

VOICES OF REENTRY

Changing a System with Planning, Data, and Optimism

Voices of Reentry is a series of profiles of people making good on second chances after they return from incarceration. Articles in the series tell individual stories to highlight the impact of programs funded under federal Improved Reentry Education grants.

Before he was incarcerated twenty years ago, **Maurice, 50**, always had a job, but never a career. He worked as a childcare provider, a retail clerk, a construction laborer, and an assistant manager at 7-Eleven. When the Philadelphia native is released from a Pennsylvania prison in 2019, however, he intends to leverage the vocational training and certifications he has received inside and embark on a career for the first time, one that will pay a living wage and provide a sense of job satisfaction.

“I like working with my hands and want to work in a warehouse operating a forklift,” says Maurice, who recently earned a certification in warehouse management along with one in forklift operation through a six-month vocational program at his facility. “I’ve learned the ins and outs of the job— from the shipyard to the loading docks to inside the warehouse.”

Maurice is one of the faces of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections’ (PADOC) systemic overhaul to ensure that time spent in prison is preparing inmates for post-incarceration. With the help of an Improved Reentry Education Grant (IRE), the PADOC has begun building Career Pathways infrastructure into every stage of incarceration. The future-focused approach will begin the moment inmates arrive in the system — at intake and classification— and continue as they serve their sentences, transition to release, and adjust to life in their home community.

“The most important thing is that at every step along the path, wherever they are in the

framework, we're getting them job ready," explains Career Pathways Program Manager Dorenda Hamarlund. "We don't want to wait and do work with inmates just at the end. We want to be preparing them for reentry from the moment they're incarcerated through post-release."

Before Career Pathways

In the past, the reentry offerings varied from prison to prison, cell block to cell block. "If you lived on a certain block and your movement was restricted, you missed out on a lot of reentry stuff," says Hamarlund. And although motivated inmates might do lots of vocational programs, they could leave prison with a collection of certifications that wouldn't necessarily add up to a career.

Now, reentry services, which offer everything from workshops on life skills and career searches to help with resumes and cover letters, are more widely available.

And most importantly, the Career Pathways approach brings together all of the PADOc's reentry preparation resources into a data-driven sequence of education, training, and work leading to credentials and experience aligned with labor force needs and viable careers — and ideally careers with room for advancement. Labor force needs across the state are closely tracked and provided to the PADOc by the PA Department of Labor & Industry (L&I). When complete, this transformation will include new partnerships not only with the L&I, but also with employers, community colleges, and other stakeholders, providing reentrants with a variety of support and opportunities in the outside world.

A Shot of Hope and Reality

Changing an entire system takes time, but the 60-hour Pathway to Success course, which is offered to every inmate, is up and running and very popular among inmates. It is a shot of hope for some, driving home the fact that inmates' post-incarceration career options extend beyond fast food restaurant work. But at the same time, it's an eye-opener, once students realize what it will take to afford the lives they imagine post-release. "One of the



An Offender Workforce Development Specialist Training sponsored by the PADOc

challenges I have is striking that delicate balance between being honest and transparent, but also being encouraging,” says Pat McDevitt, a Pathway to Success teacher.

“The toughest thing to get past for these guys is their self-defeatist attitude, I can’t blame them: they’ve been beaten up by society.”

The class is all about specifics: getting facts in front of inmates about where the jobs are, what they entail, and exactly how to transform themselves into good candidates. The rubber hits the road when they discuss the lifestyle they desire and create a budget that would support it. “It’s their first kick in the gut,” says McDevitt. “Then they look up entry salaries for the careers they’re interested in and the grumbling continues. They’ve seen the harsh reality and how they need to make adjustments to their lifestyle and that it’s time for tough choices.”

With their targeted careers in mind, the students then examine the requisite skills and do an inventory of which ones they believe they possess. “When they can’t come up with any evidence that they have those skills, that’s when it turns from who they’d like to be vs. who they are,” says McDevitt. He helps them map out a strategy to acquire the skills. For example, if an inmate identifies carpentry as a possible profession but can’t do decimals and fractions, he will be offered the opportunity to enroll in a basic math course, ideally followed by a carpentry course. Unfortunately, as in many prisons, class space can be limited. However, inmates who have completed the Pathway to Success class receive priority ranking on class waiting lists. “Even if they can’t or don’t follow through on the plan, at least we’ve identified their deficits and come up with a concrete plan for them to follow upon reentry to the community,” he says.

Ronald, 62, was one of those students who was bumped to the head of the line for the warehousing course, which was an important perk of the Pathway to Success course for him, he says. “It also opened up a door of employment that I didn’t think I would be interested in, but it turns out I was interested: forklift,” says Ronald. He learned about the career when one of the vocational instructors did a presentation to his Pathway to Success class and he ended up enrolling in the warehouse course. Like Maurice, Ronald earned warehouse and forklift certifications and also hopes to get a job as a forklift operator in a warehouse when released.

More Motivated Students

Ronald and Maurice were part of the first cohort to go through Pathway to Success before enrolling in instructor Randy Millard’s ‘Fundamentals of Warehousing and Distribution’ course. His six-month class gives students a solid grounding in warehouse operations, equipment, supply chains, and forklift operation.

Millard, who has taught the course for 11 years, says he saw a difference in the attitudes of the students — including Maurice and Ronald— who were part of the Pathway to Success inaugural group: “These guys were more in tune and committed and enthusiastic about learning,” comments Millard. “They knew where they wanted to go and how to get there. They were driven.” Both Maurice and Ronald were serious students and Ronald was especially inquisitive, according to Millard. “He was a very involved individual, always asking questions and always wanting to know more,” recalls Millard. But he was not a good test-taker, so Millard tutored him and he ended up graduating with a B average. Millard added that the top three students in his most recent warehouse course were also Pathway to Success completers.

Useful Experience, Whatever the Job

The ideal Career Pathways progression for Maurice and Ronald after the warehouse course would be employment at the prison commissary or warehouse to put their new skills and knowledge to work. Maurice has applied for a job in the warehouse, but so far has not been offered a position. That’s the reality of prison, says Millard. “There’s just not many jobs in warehousing,” he explains. “The institution is a microcosm of the world that they’re going to walk out into.”

But the Career Pathways approach has a broader view of work experience, according to Career Pathways Program Manager Hamarlund. “Our goal is to get them job-ready and for them to learn transferable job skills,” says Hamarlund. “Even if they’ve been trained in a vocation like carpentry, but are now working in the kitchen, they’re still gaining skills they can take to a job: health and safety, working with tools, showing up on time, working with other people, conflict resolution. We don’t want them to be narrow-minded and think carpentry is all they can do.”



An inmate operates a forklift at a PADOc prison.

The Inside-Outside Connection

As part of the Career Pathways overhaul, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections is now working to ensure that once inmates are released, they are quickly connected to the state’s one-stop career centers — [PA CareerLink](#). In January 2018, for inmates who are 30 days or less

away from release, the PADOc began pre-registering them in the PA CareerLink system to save them the hassle of doing the time-consuming process onsite and giving them a jump on their job search. The PADOc also piloted a CareerLink referral system in two prisons whereby inmates in those institutions requested that their parole agents inside prison facilitate a referral to a PA CareerLink in the part of the state in which they were released. A parole agent on the outside who was familiar with the local PA CareerLink— some teach classes there—made the referral, sometimes even accompanying the parolee to the office when he or she was released.

A warm hand-off is desirable for several reasons, explains Hamarlund. Different PA CareerLink offices may have certain days or hours when they focus on reentrants as well as staff who specialize in offering more intensive services to this population. And the referrals also make it possible for the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry to have accurate numbers of job-seeking former inmates for planning workforce development initiatives. In the first five months of the pilot, 86 referrals were made, according to Hamarlund. But not enough of the referrals turned into actual visits to a PA CareerLink, so the PADOc is in the process of analyzing “why” and will improve the process before spreading it to all of the prisons, she says.

The IRE grant has also enabled the PADOc, in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole, to expand the pool of staff who have expertise in helping reentrants get back into the workforce. They sponsored three Offender Workforce Development Specialist Trainings (OWDS) to prepare a wide-range of people to work with reentrants seeking employment. The OWDS trainings have helped forge relationships among the different stakeholders — from corrections, parole, and PA CareerLink staff to veterans’ representatives and non-profit organizations working with former inmates. And these connections are laying the groundwork for the Career Pathways work that is yet to come. “These are some of the people we will reach out to for our inside-outside partnerships that will define our Career Pathways work in 2019,” says Hamarlund.

The Final Steps of the Pathway

In the last year of the IRE grant, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections will concentrate on those critical partnerships, including with its halfway houses — called Community Corrections Centers—where paroled inmates who need extra support live post-release. These centers provide a structured environment for parolees and connect them with services like counseling, employment assistance, and drug and alcohol treatment. “We’ll be working with their staff to see how we can help them assist reentrants with their job searches and other employment-related needs,” says Hamarlund. The PADOc has also begun discussions with community colleges about developing articulation agreements that would allow the vocational training inmates receive inside prison to translate into college credits when they get out.

Finally, the PADOc's Career Pathways work will involve one more collaboration with the Department of Labor & Industry: educating employers about the benefits of employing reentrants and facilitating their hiring. Hamarlund says it's too early to say exactly how PADOc will flesh out this part of the Career Pathways, but she cites a prison-to-employment pipeline that's worked remarkably well at one of the state's women's prisons and could be a model. The institution has a thriving optical lab. When inmates who have completed vocational training and worked in the lab are ready to be released, the prison sets up phone interviews with potential employers. "Most of the inmates are getting jobs before they're even out," says Hamarlund. It's the ideal culmination of the Career Pathways efforts that began the moment inmates entered the system.

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