CONNECTING INMATES TO JOBS:
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS DEVELOPS A MODEL FOR SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYMENT REENTRY

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8 March 2011

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The Problem

Nearly all prison systems in the United States provide some vocational and reentry services to inmates, and the Illinois Department of Corrections is no exception. Basic educational classes such as literacy, math, and GED preparation have long been considered necessary because almost all employers today require such foundational skills. Furthermore, generalized vocational programs such as in carpentry or agriculture are understood to be beneficial in that they provide inmates with good skills that may be helpful in seeking post-release employment.

Never the less, prisoners returning to their communities have a hard time finding even the most menial of work, often part time, underpaid and paid under the counter.

It may be that basic foundational skills and general vocational preparation are not sufficient. In the present economy industry needs and industries themselves are constantly changing. Employers are seeking increasingly specific skills in job candidates. To be effective in this environment, Illinois Department of Corrections officials concluded that it should engage private sector partners in the design of reentry programming. Accordingly, IDOC sought the advice of business and industry to help ensure that the training provided prisoners will prepare those prisoners for jobs that are likely to actually exist upon their release -- jobs for which potential employers will be receptive to hiring ex-offenders.

The Model

The Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) recently conceived a new program model that confronts head-on the above-mentioned concerns. IDOC’s program model places reentering inmates in the best position to obtain post-release employment.

IDOC’s first step in designing its new program was to undertake an evaluation of the regional occupational climate, so that programming can be focused on viable career paths with industries that expect to be hiring during the period when participating inmates will be released. The evaluation entailed a review of information obtained from state economic development agencies and departments of labor, local academic institutions, and, most importantly, with private sector industry associations and individual businesses. After some surprising twists and turns, an industry that offered employment opportunities and a career path was identified.

The second and third steps in the model involved communicating with the targeted industry to identify specific skills and/or certifications that businesses in that industry desire in a job applicant and to identifying training resources who could teach the skills desired by the industry. The IDOC looked to several training resources including the prison system’s in-house vocational training staff, an area community college with which the Department had contractual arrangements to conduct vocational training in a prison, or representatives from the targeted industry itself.

Once the training resource was identified, the IDOC asked that resource to design a curriculum and for advice on the skills and minimum academic abilities required to maximize participants’ likelihood of success in completing the curriculum.

In implementing the program, IDOC will screen potential applicants for the program from among inmates who had obtained the recommended skills and academic preparation and who had
had satisfactorily addressed collateral issues such as substance abuse, anger management or emotional problems. In addition, IDOC will also identify potential applicants for the program from among those inmates whose date of release coincided with or closely followed the conclusion of the program. This would allow for a seamless transition from incarceration to employment. IDOC would further limit potential applicants to those who would be released near the locations of the industries and businesses for which they would be prepared to work. IDOC also decided to limit participants to those who would be under Mandatory Supervised Release, a parole-styled supervision under Illinois law, for at least two years after release from prison.

The next step in implementation would be notification of potential applicants with an opportunity to apply followed by review and selection. In the model ultimately designed by IDOC three cohorts of inmates grouped as classes are to be selected. The Department would then transfer selected inmates to a specially designated unit of the prison in which the program was established.

As IDOC conceives it, the program involves more than mere classroom training. At the onset, each cohort of participating inmates will meet with industry representatives for an opportunity to learn about job opportunities in the targeted industry and to ensure that inmates are fully committed to participation. From the start, participants will be paired with mentors employed by or experienced in the targeted industry. These mentors will serve as a resource with coursework, support in the job search process and ultimately employment.

A program coordinator, employed by the corrections department, will arrange for employment counseling, provide assistance with job applications, and will maintain open lines of communication with applicable employers and hiring agencies. As inmates progress toward program completion and release, the program coordinator will coordinate with parole officers and other post-release service providers to ensure—for the benefit of both the inmate and the employer—that inmates are optimally positioned for success in employment.

The program model is designed to adapt and adjust to changing industry needs and emerging and new employment opportunities in different economic sectors. An ongoing IDOC working group and outside advisors will periodically reassess the job markets, identify opportunities in which reentering inmates could, if properly trained, have viable job prospects, and place the corrections department in direct contact with representatives from the targeted industry. The goal is that the IDOC identify the next opportunity where it can partner with the private sector to devise a winning program—for industry, for offenders, and—because successful employment and reentry is directly correlated with reduced recidivism—for society.

The Model in Action—The MINER Program

IDOC recently designed a model reentry program based on the above model and submitted it in an application for federal funding under the Second Chance Act. The specific grant solicitation appealed to IDOC because, uniquely among Second Chance Act grants open to corrections departments, it encouraged applicants to collaborate with private industry and business entities—a key to the IDOC’s program model. The grant solicitation had the added appeal of specifically focusing on technology-based training which by implication would involve new and potentially expanding labor markets.
After an initial investigation, IDOC quickly focused on employment opportunities in areas of new “green energy” and local foods/urban farming. Following its model approach, IDOC sought information from experts and potential partners—such as the Illinois Department of Economic Security (an agency that performs state-wide occupational forecasting), universities, community colleges, local “fresh produce” and local markets advocates and green technology industry organizations—to determine which green energy, urban food or agricultural jobs were likely to be hiring and open to hiring returning prisoners.

IDOC quickly encountered a problem with developing prison vocational programs related to “green energy” and local foods/urban farming in the period allowed by the federal grant. The media and the internet are alive with optimistic representations of new businesses in sustainable electricity generation, solar energy and bio-fuels. However, investigation revealed that progress varies from state to state. In Illinois, the mid-term viability of these industries is speculative. Segments of “green energy” are still highly dependent on governmental support. While the federal government has funded nationwide demonstration projects to train the next generation of energy workers, there is not yet an adequate level of private sector demand to support the emergence of graduates of such programs into the workforce. Similarly, the urban horticulture movement, while achieving new levels of popularity both in inner-cities and at the White House, is still primarily an associational and voluntary industry; unable to self-sustain or produce meaningful numbers of new jobs. In time, the situation in both areas is likely to change. It is even reasonable to predict a future demand for jobs based on a state law that mandates power companies purchase an increasing proportion of electricity from sustainable energy sources.

However, IDOC’s investigation led to a viable program partner in the Illinois clean coal industry. The clean coal industry is rapidly expanding in southern Illinois where new technologies and higher demand make mining Illinois’ soft high-sulfur-content coal environmentally friendly and economically profitable. Unlike other green-technology sectors that were considered, the clean coal industry was found to have a current and projected need for individuals trained in specific technical skills. Industry representatives were willing to partner with corrections to develop a program and commit to giving released ex-offenders a fair shot at employment. In addition, the employment offered starts at a salary level estimated in the $30,000 to $40,000 range in locations where the cost of living is relatively low.

With a targeted industry partner secured, IDOC’s focus turned to identifying an appropriate in-prison instructor for the newly named MINER (Mining Industry New-technology Employment Reentry) program. Fortunately, IDOC had existing contracts in place with a number of community colleges one of which, Rend Lake College, is an established training provider for individuals who want to work in coal mining. Rend Lake College was brought on board as a program partner—to develop a curriculum, identify needed equipment, and assist in the development of a program budget. Rend Lake also provided additional direct industry contacts; through it, IDOC was able to confirm in writing support for its proposed program from a multi-national mining company and a hiring agency that does entry-level hiring for clean coal mines.

In developing the curriculum Rend Lake College and the IDOC determined that while most of the courses which inmates needed could be taught to prisoners while they were incarcerated, several could only be taught with equipment including a mock mine that was available at Rend Lake College. Accordingly, IDOC and Rend Lake College decided to split the program into two phases. During the first phase, involving an intense academic schedule lasting
five-six months, inmates would complete a series of courses and 24 credit hours in a class room setting within the prison. Prisoners whose release dates coincided with the end of phase one would graduate from class and leave prison at the same time. During phase two, lasting one academic semester at Rend Lake College, inmates who were released after conclusion of their course work in prison would be eligible to take classes leading to certification at Rend Lake College. Program participants whose release dates followed conclusion of the course work in prison could be released into an Adult Transitional Centers (ATCs) from which they could complete their coursework at Rend lake College while on work release. The phase two portion of the program put participants side by side with other students, many of whom would have worked in mining, as well as in a hands-on training environment including a full-size simulated mine. Phase two classes are scheduled to accommodate working students, which means that participants could be employed.

And employment is the goal: IDOC’s program coordinator would have worked with participants, the temporary hiring agencies upon which coal mine operators rely for workers, mentors, community-based service providers and even the participant inmates family to obtain employment prior to release if at all possible, and shortly thereafter if not. Program support would extent to employment assistance in industries other than clean coal for returning prisoners who did not find work in clean coal, and to substance abuse testing, counseling, and assistance with housing and related reentry concerns for the period of mandatory supervised release.

**MINER Program Considerations**

IDOC designed the Miner Program to run over a twelve-month period in order to meet conditions of a particular grant solicitation. The IDOC would prefer to extend the program over 24 months or longer, with a period of approximately one year or longer in which to address substance abuse issues, provide basic education or identified literacy skills, and otherwise prepare inmates for the intense training program offered them upon successful completion. The same period would provide time in which to assess motivation and other factors in selecting inmates for the academic program.

A MINER or similar program which is designed to run 24 months or more fits the needs of emerging industries which still short of being commercially viable or hiring to the scale anticipated as the economy improves and technologies advance. A program designed with the best advice of such an industry to prepare inmates to contribute to a workforce for which there will be demand at the time those inmates complete their sentence has an inherent efficiency: the inmate is housed, fed and provided for during all or most of the period he or she in training. There is no need for subsidized training or transitional work. There is time to assess each inmate’s abilities and motivation for the job. As in the MINER program, there is an opportunity to mentor which is also an opportunity for a person knowledgeable in the industry to observe a person prior to his applying for a job.

The MINER program is not inexpensive, particularly because a significant part of the cost is the purchase of equipment necessary for the portion of the program conducted in prison. This equipment can be reused as long as the MINER program continues and it can be used for training for work in other industries. If the MINER program model succeeds for the inmate and the industries for which inmates are being trained, it seems only logical that costs of future programs
might be shared with the industries that will benefit by being able to train candidates for employment with new skills and to high standards of the industry’s own choosing.

Moreover, while the MINER program model is not inexpensive, its costs are less than even a half a year of incarceration. And because most of the training is provided while the inmate is incarcerated, the model compares favorably to transitional work models which provide stipends or subsidies to the former inmate or his or her employer during the initial training or employment period.

The MINER program is intended for a higher risk inmate, one who merited a fairly lengthy sentence in the first place. It is designed for an inmate in which the state has made a considerable investment in terms of longer term incarceration and, presumably, substance abuse treatment and other programming. The program becomes cost efficient if it reduces recidivism by a more serious offender and produces instead a taxpayer capable of supporting a family and contributing to the economy of a community.

The MINER program could be justified on a cost basis to an even greater degree if an inmate’s successful participation and connection to employment upon release could be tied to a shortened prison term --- a step not available under Illinois’ determinate sentencing laws but worthy of consideration moving forward.