencies that in the past pushed beyond the passive role and established employment programs, designated staff as employment specialists and reached out to the employment community to locate potential jobs. That pioneering work is being built upon and expanded in innovative ways. The adoption of evidence-based practices (EBP) by agencies has replaced the surveillance-only supervision that was so popular in the 1980s. The emphasis of EBP on assisting offenders to change their behavior has given new impetus to employment- oriented services by community corrections.

This shift is characterized first in the assumptions about this employment challenge. Probation and parole staff are realizing that many offenders under supervision simply do not have the experience and skills necessary to find, secure, and maintain quality, career-oriented employment. Expecting them to accomplish that goal with their current skills and resources will lead to frustration all around. The second assumption is that the role of probation and parole includes active efforts to both *prepare* offenders for the world of work and to *assist* them in finding appropriate work. The onus of finding employment is shared between the officer and the offender.

Two additional assumptions about offenders and employment are starting to take root. The third

assumption is that probation and parole agencies and staff can help to cultivate the marketplace to make employers more inclined to hire the offender. Outreach efforts to employers can educate them about the potential advantages to their firm of hiring an offender. The last assumption is that a prepared and motivated offender is a marketable commodity in today's labor market. PPOs don't have to go begging and pleading for employers to hire their clients. When these two assumptions are factored in, the focus of the work of probation and parole expands beyond the boundaries of the office and begins to engage the community. In traditional economic terms, officers are working on the *supply side*, increasing the supply of attractive applicants for jobs and also working on the *demand side* with employers to increase the likelihood of hiring the offender.

An Active Probation Office

The United States Probation and Pretrial Services Office for the District of Delaware has bought into these assumptions and developed a multi-faceted collaborative program to enhance the employment of the probationers and prison releasees under their supervision. The Delaware office is small, with 16 probation officers and a total staff of 26. The total case load is 317 offenders, of which 17.7 percent are pretrial and 82.3 percent are post-conviction (probation and post-incarceration supervision). The gender breakdown is fairly typical, with 75.7 percent male and 24.3 percent female (see figure 1). The age distribution tends somewhat toward older offenders, with 35.2 percent between 26 and 35 years of age and just over half at 36 years or older (see figure 2). The racial composition of the caseload is 60 percent black and 37.4 percent white (see figure 3). The offense of conviction for post-conviction cases is dominated by cocaine offenses (possession, sale or distribution), fraud, and firearms offenses, which comprise 62.7 percent of the cases (see figure 4). The district's caseload is a higher-risk group, scoring 12 percent or higher on the federal RPI risk assessment than the national average.* This trend is expected to continue as the impact of a major anti-firearms initiative begins to be felt.

Figure 1

Total Supervision Caseload						
Status	Male		Female		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Pretrial	40	71.4	16	28.6	56	17.7
Post-Conviction	200	76.6	61	23.4	261	82.3
Total	240	75.7	77	24.3	317	100.0

Figure 2

Offender Age and Gender										
Status	Pretrial				Post-Conviction				Total	
	Male		Female		Male		Female			
Age	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
18-25	4	57.2	3	42.8	24	64.9	13	35.1	44	13.9
26-35	16	84.2	3	15.8	76	81.7	17	18.3	112	35.3
36-45	10	66.6	5	33.3	59	77.6	17	22.4	91	28.7
>45	10	66.6	5	33.3	41	74.5	14	25.4	70	22.1
Total	40	71.4	16	28.6	200	76.6	61	23.4	317	100.0

Figure 3

Racial Composition Post Conviction Caseload		
Race/Ethnicity	#	%
Black/Non-Hispanic	152	60.6
Black Hispanic	1	0.4
White Non-Hispanic	94	37.4
White Hispanic	2	0.8
Asian	1	0.4
Indian	1	0.4

Figure 4

Most Common Offense of Conviction						
Offense	Male		Female		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Cocaine	57	83.8	11	16.2	68	26.5
Fraud	38	76.0	12	24.0	50	19.3
Firearms	41	93.2	3	6.8	44	16.9
Embezzlement	4	26.7	11	73.3	15	5.8
Counterfeit	7	58.3	5	41.7	12	4.6
Robbery	11	100.0	0	0.0	11	4.2

The Delaware district’s Workforce Development Program (WFD) began as an initiative of five probation officers, who believed that offenders need skills to secure employment and that it was part of their (the officers’) responsibilities to help the offender acquire these skills. With the support of the district’s judges, the program began with careful planning and development work.

The goals of WFD are clear and straight-forward:

- Reduced recidivism - defined as a reduction in new arrests.
- Increased employment of offenders.
- Increased earnings of offenders.
- Increased levels of skill training and education.
- Enhanced employment opportunities.

The project was laid out in a series of three phases. Phase I started with outreach to the many vocational program providers in the community. In addition to the traditional GED classes, these programs provide training and skills development in areas as diverse as training for commercial driver's license, cosmetology, welding, electrical skills, forklift training, hazardous waste removal, office skills, and auto mechanics. The goal of the outreach was to strengthen existing relationships with programs and forge new ones.

Phase I also involved the development and analysis of the target offender population. A target group was identified, consisting of all those offenders under supervision who had a minimum of three years remaining on their term. This would form the study group, with a baseline analysis being done in July 2006. The offenders were classified according to educational level, employment status, monthly gross income, re-arrest, and drug usage (see figure 5). Through this process unemployed offenders were identified, as were those considered to be under-employed.

Figure 5
Target Group Profile as of June 2006
 N=64

Education	
College Graduate	6.25%
Some College	17.18%
H.S Graduate	39.06%
Some H.S.	29.56%
K-8	7.81%
Unknown	3.12%
Employment	
Full Time	73.43%
Part Time	6.25%
Unemployed	20.31%
Student	0.00%
Monthly Income in Dollars	
0-1,000	40.62%
1,001 to 2,000	46.87%
2,001 to 3,000	9.37%
3,001 to 4,000	1.56%
4,001 to 5,000	0.00%
5,001 to 6,000	1.56%
New Arrest While Under Supervision	
No	89.1%
Yes	10.9%
Drug Use in Last 6 mos.	
No	90.6%
Yes	9.4%

Phase II began with a public kickoff event on December 7, 2006, in a courtroom reserved for public events. Present were all the judges in the District of Delaware, representatives from Delaware's Congressional delegation, the U.S. Attorney, the Federal Public Defender, representatives from nearly all the social service agencies, state correctional officials, and the media. Special guests included an ex-offender honored for his exemplary efforts and an employer, a former basketball star at the University of Delaware, who was recognized for his commitment to giving felons a second chance. A local newspaper did a front-page article on the event and a Philadelphia television station did a segment on its evening news program. One of the intended benefits to the public kickoff was to provide information on the benefits of hiring an offender (see figure 6). Through a purely practical analysis, it may well prove financially advantageous for an employer to hire an offender over someone who applies for the job right off

the street. In addition, the employer may be getting an employee who will work harder as the result of getting a second chance, perhaps a last chance at succeeding in the community.

Figure 6

Benefits to Employers of Hiring Probationers and Parolees
1. Confirmed Identity at No Cost To Employer Particularly important with emphasis on Illegal Immigrants
2. Complete and Accurate Criminal History, at No Cost to Employer
3. Regular Drug Testing at No Cost to Employer
4. Tax Credits to Employer for Hiring Offenders
5. Federal Bonding Program to Protect Employer Against Loss, at no Cost to Employer
6. Workforce Investment Act Training Funds
7. Probation Officer Available for Problems or if Offender Starts to Slip

During Phase II, the work of the probation officers began to change. They began to focus on securing skilled labor positions as an avenue for good jobs with benefits, at which offenders might be successful long term. The trade unions are strong in northern Delaware. The first productive contact with the skilled trade unions occurred when a WFD probation officer attended a job fair to assess the range of available jobs in this field. The Delaware Trades and Constructions Unions, an umbrella organization for about 15 trade unions, was a participant at the event. The executive director quickly came on board and shared the program's vision. He facilitated a presentation by the WFD team to union leaders, which was repeated in a presentation to the group's general membership.

The trade unions have apprenticeship programs that provide paid positions with the certainty of permanent jobs upon successful completion. A partnership has been created with a remedial program known as the Preparatory Apprentice Instruction & Development Program (PAID) for those offenders having difficulty passing the apprenticeship test.

Another manifestation of the changing role of the federal probation officers in Delaware is the completion by one officer of a three-week training program on offender employment development conducted by the National Institute of Corrections (see: <http://www.nicic.org/OES>). The officer is now certified as an Employment Specialist. The change in the probation office's philosophy has been accompanied by physical changes in the probation office. In the waiting area, employment-related reading material and posters have replaced sports and general interest magazines. An office has been converted to house the WFD program, and mock interviews and resume writing classes are held there. Another portion of the office was converted into a clothing closet, where donated suits and other business clothing are available for offenders, both male and female, to wear to job interviews and to work.

The practices of the probation office have also changed. Acting on the recognition that offenders are not prepared to find, compete for and secure good jobs, the probation staff are running job preparation classes. The curriculum for the classes includes, among other activities, employment and skill inventories, resume preparation, mock job interviews and viewing of job preparation

video tapes.

Enhancing the Workforce Development Program

As the probation staff developed and implemented the program, they began to see additional opportunities. Working within the existing resources and collaborating with a variety of community partners, the staff had been able to create and launch the program. Taking advantage of these additional opportunities required additional resources. The probation office was able to secure funding from the Administrative Office of the United States Courts under an evidenced-based practice grant, also known as *Research to Results*, R2R. There are 16 pilot districts in the federal system that have been awarded funding for various evidence-based practices, and the District of Delaware was awarded a workforce development grant in 2007, which was renewed in 2008.

The funding supported the hiring of a part-time community resource specialist whose duties are cultivating additional job opportunities and assisting with job preparation. The additional funding was also used to enable selected offenders to receive vocational services. The offenders have to submit an application for the program, and must be in compliance with the conditions of their supervision in order to be considered.

One recent example of a job placement involves a man who was convicted of bank robbery, which was his first offense of any kind. He served four years in prison and came out to a halfway house with no job prospects and no place to live. While the offender was still in the halfway house, the probation officer linked him up with the WFD community resource specialist, who in turn arranged a job interview for a position as an electrician. The offender got the job at a starting pay of \$16 per hour. Another probation officer is helping the offender secure an apartment. In a recent letter, this offender writes, in part: "Even the receptionist working the Friday I was interviewed for the job gave me a 'thumbs up' sign as I was leaving. Your whole office seems to be involved."

Additional Challenges

As the program evolved, the probation staff noticed that despite the many opportunities to secure and enhance employment, there were offenders who were not motivated to take advantage of them. Some offenders were suspicious that the offers of employment were genuine, or lacked confidence in their ability to perform, or were fearful of failure. To address these issues, the probation office will be implementing the "Thinking for a Change" cognitive behavioral intervention curriculum with classes held in the probation office. (Bush, et al. 2001) This curriculum may also be of use in dealing with chronically underemployed offenders. These individuals are in compliance with the condition of supervision that requires them to work and with the other general conditions. However, the jobs they hold are low level, with little or no career potential and no skills base to develop future potential. These jobs are vulnerable when economic stress hits an industry or employment sector. Offenders are being encouraged to accept the calculated risks that are associated with employment changes when it affords them a better chance for permanent conversion to a law-abiding lifestyle.

The additional resources have enabled the probation office to consider contracting a faith-based organization to mentor ex-offenders. The pilot initiative is being discussed with a church in a high-crime area. The target population is young offenders from dysfunctional family settings. This pilot would support the belief that most offenders will internalize more when the message is received from someone in their own community. Selected community members can be uniquely positioned to crack through resistance and/or to assist with job retention. If this initiative takes shape, it will begin with a small group and will be carefully monitored as there are insufficient evidence-based studies conducted at the present time to support the effectiveness of faith-based mentoring.

Going the Next Step: A Public-Private Sector Collaboration

The U.S. Probation Office in the District of Delaware has been persistent in its outreach to the

community, meeting with as many people and organizations as possible to spread the word about the WFD program and the benefits of hiring from the offender population. This outreach has facilitated the formation of a unique partnership between the U.S. Probation Office, the State of Delaware, the City of Wilmington, and the Delaware Riverfront Development Corporation. Through efforts with these community partners, the probation office established a partnership with the Preparatory Apprenticeship Incentive Program (PAID) in a targeted area. The unions have a great deal of skilled labor working on the projects along the riverfront, yet some residents, including offenders, were not able to pass the test to be accepted into the apprenticeship programs. To remedy this situation, PAID was expanded, funded in part by a major developer working on the riverfront projects. The PAID program works on remedial academic skills in the hope that students will be able to pass the entry test and gain admission to the apprenticeship programs, eventually leading to good jobs in the unions. Over the past year, this office has placed three federal offenders in this program.

Preliminary Results

It has been 23 months since the probation office's first WFD meeting and only 13 months since R2R funding was received. It is premature to make empirical conclusions regarding outcomes; however, statistics are being compiled to make a comparison from the July 2006 study group that created a baseline to compare to the July 2008 results.

In terms of employment, there was a 30 percent reduction (from 13 to 9) in the number of unemployed in the study group from July 2006 to July 2007. In June 2006, 40.62 percent offenders grossed less than \$1,000, which clearly could be defined as underemployed. One year later, there were 7.32 percent fewer offenders in this group earning less than \$1,000, but 4.83 percent more offenders earning between \$1,001 and \$2,000, and 1.74 percent more earning between \$3,001 and \$4,000. These preliminary results are modest but encouraging.

Anecdotally, the probation office is seeing the possibility of a real breakthrough with employers. One example in Delaware is a family-owned grocery store chain that is very willing and eager to hire ex-offenders and has recently offered six positions starting at \$10 per hour to offenders with the promise of six more positions in the very near future. Two offenders are being placed at a local steel mill. Positions for twelve offenders have just been arranged with a local construction company. These positions pay \$14.00 per hour.

Future Efforts

In the fall of 2007, the probation office began working closely with the Delaware Riverfront Development Corporation and the Hope Commission, a group chartered by the City of Wilmington to increase opportunities and bring hope to the residents of the city. The primary goal of this joint effort is to create a joint federal, state, and private sector program called "One Stop." The concept is to identify inmates for inclusion in the One Stop program while they are still in prison. The One Stop would have a state and federal probation presence, as well as involvement of the state Department of Labor.

Once released from prison, an inmate would immediately report to One Stop for an employment inventory. The individual's strengths, weaknesses, and motivation would be assessed so the program could be tailored to individual needs. One central component of the program would be job preparedness classes, mock interviews and resume writing run by the Department of Labor. The cognitive behavioral curriculum *Thinking for a Change* would be conducted on as-needed basis. Many of the barriers to assimilation into the community would be addressed at this One Stop. Agencies such as the Department of Motor Vehicles would come in to issue identification cards. A medical outreach van would also visit, as many ex-offenders do not have medical insurance. Other speakers would be brought in, such as representatives from First State Community Loan Fund, which has a program that helps offenders purchase a home or start their own business.

Once a person is declared job ready, the design calls for the Riverfront Development

Corporation to assist in placing the individual in a job on the riverfront or in a targeted area of Wilmington known as Southbridge. The target is to place 100 people in jobs through this program once the infrastructure is in place.

More concretely, the immediate future provides an opportunity to strengthen local partnerships. The federal probation office will be hosting a three-day NIC Offender Employment Specialist training program at the convention center along the riverfront for approximately 65 participants. The participants will be the office's state partners (Department of Labor, state probation and parole, faith-based organizations, juvenile probation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Wilmington Housing Authority) as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Participants will become certified Employment Specialists upon completion of the session. The joint training will enhance the collaboration of all these entities. This will be an opportunity in a very visible way to demonstrate the private-public sector link that is working in Delaware.

Conclusion

While the WFD is still in its early stages, the preliminary results are promising, if not yet significant. The Delaware probation office is firmly convinced that WFD will in time substantially reduce recidivism. However, it is not an initiative that can be instituted overnight. It requires a long-term commitment.

The critical challenges for those considering a WFD initiative include:

1. Changing the philosophy and mission of the agency and the staff. PPOs have to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities. Collaboration with community partners is critical.
2. Changing employer attitudes about hiring offenders. They have to see the advantages of taking a chance on an offender, working with the probation or parole agency. The experiences of the Delaware WFD suggest that this is possible.
3. Changing offender attitudes about work, developing a commitment to work and giving them the skills to locate, secure, and maintain gainful employment.

The Workforce Development Program (WFD) transcends philosophies and political positions. Liberals favor it for its commitment to helping offenders change their lives while conservatives appreciate that it moves ex-offenders into gainful employment and paying taxes. From this perspective, it seems to have no opponents. The challenge lies in the hard work and commitment needed to make it succeed.

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