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Advancing Employment Opportunities for Justice-Involved Individuals through Work-Based Learning: Experiences from Reentry Project Grantees

For justice-involved individuals, the path from incarceration to obtaining a good job can be challenging (Ositelu 2019). A third of incarcerated adults in the United States have low educational attainment rates. They possess less than a high school diploma or GED, which is a requirement for many employment positions (Ositelu 2019). Formerly incarcerated individuals struggle to reconnect to the labor force after release because they have limited basic skills and soft skills, their criminal records make employers reluctant to hire them, and struggle with finding adequate transportation, secure housing, and mental health services (Agan and Starr 2017; Lake 2021; Nordberg et al. 2021). One strategy used by Reentry Project (RP) grantees to address these concerns is work-based learning (WBL).

This brief draws on a variety of sources, including survey responses from 89 RP grantees, interviews with RP program staff and partner organizations from 27 sites, interviews with 37 RP participants, interviews with 41 employers, and national workforce data from the Workforce Integrated Performance System (WIPS) all with the aim of describing the types of WBL provided to RP participants, RP programs' experiences in offering WBL opportunities to justice-involved individuals, and some lessons learned from offering WBL to the reentry population. The "Experiences with WBL for justice-involved individuals and employers" section of this brief provides insights into the value of offering WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals and businesses.

Study background

This issue brief is part of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office that explores the implementation and impact of the Reentry Project (RP) grants. DOL's Employment and Training Administration awarded a total of 116 grants in 2017, 2018, and 2019. These grants aimed to improve employment and public safety outcomes and reduce recidivism for individuals previously involved in the criminal justice system.

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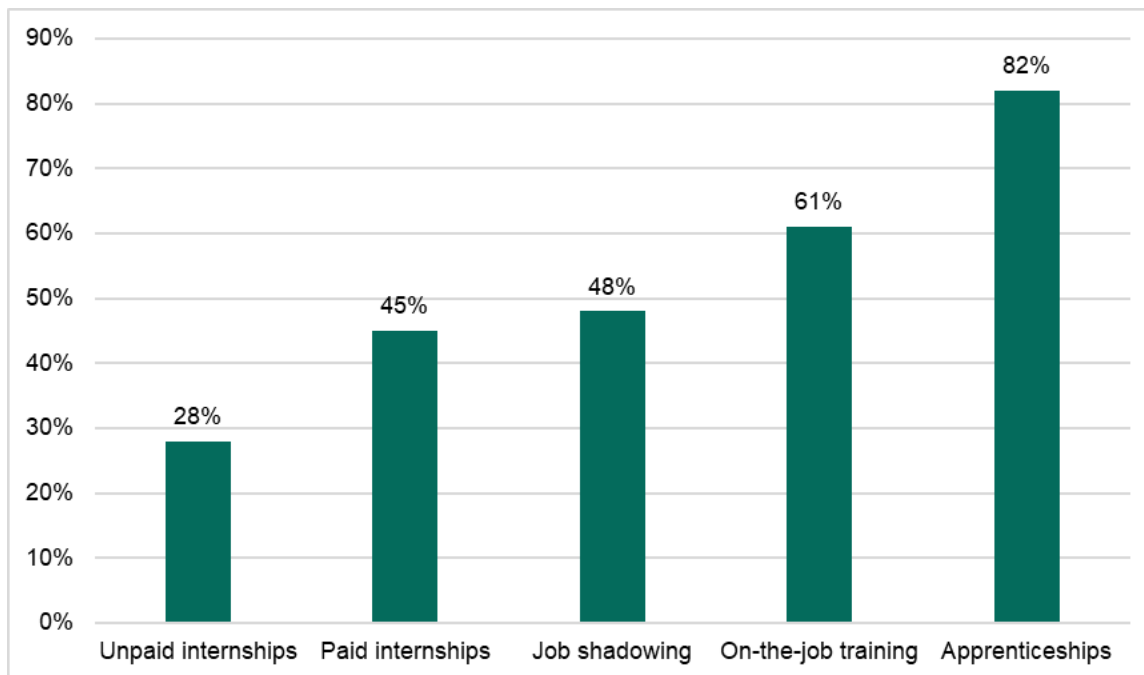
Reentry Project virtual site visits

The evaluation team conducted 27 virtual site visits with selected 2018 and 2019 RP grantees between December 2021 and April 2022. Sites were chosen by examining certain grantee characteristics (for example, population served, geography, and program features) to ensure selection of a diverse set of grantees in order to inform impact study results and explore potentially promising practices of interest, as identified by site visit respondents, to DOL. Site visits typically included interviews with RP program staff, partner employers, a training provider, a justice system partner, an American Job Center partner, and program participants.

Work-based learning (WBL) opportunities offered by RP grantees

There are many definitions of WBL (Wilson 2017).¹ For purposes of this brief, WBL refers to an approach to applied and experiential learning that supports skills development in technical, vocational, and soft skills for a range of learners and workers through learning and/or working in a real work environment.² In Figure 1, we outline the WBL opportunities that grantees offered as reported in the RP grantee survey.³ The majority of RP grantees (82 percent) offered apprenticeships, (61 percent) on-the-job training. Fewer grantees offered job shadowing (48 percent), paid internships (45 percent), and unpaid internships (28 percent).

Figure 1. Percentage of grantees offering WBL opportunities to Reentry Project participants, by service type



Source: RP 2018 and 2019 grantee survey, n=66

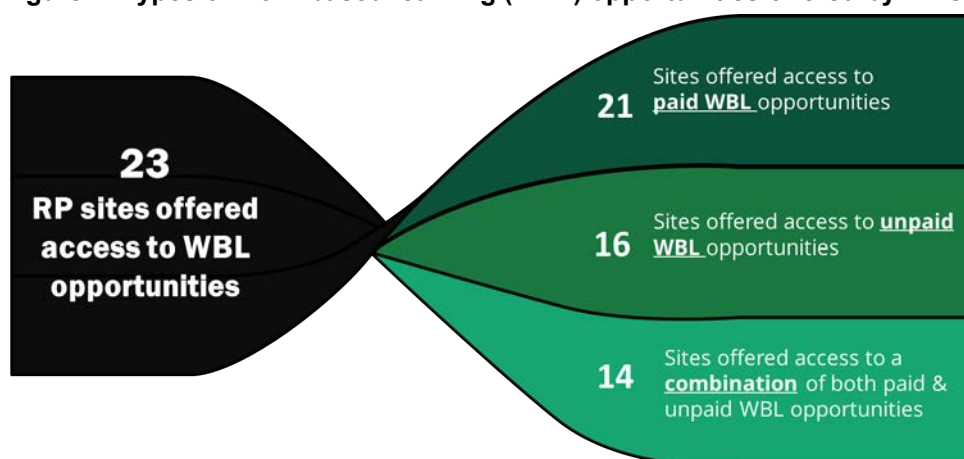
Site visits conducted with RP intermediaries and grantees provide additional context around the types of WBL offered to reentry project participants. In total, 23 sites offered access to paid and/or unpaid WBL opportunities, providing those services directly through their RP programs or through referrals to partner organizations such as American Job Centers (AJC), unions, and community colleges (see Figure 2).

¹See the [Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006](#); [National Governor's Association](#); [National Skills Coalition](#); [Southern Regional Education Board](#); and the U.S. Department of Labor [apprenticeship site](#).

²See [JFF's Work-based Learning Framework](#) for more information on WBL. See the [Aspen Institute's Unpacking the Work of Work-Based Learning](#) for more information on youth-focused WBL.

³The study team administered surveys near the end of each grant cycle for RP grantees awarded grants in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Overall, the survey had a 98 percent response rate. This brief draws on findings from the 2018 and 2019 grantee survey responses.

Figure 2. Types of work-based learning (WBL) opportunities offered by RP sites



Source: Virtual site visits, n=27.

Note: Paid WBL experiences include offerings, such as on-the-job training and apprenticeships, in which participants earn wages while engaged in training. Unpaid WBL experiences include offerings such as internships or job shadowing opportunities, in which participants gain exposure and experience but do not earn wages.

As shown in Figure 2, 21 RP sites reported offering access to paid WBL opportunities such as paid internships, on-the-job training (OJT), and apprenticeship programs, whereas 16 sites reported offering access to unpaid WBL opportunities, such as facility tours, job shadowing, unpaid internships, and pre-apprenticeship programs. Fourteen sites offered access to a combination of both paid and unpaid WBL to justice-involved individuals participating in their RP programs.

Among the 23 RP sites that described offering access to paid and/or unpaid WBL opportunities to their participants:

- Nine sites reported that they used **pre-apprenticeship programs** to assist participants in securing the needed basic skills, employability skills, and technical skills required for placement in registered apprenticeship programs. Site visit respondents from these nine sites noted that the duration of the pre-apprenticeships varied with industry requirements, ranging from a few weeks to several months. These respondents added that participants who enrolled in and successfully completed pre-apprenticeship programs had greater success in securing placement in an employer-sponsored apprenticeship.
- Twelve sites facilitated **paid internships or work experience**, of which three also offered unpaid internships. Internships offered by sites ranged from one to eight weeks.
- Ten sites offered **on-the-job training**, ranging from two to eight weeks.
- Eight sites described their **job shadowing** opportunities as short, ranging from a couple of days to two weeks, and two sites offered participants **job tours** typically of no more than two hours.
- Three sites also reported using **social enterprises**, which are mission-driven businesses, to hire RP participants and assist them in gaining work experience while helping them overcome barriers to

unsubsidized employment.⁴ The social enterprise approaches served as a bridge from unemployment to employment and ranged from a few weeks to several months.

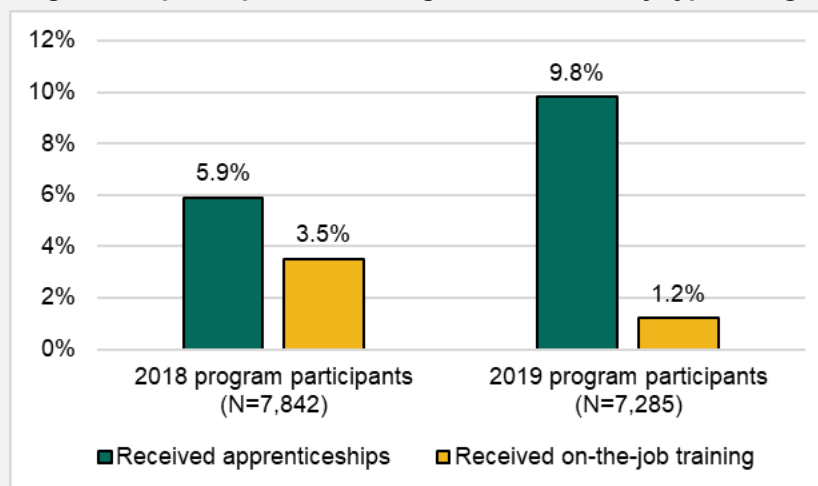
- For RP sites that offered justice-involved individuals access to WBL opportunities, 20 of 23 sites either relied solely on partner resources or braided their RP funds with partner programs to offer WBL. Partners most cited by RP program staff as funders of and collaborators in WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals included WIOA Title I adult, dislocated worker, and youth providers; WIOA Title II adult education and literacy providers; and community colleges, unions, and local employers.

The interviews with RP sites illustrated that the sites made WBL opportunities available to justice-involved individuals participating in reentry programs. However, the Workforce Integrated Performance System (WIPS) data suggest that the overall uptake of WBL among RP participants remained relatively low, given the large proportion of sites offering work-based learning to participants (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Types of work-based learning opportunities offered by RP grantees

The WIPS data for 2018 and 2019 RP grantees illustrate the use of two types of work-based learning (WBL) opportunities—registered apprenticeship and on-the-job training (OJT). As shown in Table 1, the number and percentage of RP participants who received registered apprenticeships rose from 5.9 percent (N = 463) in 2018 to 9.8 percent (N = 714) in 2019. In contrast, the number and percentage of RP participants who received OJT declined from 3.5 percent (N = 274) in 2018 to 1.2 percent (N = 87) in 2019. It is important to note that the WIPS data do not include other less intensive forms of WBL such as facility tours, job shadowing, and internships, although interviews with RP sites reported the offer of these types of WBL activities to reentry populations.

Figure 3. Percentage of RP participants receiving WBL services by type and grant year



Source: WIPS data, N=15,127.

⁴ Social enterprises are described as “revenue-generating businesses with a mission,” such as expanding access to public benefits or improving the environment. They also aim to help individuals enter or reenter the workforce. See the [Annie E. Casey Foundation’s definition of a social enterprise](#) for more information.

Experiences with WBL for justice-involved individuals and employers

Site visit interviews with RP project staff, participants, and employers offer deeper insight into their experiences with and participation in WBL. According to interview data collected during RP site visits, staff from 23 sites discussed the challenges associated with creating and offering WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals, including the pandemic’s impact on businesses’ ability to provide WBL opportunities. The site visit interviews with project staff, partners, employers, and participants also reflect the value of offering WBL opportunities to the justice-involved population and the business community.

Experiences offering WBL opportunities to justice-involved individuals

- **WBL offered justice-involved individuals opportunities to earn an income while engaging in training.** Of the 23 RP sites that offered WBL opportunities to their participants either directly or indirectly through referrals, 13 sites reported that justice-involved individuals often needed to earn a wage immediately upon release. Accordingly, WBL opportunities that offered monetary compensation (i.e., stipends, subsidized employment, direct employment with a salary) were preferable to unpaid WBL opportunities. Program staff noted that forms of WBL that did not involve financial compensation, such as facility tours, job shadowing, and unpaid internships, did not meet participants’ immediate need to earn income while engaging in training and job preparation. Interviews with RP participants across the sites echoed the same. Ten of the 37 RP participant interviewees stated that they needed income to support themselves and pay for basic needs such as housing, food, and transportation or to meet a probation requirement.

To address this challenge, at least 12 RP sites offered paid internships or subsidized work experience opportunities (Exhibit 2). Specifically, two sites that coordinated pre-apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades for RP participants—one through its local AJC and the other through a local employer—reported high apprenticeship placement rates. In fact, one site reported that between 75 and 80 percent of all participants who completed the construction pre-apprenticeship program obtained placement in the union-supported building trades council apprenticeship program, while the other site reported that it placed approximately 90 percent of its pre-apprenticeship graduates in formal apprenticeships or directly into unsubsidized employment. One site reported that it leveraged an OJT experience to help a female participant, who was experiencing difficulty in finding a position as a commercial driver’s license (CDL) driver, find employment in a nontraditional occupation with her OJT employer.

Exhibit 2. Paid internships in one RP site

Project staff from one RP site reported that roughly 35 percent of RP participants secured paid internships focused in two industry sectors—construction trades and health care—ranging from six to eight weeks. Their RP participants in the health care industry received work experience as part of a practicum in patient care or nursing assistant training programs. This site helped to subsidize the internships offered to its participants, which staff helped make a difference in program persistence and completion.

Even though, according to site visit respondents, participants and program staff preferred OJT opportunities, program staff from 14 sites that offered access to WBL reported that the pandemic limited their ability to offer both paid and unpaid WBL opportunities as opportunities “dried up” among businesses in their communities. Across these 14 sites, RP staff reported that the pandemic

undermined WBL opportunities when some businesses closed their facilities or others increased health and safety protocols, such as requirements for vaccinations, personal protective equipment, and frequent COVID-19 testing. As discussed during site visits, in some instances, employers were no longer willing to accept any individuals for WBL who were not already on their personnel roster.

- **WBL appeared to support justice-involved individuals as they built their workplace skills and gained real-world experience.** According to interview respondents from 14 of the 23 RP sites offering access to WBL opportunities, justice-involved individuals participating in WBL activities gained exposure to real-world work environments and developed skills valued by employers but that may be difficult to acquire in traditional classroom settings. RP program staff and participants from these sites added that the skills learned during participation in WBL activities extended to a combination of the technical, vocational, and professional, the last of which included working effectively in teams, understanding workplace rules and procedures, understanding time management, and learning to become proactive to address problems that arise on a work site.
- **WBL was reported to help justice-involved individuals with career exploration while they gained a better understanding of specific industries and occupations.** Staff members interviewed at nine RP sites offering access to WBL opportunities reported that their activities provided an opportunity for justice-involved individuals to gain a better understanding of a specific industry and set of occupations by working alongside professionals within that industry who understand the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in that career pathway. For example, a staff member at one RP site encouraged all RP participants to attend facility tours offered by local employers. This staff member stated that the facility tours fulfilled two purposes: (1) they help introduce participants to local employers and (2) give participants an opportunity to explore various work environments and jobs at a single employer site, such as plant security, the manufacturing floor, and the back office.
- **Staff observed that WBL allowed justice-involved individuals to fill employment gaps and re-acclimate to work life and their community.** Staff interviewees in three RP sites offering access to WBL opportunities stated that justice-involved individuals experience difficulty in re-acclimating to community life after incarceration. Program staff from these three sites viewed offering justice-involved individuals the opportunity to work closely with an employer as a good way to support individuals' transition to the community and work life. Program staff at one site noted that participants have different learning styles and that, for some people, experiencing the daily routine of an WBL opportunity was a meaningful step in preparing them for a return to full-time employment. According to another RP staff member from one of these three sites, participants in WBL opportunities seemed to “feel more connected to the community, feel like they’ve contributed to society. That’s super valuable. These are youth that don’t necessarily feel good about themselves.”

An RP staff member at one site summarized the importance of WBL in helping participants understand the reality of an occupation:

“The advantage [of WBL] to the student is that we do it, our training and work site environment, so that they see exactly what they're gonna walk into. We tried to mimic the work environment [in our training component] and I think that is extraordinarily important because over the years what I've found is that in a sterile environment the student learns or believes that that's what he's going to go into. Once they get into the field it's a shock.”

Perceived benefits for employers

- WBL served as a conduit for employers to gain familiarity with and comfort in working with and hiring justice-involved individuals, according to site visit respondents. Engaging in WBL opportunities with RP participants gave businesses an opportunity to train and observe potential employees before committing to hiring them, according to interviews with program staff and employers at nine sites. Even though some employers expressed concerns about hiring justice-involved individuals with certain criminal justice backgrounds, such as burglary or violent crime, many employers pointed to their desire and willingness to give justice-involved individuals a “second chance”; in fact, some employers noted that they considered the time since a crime was committed in their hiring practices.
- **WBL provided employers with a talent pipeline for open positions, according to respondents.** Employer partners for three RP sites reported that participation in WBL programs helped their businesses expand their talent pipeline. RP site interviewees from these three sites stated that WBL participants also received needed industry-recognized certifications through their WBL experiences, mainly in the more intensive forms of WBL such as OJT, pre-apprenticeship, and apprenticeship. Industry certifications benefitted employers because hands-on training readied individuals to perform their work assignments, according to RP program staff. One strategy used by 17 of the 23 RP sites offering access to WBL opportunities was to embed certifications into their skills development and occupational skills training approaches. Of these, 3 sites reported that industry certifications were embedded into WBL activities, especially in their more comprehensive and robust WBL pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and paid internship or work experience opportunities. Embedding certifications into WBL activities ensures that justice-involved individuals gain valuable hands-on experience while learning new, certifiable skills, according to RP staff. RP staff reported that embedding certifications in WBL opportunities helps improve employability by enhancing prospective employees’ qualifications and marketability.
- **WBL was reported to defray employers’ training costs.** Employers working with four sites noted that they appreciate publicly supported WBL opportunities, such as paid internships, OJTs and pre-apprenticeship programs, because these types of WBL help businesses cover the high cost of onboarding new employees and ensure that employees have the requisite skills—soft and occupational—needed to perform their jobs. An employer at one RP site stated how grateful he was that the RP program covered half the cost of the OJT, which served as an incentive for his skilled

Employer perspective on gaining a better understanding of the reentry population

“I had no ability as a former construction foreman to deal with the level of dysfunction that comes along with someone trying to reintegrate into society. My thought was to get angry, which is the wrong approach. [Working with RP site staff] was a way to get some [knowledge about] trauma informed care for me and people like me who don’t know how to deal with it.”

RP staff perspective on benefits of WBL for employers

“Employers can be anxious about the risk of hiring someone with a [criminal] background but feel differently after a successful internship experience through [our program].”



“I needed employees and appreciated that their training time would be paid by [the program].”

Employer


workers to train RP participants and helped his company defray the cost of onboarding new employees.

Lessons shared by the RP sites implementing WBL

Project staff from across the 23 RP sites offered various perspectives on WBL practices and identified lessons of potential use to practitioners providing reentry services in their communities.

- **Subsidize WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals when possible.** Interviews with staff at eight RP sites indicated that unpaid WBL experiences, though valuable in helping justice-involved individuals develop workplace skills, were less appealing to participants because the unpaid opportunities did not meet participants' immediate need to earn income. Paid WBL opportunities were perceived to balance the immediate need for income with the longer-term benefits that come through WBL. Fifteen sites that provided access to paid WBL (i.e., paid internship, pre-apprenticeships, and OJT) noted that such opportunities motivated participants to enroll and complete a WBL experience.
- **Forge partnerships with a wide variety of organizations to develop and sustain WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals.** Funding WBL opportunities can be expensive, and the paperwork can be time-consuming for program staff and employers, according to staff at three sites. Staff from one site noted that the site could sustain paid WBL only if it had funds to tap or could share the cost of the WBL opportunity with an employer (i.e., OJT) or partner program. Most RP sites (19 of the 23 that provided unpaid and/or paid WBL opportunities) reported coordinating with external partners such as AJCs, community colleges, career technical education centers, and employer associations to develop linkages, create referral processes, and braid funding to support WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals in their community.
- **Ensure that WBL opportunities meet the needs, expectations, and capabilities of justice-involved individuals and employers.** Staff from nine sites mentioned the importance of assessing a participant's "fitness" for placement in a WBL activity. Project staff from three of the sites that performed assessments stated that participants must complete work-readiness training before placement in a WBL opportunity. In addition to providing an opportunity for participants to strengthen their employability skills before beginning a WBL activity, according to respondents from these sites, the training offered staff the opportunity to assess a participant's readiness to meet an employer's work requirements (such as start times, physical ability, and communication skills). For example, one RP staff person stated that, before she takes participants on facility tours, she assesses their readiness for the opportunity. "I want to see how students are acting in school; are they polite? Do they follow directions?" She added that her assessment process includes learning more about her students' life to better understand their behaviors, what they like in terms of work environments, and what types of roles might be a good fit for them. The site's job recruiter also talks with participants individually to see what they want to do after the program and what types of jobs they see as a good fit. RP staff from these nine sites reported that ensuring participants' preparation in advance of participating in a WBL activity is critical to building trust with employers. The knowledge that participants have completed preparation activities and that RP staff are available to support participants after placement builds employer confidence and, in turn, helps ensure that participants enter a supportive WBL environment, according to site visit respondents.

- Provide needed supports, including supportive services, ongoing case management, and mentoring, to encourage participation and completion of WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals.** Just over half of RP sites that provided WBL opportunities (13 of 23) reported barriers to participation, such as reliable transportation and mental and behavioral health problems, that affect justice-involved individuals’ ability to participate and/or complete WBL activities. Thus, the provision of supports such as behavioral counseling, substance abuse treatment programs, and mentoring coupled with supportive services (for example, subsidies for transportation, work clothing, etc.) could help promote retention and increase justice-involved individuals’ ability to succeed, according to site visit respondents.


“We are also a family here at [the program]. If participants are hungry, we feed them; if they need an outfit, we clothe them...we give them what they need to get a job.”
 RP Site Case Manager
- Use available workforce data to determine which positions in local industries and occupations are in demand.** To gain a better understanding of which local industries and occupations offered job openings and likely promised long-term demand, staff at four RP sites that provided WBL stated that they relied on labor market information, met with partner organizations, and held discussions with employers/employer associations. These information sources were reported to help RP sites identify industries and employers with open employment positions through which employers might be more inclined to meet their workforce needs by offering WBL opportunities to justice-involved individuals.
- Explore opportunities to prepare participants for more intensive forms of WBL, including pre-apprenticeships and social enterprises.** Nine sites offered pre-apprenticeships, and three supported participants at internally or externally operated social enterprises. Both pre-apprenticeships and social enterprises provide a gateway to full-time employment. One site offered a pre-apprenticeship within its own social enterprise, in which participants worked 20 hours per week for three months in the site’s vending and delivery services and acquired valuable skills and work experience. After completing the pre-apprenticeship within the social enterprise, most participants moved on to employment, but a small number participate in a registered apprenticeship offered through the social enterprise after completing the pre-apprenticeship.

Conclusion

WBL opportunities for justice-involved individuals reentering the workplace may help advance justice-involved individuals’ understanding of the workforce and employment opportunities. Through WBL, and especially paid WBL opportunities, justice-involved individuals may be able to acquire the academic, vocational, and professional skills they need to succeed in the workplace. Through WBL opportunities, justice-involved individuals could benefit from opportunities to identify career pathways of interest, develop supporting relationships with employers, strengthen their social and professional networks, and acquire practical work experience that helps them develop new knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for securing and maintaining employment.

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Additional briefs and reports developed for the Reentry Project evaluation are available here: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/Reentry-Projects-Grant-Evaluation>

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