

Offender Workforce Development Services Makes an Impact

By Eric Lichtenberger and Scott Weygandt

Between 2004 and 2006, the National Institute of Corrections provided offender workforce development specialist (OWDS) training to a select group of trainers from the Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC). Those trainers then facilitated the OWDS program for KDOC staff, leading to the development of an offender workforce development (OWD) program in Kansas. OWD services that KDOC provided to offenders included comprehensive pre-employment preparation, job-retention planning, and post-release case management for individuals assessed as facing the greatest barriers¹ for successfully gaining and keeping employment.

The importance of OWD services is rather simple. Imagine two offenders who have successfully completed both a cognitive restructuring and a vocational program in welding within three months of their release. The first offender participated in an OWD program while the second did not. The first offender received work force training, including how to complete a job application, create a resume, and address his criminal history during job interviews; and the second offender did not. Which of the offenders is more likely to transition successfully and secure employment as a welder? Without the ability to find employers that are hiring, apply for jobs, and interview successfully, the second offender may never get the chance to be paid to use his skills and reduce his likelihood of recidivism. Recent research has demonstrated that obtaining consistent and quality employment is directly related to reducing the risk of recidivism for all ex-offenders, while the ex-offenders who fail to gain such employment increase their risk of recidivism, regardless of their education/training.² Providing all ex-offenders with the skills necessary to navigate the employment process is therefore important in reducing recidivism.

Evaluation

The key findings of an ongoing evaluation project focusing on the impact of the OWD services provided to a purposefully selected sample of 112 offenders by KDOC are outlined below. Nearly all of the offenders in the OWD group were selected based on their history of being unemployed or underemployed, having at least six months of community supervision upon their release, and not being restricted from work due to disability. A comparison group was created so that each OWD group member was paired with someone with similar background characteristics³ and participation/completion patterns in other programming.⁴ Recidivism rates⁵ were calculated and compared across the two groups and cross-tabulated by overall risk level based

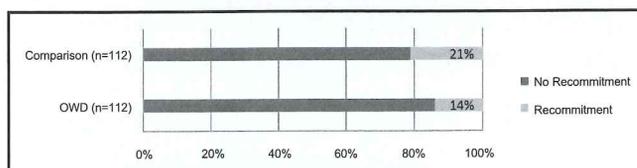
on risk/need scores using the Level of Service Inventory-Revised.

Followup interviews with OWD participants were conducted to gain insight into the perceived benefits of the OWD services and areas that might need improvement. Both OWD participants who gained employment and had not recidivated, as well as OWD participants who recidivated, were interviewed in an effort to get feedback from “successful and unsuccessful” participants alike. Based on patterns in the responses to interview questions, KDOC has been able to identify factors that both contributed to and hindered post-release success.

Results

Recidivism. The evaluation established that participating in OWD programming was related to a decreased likelihood of recidivism. As Figure 1 illustrates, individuals receiving OWD services had a 33 percent lower rate of recidivism relative to the comparison group. Since the recidivism rates of both groups were fairly low, the seven percentage point difference is practically significant. The positive program impact was evident even though the OWD group had overall characteristics suggesting they would be at greater risk of recidivating. Even after matching on key characteristics, OWD group members were slightly younger at release and slightly less likely to complete the work release and the therapeutic community programs (among participants) relative to members of the comparison group.

Figure 1. Overall Recidivism Rates



More important, as Table 1 shows, the positive program impact was greater among moderate- and high-risk offenders, rather than those in the low-risk category. In other words, the positive program impact was isolated among individuals who had demonstrated a greater need for OWD services. This was due to relatively few low-risk offenders receiving services, as KDOC focused more of its OWD services on offenders who were at higher risk. Furthermore, low-risk offenders had lower rates of recidivism by sake of their risk level.

Interviews. The positive results regarding recidivism led KDOC to ask which OWD modules or other aspects of the program were related to post-release success or the lack thereof. Participants viewed the mock job interview module as extremely helpful, and those who were able to apply the interview skills they learned felt it contributed to their success. Among the specific interview skills found useful were being able to articulate information related to tax credit and bonding programs to employers, understanding body language and other nonverbal communication during the interview and interactions with potential employers, and being prepared to deal with questions related to one's criminal history. Having a job lined up as close to release as possible, along with the required identification (birth certificate, social security card, etc.) was also found to relate positively to post-release success. Another theme related to success was one of perseverance or being able to deal with disappointment while searching for a job and not giving up on other opportunities after an unsuccessful interview.

Drug and alcohol abuse and/or not continuing substance abuse treatment was identified as almost a universal barrier to post-release success. Falling back in with the "old crowd" was also a common barrier to success and it was highly related to substance abuse. Many offenders feared the lack of structure associated with being released and completing parole, suggesting this might be an area that should be addressed during the OWD program. Other offenders felt it was too difficult to make child support payments in addition to their other financial obligations, suggesting that a greater emphasis should be placed on budgeting for offenders in such a situation. Another barrier to success was not taking the OWD modules seriously. Most of the "unsuccessful" OWD participants admitted to their lack of full participation and acknowledged it was one of the reasons they had difficulty gaining employment.

Using information gleaned from this program evaluation, KDOC has made and continues to make systematic improvements to the ways it provides OWD services. The current focus is on providing intensive services to high-risk offenders since the evaluation has shown that they benefit from the services the most. A heavier emphasis is now placed on conducting at least three mock interviews, allowing offenders to better respond to questions regarding their criminal history. Wrap-around services connecting offenders to community-based employment resources is a current priority for KDOC. In fact, offenders released in Kansas now register as job seekers through the Kansas Workforce system prior to their release, and virtual technology pilots have now been established to deliver remote services and connect offenders with practitioners in their home communities.

The sample of individuals receiving OWD services continues to grow and is now more than double the size of the group used in the current evaluation. This will allow KDOC to conduct more sophisticated analyses and increase the likelihood that the positive impact was due to the OWD program and not other factors. KDOC is also in the process of obtaining employment records from the Kansas Department of Labor to better measure the link between OWD services, improved employment outcomes, and reduced recidivism.

Table 1. Recidivism Rates by Risk Level

| Group | Risk Level | Recidivism Rate |
|------------|------------|-----------------|
| OWD | Low | 5% |
| Comparison | Low | 5% |
| OWD | Moderate | 10% |
| Comparison | Moderate | 17% |
| OWD | High | 29% |
| Comparison | High | 36% |

ENDNOTES

¹ Risk levels were assessed using the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R). The LSI-R is a risk classification tool comprised of 10 sub-scales: criminal history, education/employment, financial, family/marital, accommodations, leisure/recreation, companions, alcohol/drugs, emotional/personal, and attitudes/orientation.

² Lichtenberger, E. 2010. *Examining the relationship between career and technical (CTE) program participation and completion, improved employment outcomes, and the reduced likelihood of recidivism: A descriptive summary of the impact of the Virginia Department of Correctional Education's CTE programs*. Blacksburg, Va.: Center for Assessment, Evaluation, and Educational Programming, Virginia Tech.

Lichtenberger, E., P. O'Reilly, Y. Miyazaki, and M. Kamulladeen. 2010. *Direct and indirect impacts of career and technical education on post-release outcomes*. Blacksburg, Va.: Center for Assessment, Evaluation, and Educational Programming, Virginia Tech.

Visher, C., S. Debus, and J. Yahner. 2008. *Employment after prison: A longitudinal study of releases in three states*. Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Center, The Urban Institute.

³ Potential matches shared all of the following characteristics with members of the OWD group: release quarter, race, gender, offense type, risk level, time served, parole violations, and disciplinary reports. Propensity and total LSI-R scores were used to find the "nearest neighbor" if there was more than one potential match.

⁴ Other programming included therapeutic community, interchange, sex offender, vocational, substance abuse and work release.

⁵ Recidivism is defined as state-level recommitment in Kansas for either a technical violation of parole or a new crime. The mean release time for both groups was nearly a year (353 days).

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