



Improving Employment Outcomes for Returning Citizens in Illinois

The Government Performance Lab (GPL) provided pro-bono technical assistance to help the Illinois Department of Corrections improve the quality of in-facility career and technical education courses.

The Challenge: Individuals returning from a period of incarceration with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) face major challenges finding gainful employment in the formal economy. More than 60% of returning citizens report no employment within two years of release and 93% live below the federal poverty line. Poor employment outcomes for returning citizens contribute to Illinois' relatively high rate of recidivism (44%)¹ and perpetuate a cycle of poverty and re-incarceration. To address the employment challenge for returning citizens, IDOC provides a suite of career and technical education (CTE) courses to up to 9% of the prison population. However, sustained poor employment outcomes amongst returning citizens signaled challenges with both the accessibility and quality of the CTE courses offered.

The thirteen available CTE courses provide training in a range of areas, from relatively low-skill occupations such as custodial maintenance to higher-skill jobs such as automotive technicians. While the courses are IDOC's principle method for addressing the employment needs of returning citizens, the department had collected relatively little operational information on how these courses performed. There was a lack of clarity on whether or not individuals were being effectively matched to the right courses, which courses would be the most beneficial to offer given market-demand, and how course completers performed in the job market. In addition, the department had an unanswered question around who was responsible for improving employment outcomes. Although IDOC sought to improve employment outcomes through pre-release job training programs and other programs to address educational and criminogenic need, no designated person within IDOC had responsibility for ensuring that returning citizens who received trainings received any type of targeted employment support. As a result, IDOC knew it wasn't making the best use of its employment-focused resources.

The Project: With support from the GPL, IDOC reviewed effective in-facility career and technical education programs across the country. Through interviews with corrections departments in 14 states and conversations with almost 40 staff members, project partners identified best practices, discrete activities, and innovations that other jurisdictions have used to improve the employment outcomes of returning citizens. Grounded in this research, project partners worked to:

1. Pilot a cross-departmental subcommittee responsible for assessing program quality and advancing reforms across CTE courses

One of the department's initial challenges was the need for a lead stakeholder responsible for improving employment outcomes for returning citizens. To address this, and to ensure that reforms and best practices identified in the research process would be implemented, IDOC set up a cross-departmental committee tasked with driving quality improvements in CTE courses. The Vocational Programs Subcommittee serves as the primary body responsible for advancing the numerous changes

¹ Illinois Dept. of Corrections 3-year Recidivism Rates, https://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/reportsandstatistics/Documents/Fact%20Sheet_Recidivism%20FY10_FY14_Trends.pdf

IDOC is making to its CTE programs. It contains ten members from across IDOC, within Headquarters and from the prison facilities, and also counted on assistance and input from staff from other agencies, including the Illinois Department of Employment Security, the Illinois Community College Board, and the Department of Employment and Economic Opportunity.

One of the initiatives the subcommittee is working towards is harmonizing course deliverables with industry-demands. As part of this, the committee adopted a goal of conferring industry-recognized credentials at the conclusion of all of its CTE programs. These credentials add a layer of accountability for CTE vendors and signal to industry employers that students have received quality training.

2. Improve accessibility and relevance of CTE courses by expanding available slots, tailoring course offerings, and more effectively matching students to available courses

As partners reviewed the internal performance of CTE courses it became clear that IDOC was potentially missing out on training hundreds of students every year due to a high rate of unfilled instructor positions. Available data indicated that in a given month in 2018, IDOC had between 7% and 15% of its instructor slots unfilled, directly undercutting its ability to address pressing employment needs of its population. As a result, IDOC is working to amend contracts to allow flexibility to find different vendors when teaching slots are left unfilled in order to maximize the number of available course slots for students.

Prior to the start of the project, course selection was entirely based on individualized understandings of what ‘made sense’ for the needs of the incarcerated population. IDOC brought data into decision-making around course offerings, using labor market information to evaluate the wages, demand, and geographic distribution of occupations across Illinois and comparing this to courses offered. This process allows the department to ensure offered courses set students up for success in the job search post-release. IDOC also began to implement an assessment tool to more effectively match students to the right courses, working across the Department of Employment Security and the Department of Innovation and Technology to improve the fit between student’s interests/skills and available courses.

3. Drive improvements in key employment outcomes by increasing successful course completion rates and then matching individuals who have completed training with interested employers

From its external research and internal reviews, IDOC was able to determine the leading cause of disappointing course completion rates (56%²). The introduction of new policies around earned program sentence credit (earning time off one’s sentence for participating in educational programs) had rendered IDOC’s former method of slotting students into courses obsolete. IDOC assigned students based on proximity to release, but following the introduction of sentence credit the days remaining on one’s sentence became a dynamic figure and many were paroling earlier than originally expected. Additional analysis revealed that 67% of incompletions occurred due to students paroling early (i.e. they were released before finishing the course). In response, IDOC undertook an effort to adjust how they assign students into courses in order to improve course completion rates.

IDOC then designed and tested an employer outreach process to effectively connect individuals that have successfully completed training with interested employers in relevant fields. As part of this the department developed its first forward facing materials to engage employers and communicate the substance of its CTE programming. For example, IDOC worked with a CTE vendor which provided construction occupations training to turn its course curriculum into a digestible one-pager and reach

² Based on internal calculations of completion rates, less the Career Technology course.

out to the 75 top construction industry employers in the state. This comprehensive outreach effort aimed to match individuals who had completed the construction occupations training to potential construction employers throughout Illinois.

The Innovation: In addition to improving the quality of in-facility career and technical education courses, project partners have:

1. Developed a comprehensive reform agenda for in-prison CTE programs based on the best practices from other states

Research based on the in-facility career and technical education programs offered in other states led project partners to develop a reform agenda centered on four best practices: improving program quality through use of industry-recognized credentials; expanding coordination with workforce agencies; targeting limited seats to the right students; and department-wide dedication to fostering direct connections to employers. Examples of discrete activities and innovations of the reform agenda include: establishing regular analyses of high-demand fields appropriate for returning citizens in partnership with relevant workforce agencies, blending multiple industry credentials into the same course to boost employability, expanding class sizes and access to CTE by using teaching assistants, and ensuring resumes of returning citizens nearing release are directly delivered to a community of employers. In the case of Illinois, this new reform agenda has allowed partners to analyze the drivers of low CTE completion rates to boost the number of successful graduates, investigate opportunities to increase the availability of CTE seats, introduce a system for gauging program quality, and pilot a flexible client-focused approach to employer engagement.

2. Embedded a new culture of data-driven decision making that further integrates Illinois' corrections and workforce systems

With the creation of the Vocational Programs Subcommittee, representatives from corrections and workforce-related agencies regularly come together to oversee service delivery and performance monitoring of CTE courses. High frequency, collaborative meetings allow the different departments and agencies to jointly investigate points of concern (for example, course completion rates or employer engagement) and work together to address them.

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