

Building Partnerships for Successful Reentry Webinar Transcript

Vera Moderator: Brian Walsh, Senior Program Associate, Vera Institute of Justice

NRRC Moderator: Nicholas Read, Senior Crime and Justice Researcher, American Institutes for Research

Presenters (in order of appearance):

Becky Heth, Employment Program Manager, Wisconsin Department of Corrections;
Seth Lentz, CEO, South Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board;
Diane-Good Collins, Reentry Program Director, Metropolitan Community College;
Marji Voorvart, Reentry Life Employment Coach, Metropolitan Community College; and
Kimmie Spotts, Student and Peer Mentor Support, Metropolitan Community College

[0:00:01]

Brian Walsh: Good morning. Welcome to the National Reentry Resource Center's webinar on Building Partnerships for Successful Reentry. I'm Brian Walsh from the Unlocking Potential team with the Vera Institute of Justice.

Brian Walsh: I'm a senior program associate on the Unlocking Potential team. I've been working with ARES and CAREERS grantees on

Brian Walsh: the work of reentry. So today we're going to be hearing from two different groups. We're going to be hearing from Wisconsin and then Nebraska. Starting off with Wisconsin, I'm going to have our Wisconsin

Brian Walsh: panelists introduce themselves. So why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself individually. Seth, starting with you.

[0:00:38]

Seth Lentz: Thank you for having me, my name is Seth Lentz. I'm the executive director for the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin.

[0:00:48]

Brian Walsh: Thanks, Seth. And, Becky.

[0:00:49]

Becky Heth: Hello. My name is Becky Heth. I'm the reentry employment programs manager with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections in the Reentry Unit.

[0:01:00]

Brian Walsh: It's great to have this opportunity to talk with both of you. As some of you will see today a blog was released from Vera that talked about some of the work that

Brian Walsh: Wisconsin DOC and the workforce board have been doing with regards job centers. Today on this panel, however, we're going to be talking about

Brian Walsh: the ARES project in particular--this great partnership between the two agencies. So, would you please describe the overall ARES project. Who are the primary partners? Who are the community partners? This is a real unique example of ARES. We'd love to hear more about it.

[0:01:42]

Becky Heth: So, I wanted to start off by saying that it's pretty well established that people with criminal records face this host of barriers when they are attempting to seek employment.

Becky Heth: And so, it's important to have this coordinated system which supports the transitions from the community

Becky Heth: following their incarceration. And so, for Wisconsin for this project we're partnering with the workforce development board, Seth and his team, on implementing

Becky Heth: some strategies for those returning. We are targeting a seven-county region in South Central Wisconsin which will serve individuals releasing to those counties. Some of our community partners, we were able to identify in our planning phase of the grant that we received in 2018.

Becky Heth: And it contains about a 60+ list of identified agencies in the south-central region of state.

Becky Heth: We really want to have five main objectives of this implementation grant which was consistent with the IRES framework

Becky Heth: that we were also part of in Wisconsin. Two main objectives of this implementation is developing an internal team to create a robust information sharing system that the community providers can use to receive baseline data of clients that they're serving in the community

Becky Heth: on supervision. Our other main objective is to focus on increasing the capacity of these provider networks by conducting trainings on how to infuse evidence-based practices for the reentry population into their existing programs.

Becky Heth: That's a very brief, general overview of the implementation grant and a little bit of the history of the planning grant that we received.

[0:03:37]

Brian Walsh: Becky, that's great. We're going to go into a little bit more detail in a bit. I want to jump over to Seth and

Brian Walsh: what's interesting here is that you chose a workforce board as your partner to work with community partners. Seth, can you tell us more about that? Why did the workforce board choose to become a partner in this? Why do you think the workforce board is

Brian Walsh: a good partner for this kind of work?

[0:04:00]

Seth Lentz: Sure. We have been fortunate to be able to be a partner with department of corrections in regards to some reentry initiatives that go back almost 10 years.

Seth Lentz: And that started our relationship, focusing had those that are reentering the community after incarceration, and how can we support that reintegration into our communities, and recognizing that employment plays a factor to helping to stabilize that reentry.

Seth Lentz: And that the workforce development boards, who are the administrators and coordinators of the public workforce system, have those relationships as well as programs and resources. So, it really became a partnership that grew from a very small project, but over time has continued to grow.

Seth Lentz: I think that it's important because, from a workforce development perspective, workforce development—sure we focus on worker development. Literally, the workers and their development. But, we have to do that to

Seth Lentz: maintain alignment with what industry needs are so that we can also maintain a healthy economy and a healthy community. So, it is this integration of workforce economic and community development. They all wrapped into

Seth Lentz: one package together, and so we it's the collaboration and the partnerships that really have built

Seth Lentz: this pipeline of talent development. Let's capitalize on the growth, the population pool, or the talent pool, employment pool, and let's try to connect those to our industry

Seth Lentz: needs and our employers, and also help to you know stabilize and improve our communities.

[0:06:16]

Brian Walsh: Wow, it's really interesting to think about how the workforce board then has thought "we have--

Brian Walsh: Our job is to develop workers. We have this particular group of workers, which is really hard to access within prisons. And, we want to help them be more successful." It's great to hear

Brian Walsh: how your workforce board has made that commitment. Becky, I want to go to the planning grant that you'd mentioned and the IRES framework. So, one of the interesting things about the IRES framework is this idea of serving highest need

Brian Walsh: folks. How are you doing that within this project?

[0:07:02]

Becky Heth: Sure. So, in Wisconsin DOC, we use a need scale. It's called a COMPAS assessment. And in that assessment were able to determine whether someone was less job ready or more job ready.

Becky Heth: For example, someone who is less job ready--if they have a score probable or highly probable on the scales of vocational education or employment expectation or financial.

Becky Heth: And in our planning grant we found that 47.3% of the individuals releasing from DOC incarceration to the South Central Workforce Board

Becky Heth: were considered moderate to high risk and less job ready. And, another 32.1% of those individuals were considered moderate to high risk and more job ready.

Becky Heth: And so, with the implementation phase of this grant we are working to create that information sharing system that I mentioned, which will allow the community providers to register and access of baseline

Becky Heth: data of this COMPAS assessment that I mentioned

Becky Heth: so that they can serve the justice involved clients that they have. They're able to utilize this information from an intake and case planning standpoint, and then possibly have this information prior to the individuals release

Becky Heth: from incarceration or shortly thereafter, so that we don't have a longer delay in providing services to that. So we're really hoping to

Becky Heth: continue this wraparound case services that we start prior to release and then it continues right away afterwards. And the second piece was the training

Becky Heth: part that we're offering to these community-based providers we're working with the University of Cincinnati UCCI and their team and delivering

Becky Heth: evidence-based core correctional practices training and we're hoping that the community providers will be better equipped

Becky Heth: with the knowledge to then prioritize the resources to those higher risk, less job ready clients. So, the combination of having the information

Becky Heth: that the DOC utilizes and then tailoring and delivering their services to those with the higher need, the less job ready. So, it's really filling that gap that we had previously.

[0:09:28]

Brian Walsh: So, can you share some examples of community partners that would have access to the data that

Brian Walsh: you're going to be working with or that or you're already working with?

[0:09:42]

Becky Heth: Yep. It's a permissions-based application, and there's a process where someone would have to complete a registration form and identify their agency.

[0:09:55]

Brian Walsh: So not everybody gets access.

[0:09:57]

Becky Heth: Nope, it's not-- its permission based and there's some built-in releases.

Becky Heth: And so, part of that is not only the providers having access, but the individual themselves, and I think this is really a key part.

Becky Heth: Because that individual can then own their information, their assessment results, and they have the ability to then share it with these providers in which they may be seeking services--employment related services. It's really putting

Becky Heth: that earnest on that person to be able to say "Yes, I want this person to see my assessment results and I want to be able to work with them."

Becky Heth: That's the piece that we're working on. It's a little bit newer to us in the department--sharing of information like this with community-based providers that we do not contract with. So, these are

Becky Heth: like I said 60+ in the community that Seth and his team helped identify and there is some survey pieces that were completed in the planning phase and we reengaged with them for the implementation piece so.

[0:11:12]

Brian Walsh: Seth, how did you go about identifying these partners?

[0:11:18]

Seth Lentz: Sure, so I mean just in in our workforce development daily activity, we integrate a lot of our services, and we have a series of networks and communication chains, collaborative projects throughout the community, that we engage with. But one or the other

Seth Lentz: strategies that we utilize that I think has significantly helped us and we're already starting to see some ripple effects of this larger impact is, we also coordinated with several of the other community funders. So we went and intentionally engaged

Seth Lentz: our city, the county, the United Way the Workforce Development Board. So those other entities that are also funding many of these community-based programs.

Seth Lentz: and once we had their buy into the concept and what we were intending to do, then we were also the kind of leverage their relationship with all of these community-based organizations to reemphasize okay--

Seth Lentz: It's important to participate, because you're going to help to frame, you're going to help us to build, to reinforce, to identify, it's a capacity building for our entire reentry network of partners.

Seth Lentz: That helped us to really know who is doing this work in the community,

Seth Lentz: facilitate engagement opportunities, encourage their participation in that, because the funders of many of these initiatives and agencies in the community--

Seth Lentz: we're endorsing the direction. So, it really reinforces that capacity building opportunity that these funds are bringing to the department and specifically to our region.

[0:13:30]

Brian Walsh: In a department of corrections, if they had tried to do this on their own, they would have had to go out to places like United Way and a whole bunch of other

Brian Walsh: community funders and try to establish a relationship with them and then sell this idea of

Brian Walsh: we're going to do, training on evidence-based practices, we're going to have this app, and people are going to have these things,

Brian Walsh: but they didn't necessarily have those relationships in place. What I hear you saying is that

Brian Walsh: having this partnership with the workforce board, you already have these relationships with the other major organizations in the community.

Brian Walsh: So, you took on that role of leveraging your network and explaining how important this was in the community,

Brian Walsh: and brought DOC to the table with that. I imagine, when you had these conversations, it was not just the workforce board, but people from Wisconsin DOC we're also there is that right?

Brian Walsh: So, so they didn't come along alone, so that partnership, then leveraged even wider partnership within the community. That's fantastic. And so are we talking about organizations that would be helping with employment basic skills training,

Brian Walsh: substance use treatment, things like that? What are a couple of examples of community-based organizations that are going to be participating in this?

[0:14:56]

Seth Lentz: Do you want me to take that Becky?

[0:14:58]

Becky Heth: Yeah, could you please?

[0:14:59]

Seth Lentz: Sure. We have

Seth Lentz: agencies that are participating that are all scales and really the entire service spectrum.

Seth Lentz: Yes. We do have some ADA related programs and partners. Some of these partners have housing programs. Others have employment focused programs--

Seth Lentz: whether that's basic skill development. It may be technical skill trainings.

Seth Lentz: They provide everything from circles of support.

Seth Lentz: It's the full spectrum, but again there isn't one agency that does all of the services. And, I think that was what we continue to identify was

Seth Lentz: we don't want there to be a wrong door. We want to try to inventory all of those partners. It wasn't an evaluation of their quality of service or any of those sorts of things, it was

Seth Lentz: let's get an understanding of who out there is working with a population that is reentering after incarceration.

Seth Lentz: What are they doing? How are they doing? When are they doing-- with whom are they doing? It was just this--let's understand the landscape and that helped us to identify where there are overlaps. Do they have an expertise?

Seth Lentz: Do they have a tool that they're using. Do we have common jargon or language that we're using? And how could we start to bring some consistency to that.

Seth Lentz: One of our first job of training that you know is coming up is in regards to evidence-based practice. If you don't understand what that is as an agency.

Seth Lentz: Because you may have really started from a grassroots development. That's not a fault, and you can be doing great work. Let's help to grow you.

Seth Lentz: Let's help reinforce you. Let's help to develop you so you can be more intentional, so that we also can get away from unintended consequences or impacts that, again well intended, but if you maybe didn't understand the impacts of

Seth Lentz: high risk, high need

Seth Lentz: and integrating with low risk, low need and that there could be detrimental impacts to some of those participants. We know the best of intentions, but there might have been some negative impacts that were

Seth Lentz: happening. How can we improve the competency and the capacity to improve all of our services because we all want the same results.

[0:18:06]

Brian Walsh: So, you're now you're now going to have a sort of a common language that everybody can speak to.

Brian Walsh: And an understanding of

Brian Walsh: what kinds of criminogenic needs people have, what specific criminogenic issues somebody may be dealing with, because they'll have access to this data through the app--really fascinating way to develop capacity within this region. Becky, I want to wrap up with you.

Brian Walsh: My understanding is that this is all in development, right now, so can you just talk briefly about when we should check in with you again to find out

Brian Walsh: when everything is--when your app is done and you've had a chance to sort of test this out. What's the timeline for this project?

[0:18:57]

Becky Heth: You're correct Brian. We do have an implementation phase that we're working on right now. Our goal is to

Becky Heth: have some sort of app open and ready for implementation by September. As I mentioned we're working with our internal IT team and developing this app. And we have a really great idea of how this can grow

Becky Heth: in the future. But we do need to tailor it down and at least get some app open and running by September, that is our goal.

Becky Heth: There is the possibility of a possible grant extension which would allow additional time to implement

Becky Heth: future kind of goals that we have as we started building this. As we go through this and really fully develop the application and then fully tried to implement it will have a much better

Becky Heth: idea on how we can use this in the future, going forward. We're really looking forward to getting to learn

Becky Heth: how the application is going to be used, the feedback from the community providers--we're gathering that now. We hope to gather participant feedback as well. We hope to have a core group involved with us during the planning phase and hopefully,

Becky Heth: even after the implementation part, to just continue to learn what works and what isn't working and then the possibility of expanding this on a larger scale--

[0:20:24]

Brian Walsh: Nice.

[0:20:25]

Becky Heth: --is really the ultimate goal. If that's going to work, I think, is what the unknown is right now. I do know that the DOC will continue to collaborate with the workforce development boards and the community agencies who serve our population,

Becky Heth: that serve the justice involved clients that we have returning to their communities,

Becky Heth: and will continue to work with integrating our risk and needs assessments, job readiness assessments, so that we can really deliver this integrated treatment of risk-employment needs,

Becky Heth: and they can address them in a coordinated case plan. As I mentioned before, this wraparound services is really what we're trying to strive for, and I think that's something that

Becky Heth: regardless of what the app outcome is, something that I know that the DOC will continue to work on with Seth and his team and the rest of the agencies that we in the state.

[0:21:22]

Brian Walsh: That's really a fantastic way to wrap up this conversation. One of the things I heard you say is that not only are you hoping to build capacity within

Brian Walsh: the community partnerships in the whole region, but also within DOC itself--that you're taking on a project of developing your own app that you need

Brian Walsh: and that you DOC is learning from this as much as

Brian Walsh: training community partners. Seth, Becky, thank you so much for your time today.

Brian Walsh: Looking forward to seeing the results of this and

Brian Walsh: now we're going to move over to Nebraska and just give us a moment to switch our panelists and we will be with you shortly, thank you.

Brian Walsh: This is a really great opportunity for you to learn about how colleges fit in within reentry, so let's start off with introductions. Diane, Kimmie, and Marji, why don't we go ahead, and you can unmute yourself individually and introduce yourself, please.

[0:22:26]

Diane-Good Collins: Hello, my name is Diane-Good Collins. I am the director of the reentry program at MCC.

[0:22:33]

Brian Walsh: Thanks, Diane.

Brian Walsh: Okay, Marji.

[0:22:36]

Marji VoorVart: Morning! I'm Marji VoorVart. I am the Reentry Life employment coach.

[0:22:43]

Brian Walsh: Thanks, Marji.

Brian Walsh: And, Kimmie.

[0:22:47]

Kimmie Spotts: Kimmie Spotts and I am a student at Metro--

Kimmie Spotts: --politan Community college and I also work on 180 RAP program as a peer mentor support.

[0:22:58]

Brian Walsh: Excellent. Thank you so much. Thank you for joining us today. I'm really excited to hear about your program I had the opportunity to visit when you were in a

Brian Walsh: different building. I just want to show everybody, the new building that you moved into because it's a pretty fantastic demonstration of the support the College has for this program.

Brian Walsh: Check out this fantastic building.

Brian Walsh: This is Metropolitan Community College's 180 Reentry Assistance Program. Diane, can you tell us about this program?

[0:23:30]

Diane-Good Collins: Sure, the MCC 180 RAP program was started in 2015 and we provide corrections education and transition support to anybody that basically walks through the doors.

Diane-Good Collins: We have 10 prisons in Nebraska and we are inside of eight of those prisons, providing service. And then providing focused support for them as a transition out into the community or the state work release center.

[0:24:04]

Brian Walsh: Oh, that's great. We're going to go into some details with that.

Brian Walsh: Marji, tell us about the direct services that 180 RAP provides.

[0:24:17]

Marji VoorVart: Well,

Marji VoorVart: we are lucky, here. We have this wonderful building and we're able to provide pantry services that would be hygiene, food, clothing to

Marji VoorVart: anyone coming out. Some people don't have the support of family or friends when they're released and they don't have the basic needs. And, how can they

Marji VoorVart: be successful without basic needs? So we help them with those things, we also have relationships with employers in the community,

Marji VoorVart: transitional housing treatment facilities. We also have meetings here--support meetings that will help people just feel supported with peer mentors to help lead them in the right direction and make positive healthy choices.

[0:25:07]

Brian Walsh: So how do you connect with students prior to release? What does that look like?

[0:25:13]

Marji VoorVart: Prior to release, we have several different kinds of opportunities inside of prisons. We have support in prisons, we have employment classes in prisons.

Marji VoorVart: We have educational opportunities inside of prison and really--it's really word of mouth and the prison. I mean they know we're there, and they all tell each other we're there, and this is where you need to go, and this is who you need to talk to.

[0:25:35]

Brian Walsh: And so you're primarily you're working with people releasing to the Omaha area? And that's working with people throughout the state? Talk about that a bit.

[0:25:44]

Marji VoorVart: We do work largely with people

Marji VoorVart: coming into Omaha. We have so many resources here, but we also do help throughout the state as much as possible. They can also even take online classes with us, so it's not like they have to be here in Omaha. They can be anywhere in Nebraska and we can help service them.

[0:26:02]

Brian Walsh: Great. Thanks, Marjori. I'm going to come back in a bit to sort of ask a few more questions about those services. Let's hear from Kimmie. So, Kimmie, tell us about yourself. What are you studying?

[0:26:13]

Kimmie Spotts: I'm studying prototype design. It's kind of a broad field, basically, take someone else's idea

Kimmie Spotts: or drawing and see if I can make it come to fruition, by making a prototype of it. And, if not, then I can take it back and say, well, we need to change this. Or, if they just tell me their idea, then I make a drawing and work it from there.

[0:26:39]

Brian Walsh: Does that mean--do use things like 3D printers?

[0:26:41]

Kimmie Spotts: I do, yes I do.

[0:26:43]

Brian Walsh: That's super cool

[0:26:44]

Kimmie Spotts: I have my own 3D printer yeah so.

Kimmie Spotts: Laser cutters and CNC machines for wood and metal and...

[0:26:53]

Brian Walsh: I believe I toured this building that you--it was at least a few years ago as a brand new building.

Brian Walsh: Fantastic prototype lab.

Brian Walsh: So, how did you end up in that program?

Brian Walsh: If you're working with 180 RAP, how did you end up in that in that program?

Brian Walsh: How did you hear about it--about 180 RAP. Talk about that?

[0:27:13]

Kimmie Spotts: Oh, so I heard about 180 RAP when I was still incarcerated in the women's prison here and Nebraska.

Kimmie Spotts: They offered a business class, and so I took that business class and so that would have been my first class at Metro. And so, I came to Omaha--I'm not from Omaha— but I came to Omaha because I knew the opportunities and that they were here to help me.

Kimmie Spotts: They have become my family. They are there more than just people that I work with. I share my struggles, my joys. They are my family.

[0:27:46]

Brian Walsh: Mm-hmm.

[0:25:47]

Kimmie Spotts: They celebrate with me. And if it's a struggle, they help me work through it.

Kimmie Spotts: I'm not saying it's always easy, but it's worth it. And so,

Kimmie Spotts: I got out a little over two years ago and I'll be graduating in May with my associate's degree.

[0:28:04]

Brian Walsh: That is fantastic congratulations.

Brian Walsh: So okay so.

Brian Walsh: Go ahead sorry.

[0:28:09]

Kimmie Spotts: I'm sorry. I just recently, two weeks ago, started working for 180 RAP as a peer mentor support and so it's very exciting step.

[0:28:18]

Brian Walsh: Let's hear about that. What does that mean? Did you have peer mentor support when you started?

[0:28:24]

Kimmi Spotts: Well, yes, we have many. So it's mostly people who have been where I've been. Now I'm going to help someone else walk through that.

Kimmi Spotts: I know when I first got out I didn't have clothing. I didn't have. And 180 RAP provided me with clothing and hygiene and food.

Kimmi Spotts: But more than that, it was that emotional support.

Kimmi Spotts: That like, "I can see you need a kick your butt. Here, it is." Or, "yeah, you need a pat on the back, because you've done well, and here it is."

Kimmi Spotts: They're able to push you with that. I think that's the finesse of the whole team there. It's that they're able to push without making you feel like you have to do it. It's something you're choosing to do to better yourself.

[0:29:15]

Brian Walsh: That's great.

[0:29:15]

Kimmi Spotts: They are there for you the whole way.

[0:29:16]

Brian Walsh: So, when you go out, did you know that you're going to do prototype testing as your degree?

[0:29:22]

Kimmi Spotts: No! No!

Kimmi Spotts: It's funny. When I got out, I went through like three different degrees before I decided on prototype. Because I was going to do flowers and horticulture. And then I thought about cooking,

Kimmi Spotts: and then I went and toured the building--and they have a degree in electronics prior to this--and so I toured the building and then I just fell in love with like all the machines over there. There's so much potential.

Kimmi Spotts: And not everybody was quite on board with that degree, because they wanted to make sure I had a job afterwards. And then everybody got on board and it's been great.

[0:30:01]

Brian Walsh: One last question: so employment, what would be an example of an employer that would

Brian Walsh: hire for prototype testing.

[0:30:10]

Kimmi Spotts: They have many employers that are waiting for people to graduate with this degree. It's just like a hire. So there's like a company called Sympateco. They build cabinets and doors.

Kimmi Spotts: They're just waiting for people. That company actually helped them plan that degree, so that the people who get that degree will fit into their companies.

[0:30:39]

Brian Walsh: Excellent excellent. And so, if I have it straight what you've told me is that two years ago you release from the women's prison, you thought you're going to study,

Brian Walsh: floral or horticulture, you had all the support from 180 RAP and you've ended up now in

Brian Walsh: what sounds like a pretty high tech, high demand field of prototype testing doing designs on 3D printers and laser cutters, and all this other stuff. And now you're working as a peer mentor at 180 RAP.

Brian Walsh: Yes, fantastic. Okay. That's great. Thank you so much for sharing that Kimmi.

Brian Walsh: Marji, before we kind of get here the big story of just the history of 180 RAP and where Diane is leading it, I'd like to ask a little bit more about how you work with DOC itself. So I know it's in Nebraska like how do you work with—

Brian Walsh: students who are on probation and parole?

Brian Walsh: What's that communication like

Brian Walsh: with your department of corrections partner?

[0:31:43]

Marji VoorVart: Well, first off we do work with them, while they're still inside with employability skills and classes and reintegration and how we address the barriers that are really important

Marji VoorVart: That they see that they can be addressed a lot of times people that are incarcerated don't realize that those barriers can be addressed, and they can succeed.

Marji VoorVart: So then, when they're transitioning out, probation officers, parole officers, they tell people "Hey, you need to see Marji down at MCC. She's going to help you get a job."

Marji VoorVart: We started out with

Marji VoorVart: about five maybe six companies, and now I work with over 200. And this isn't just--

[0:32:29]

Brian Walsh: Hold on one second. Two hundred companies? That's huge!

[0:32:34]

Marji VoorVart: When Diane had me make a list, a while ago. I thought, well this is going to take about four minutes. But I just kept--oh my gosh--there's this company, and this company, this company, this company. And it's not just.

Marji VoorVart: crappy little fast-food jobs. Yeah, we have fast-food jobs because I personally worked in fast food for nine years, when I got in trouble, and I did very well.

Marji VoorVart: But it was time for me to move on and I still work with many of those companies. But we have banks and high-tech positions like Kimmie had mentioned. We have warehouses, and we have

Marji VoorVart: construction. We have some assisted living and medical fields that will work with our people.

Marji VoorVart: The possibilities are endless.

[0:33:23]

Brian Walsh: Wow. Keep going sorry.

[0:33:27]

Marji VoorVart: I really think a lot of it is that we are helping reduce the negative

Marji VoorVart: stigma that comes with you being incarcerated or have some kind of criminal history. And when we send someone positive to a good company, that just makes them even more happy to hire the next guy.

[0:33:47]

Brian Walsh: That's great. Thank you so much, Marji.

Brian Walsh: Two hundred employers. That's fantastic work and students for the--

Brian Walsh: Well, let's go to Diane because I know I've worked with you on your Pell grant Program.

Brian Walsh: So Diane can you talk about how 180 RAP came to be

Brian Walsh: and why you think the college has helped expand and supported it so well?

[0:34:16]

Diane-Good Collins: Right. So prior to 2015,

Diane-Good Collins: the College had been providing college credit classes inside the prisons, for decades. And then in about 2007, there was a shift, and corrections had decided that they would

Diane-Good Collins: assume the adult education in any kind of life skills training inside the facilities and it kind of went that way until about 2014.

Diane-Good Collins: And I then I was hearing back from the population as being a person with lived experience myself that they were not having their needs met and they were not prepared to come back to society and there were just a lot of gaps.

Diane-Good Collins: The College President decided to support offering one college credit class, tuition-free, at Omaha Correctional Center and that's where we began our journey in 2014 with one college credit class that was

Diane-Good Collins: taught by two shared instructors that were corrections employees that would put on the MCC Professor hat after their contracted hours.

Diane-Good Collins: We just proved that they were not just good students, but they were excellent students and the completion rate was nearly 100% and the GPA was nearly 4.0. And so, then the next quarter we offered two classes, and we continued

Diane-Good Collins: on this plan, until there was a vocational life skills grant funding opportunity through corrections which was through LB 907.

Diane-Good Collins: And it basically afforded us the opportunity to formalize corrections education and then also provide some type of transition support which we were already doing at that point.

Diane-Good Collins: By the time that we formalize the program, I was seeing 125 students myself on top of my full-time job as a coordinator in another position at the college. So we demonstrated that there was definitely a need and then from there, we just grew into--

Diane-Good Collins: Well, we were moved from an off-campus location to an on-campus location in Building 9--which you have already visited Brian--and we resided in that building for

Diane-Good Collins: about three, four years, and definitely have outgrown that space into where we are now. And since February 2015 we've served over 6,300 people.

Diane-Good Collins: Just for sheer

Diane-Good Collins: interest of data and to demonstrate what we've been doing, in 2020 we serve nearly 2000 people with our Job Center.

Diane-Good Collins: With an 88% employment rate and like Marji stated it's in every industry with every type of employment and just purposely connecting people to education, training, so that they can attain their employment and education goals, so they don't go back to prison.

Diane-Good Collins: Of course, that was an easy sell.

Diane-Good Collins: Because of the 5,300 people or so, that are incarcerated in the state of Nebraska 90% of them will return--over 90% will return back to the community.

Diane-Good Collins: Okay. So how do we address that when a majority of those individuals are coming to the Omaha area?

Diane-Good Collins: Well, we are a community college and we are tasked to support our community, and this is our community. They are a part of that diverse student base that we have and it just makes sense. I talked to the President--

Diane-Good Collins: maybe was about four years ago, and I was telling them how exciting it was that we were doing this, and he said "Diane, we're not doing it to be pioneers. We're doing it because it's the right thing to do."

Diane-Good Collins: So when your leadership

Diane-Good Collins: has that mindset and your Board of Governors, your trustees have that same mindset it's very easy for the rest of the college to get on board and support the re-entry population.

[0:38:30]

Brian Walsh: "It's the right thing to do." What a great way for your president to say that. So, Diane, I know you are a Second Chance Pell Experiment

Brian Walsh: participant, and now you are going, you are

Brian Walsh: a new CAREERRS grantee through the Bureau of Justice Assistance. How will CAREERRS help support what you're doing with 180 RAP?

[0:38:53]

Diane-Good Collins: When we first started reentry we didn't understand how we would

Diane-Good Collins: just explode. I mean the amount of people we served within the first 17 months was like over 1000 people and I thought "oh, my goodness!"

Diane-Good Collins: Because I knew that there were certain components that needed to be

Diane-Good Collins: intertwined into the service and support that we provided: evidence-based practices like peer mentoring and relationship building. It's not just providing a service it's

Diane-Good Collins: like Kimmie said earlier, we are a part of their family and they really are like family to us. And I knew that we needed to be more intentional

Diane-Good Collins: with some of our services well it's good that we serve a lot of people. I just knew that if we were

Diane-Good Collins: more intentional and provided comprehensive case management, intrusive advising--and or intensive intrusive advising--and just making sure that we are staying more connected to the individuals that we might be able to see marked

Diane-Good Collins: improvement in recidivism rates. And I guess, this is where Marji gets to help prove or disprove it through the CAREERRS grant because

Diane-Good Collins: her and two other team members will be working very closely with 40 men that are at the Omaha Correctional Center, the Community Corrections Center, and the Omaha community. So it's,

Diane-Good Collins: directed specifically to people returning to the Omaha area, so we can continue to make sure that we're pouring into them and helping them address their barriers and to meet their employment and education goals, like the re-entry program but more comprehensive.

[0:40:41]

Brian Walsh: Hmm so.

Brian Walsh: We have.

Brian Walsh: this fantastic building, we have people who are dedicated to helping them people--dedicated to helping folks as they return to the Community.

Brian Walsh: And we have the funding to make this possible. I just want to congratulate you on this program and the way that you've been able to develop it all of you. Kimmie again, congratulations on graduating this May. Fantastic.

Brian Walsh: Marji, good luck with CAREERS. I'm looking forward to working with you on this project. And, Diane thank you so much for your leadership. I think this is a really great example of how community colleges and

Brian Walsh: corrections can work together to serve our community like you said, doing the right thing. Thank you so much.

[0:41:38]

Nicholas Read: Great. Thank you, Brian and team for that presentation. I'll invite our panelists to join me here on video and we will continue to, by we, I mean they will continue to entertain your questions. I know they have been typing furiously and gathering those on the side. So, Brian I will turn things over to you.

[0:42:01]

Brian Walsh: Great. Thank you so much, Nicholas. So, Diane if you want to turn your video on, we can, and unmute yourself.

[0:42:15]

Diane Good-Collins: There we are.

[0:42:16]

Brian Walsh: Excellent. So, participants if—we have a number of questions in the Q&A—but if there are additional questions you'd like to ask if you'd please type those into the Q&A, where we've been collecting those. We're going to start. We're going to go in reverse order for a second. Since we just had a really interesting question about activating faith communities to support the work of reentry. So, Diane if you and your team could talk about that how you guys have as a community college are also working with faith groups in Omaha.

[0:42:50]

Diane Good-Collins: Sure. So, some of that has been just from the basic outreach that we have done in the Omaha area connecting to the churches and the North Omaha area that is central to our campus. And then also some of it has been the faith communities reaching in to us, and asking us how they can get involved. So the involvement includes anything for referrals to their, maybe their church services, if they're asking about if we know of a good church to go in the area, that would be receptive to somebody with a lived experience even though everyone should, in my opinion, but just someplace where they would be comfortable. Sometimes a lot of the churches will have recovery meetings. So, we're referring them to the recovery meetings, and the food pantries. And then the churches have always, are also been very good about providing pantry donations to our onsite pantry. So, our goal is to meet those immediate needs and then refer them to the pantries in the community.

[0:44:01]

Brian Walsh: We have a number of questions about employment as well. Could you talk about some of the kinds of jobs that you've, that people get? Do you keep track of your placement rates? That kind of information. Who are some like some of the, you know, you've you grew from five to 200 employers, how, you know how are people getting jobs? Are they staying with those jobs? If you could elaborate on that, that would be great.

[0:44:30]

Marji VoorVart: Well, I've really advocated with community with various companies, in order to help people, find employment and stay employed. My goal was always to have people go to a job that they liked going to, because we all know when you like to go work it's much better than when you don't, you just don't want to go. So of course, there are some people that try a job and it's not for them. How about a meat packing plant, or, oh my goodness. How about that meat packing plant? Isn't that a hard place to work? So of course, sometimes they don't always stay there, but I can help them choose another kind of career path.

Marji VoorVart: We also use the Holland Codes which helps people determine what their characteristics are, what their strengths are, and what kind of employment is best. We do keep track of how many people I've seen? How many people has been talked to in the job center? What kind of employment they've found? Maybe they need to come back because they, you know try different career plan itself.

[0:45:46]

Kimmie Spotts: Or upgrade.

[0:45:47]

Marji VoorVart: Or upgrade their job, of course. People like to upgrade. I mean, nobody wants to be stuck in the same old job that the glass the ceiling's already been met. So it's really wonderful that we have the opportunity to help them with educational needs, and maybe take a class here or there, or maybe even get their associates degree, and move on to get a bachelor's degree. It's really a wonderful thing we get to do.

[0:46:08]

Brian Walsh: I have a follow-up for you on that from Michelle Tolbert. How have you developed these partnerships with employers? What did you have to do to get them to think about working with this population, with people returning from prison?

[0:46:23]

Diane Good-Collins: I will take that first great. So, when we first started in 2015, we did not have--the best thing that we had going in Omaha was a list of felon friendly employers, which was not good. Because a lot of the times, you know, people would start the list at A and then go down and it just wasn't working. And the employers were frustrated with that. So, I asked a couple of people from the chamber to go with me to visit with companies. And ask about what they would, would they be willing to hire someone with a criminal history? And if no, why not? And how we could leverage their skillset to be more marketable, to fill the open positions that they had in their company. So, we started there, and we started with about three larger companies in the area. And then from there we just kind of built out. And then when Marji became our Employment Specialist, then she started, you know, she had a lot of contacts in the community and she started building them that way. Right, Marji?

[0:47:29]

Marji VoorVart: Right.

[0:47:30]

Diane Good-Collins: -And created the Employee Resource Form, which maybe you want to tell about that.

[0:47:35]

Marji VoorVart: I will call people. I'll call an employer that I know that's hired someone. And then maybe I've met with. And I said, well, I worked at so-and-so. So, I will call their Human Resources and I'll talk to them. And I'll ask those questions that Diane just talked about. And if they are receptive, I'll email them, Employee Referral Information Form that we've made up. And it'll help us decide how they can apply? What kind of skills that they need to have to be employed there? How many people are they almost always--how many opportunities are always available there? We'll also discuss things like, what kind of charges or convictions do they have a trouble hiring? Of course, the car dealership has troubles hiring someone that may have a car theft. Only makes sense. So, you know, we really work hard with each company to find out what they need and what is best for their company. Now, I also just, I just call companies and I say, Hey, let's talk. I know you need people. I got people.

[0:48:43]

Brian Walsh: Okay. Let's talk about housing. Housing is a major issue for people. How does Metropolitan Community College, help students with housing or people as they're released from prison? It's an unusual role for a college to have. So how do you guys handle that?

[0:49:02]

Diane Good-Collins: Right. So, since we don't house people, we refer to other places that do. So that could be a sober living, transitional houses. It could be independent landlords, or apartment complexes that we know will accept people with various criminal histories. So, what we've done actually, the first time we did it was in 2016 and it took about three or four weeks. And we just started calling places, rental agencies, all kinds of places to try to create a comprehensive list of places, because we know that not only is it difficult for a person to get out of prison and try to secure housing, but it also magnifies their frustration when they're calling people or hanging up on them. Or so we were really just trying to create a good resource for them. And right now, we actually have a pretty good list. And it includes a lot of transitional housing, which, you know, I would suggest for anybody that's been incarcerated. And then for those that just need independent housing we have everything from apartments to homes to shared living. So, it's very diverse.

[0:50:23]

Brian Walsh: There was an earlier question about having sort of basic documents, necessary to be successful when you're released. Driver's licenses, social security cards, you know, IDs, that sort of thing. How is that being handled by Nebraska DOC, the college, or other partners in Nebraska?

[0:50:41]

Diane Good-Collins: The Nebraska Department of Corrections has very recently started assisting people born in Nebraska to obtain their birth certificate prior to release. So, for those who are born out of state, which we've found are several, we help them get their birth certificate. And then once they're released, we help them to get their State ID or driver's license. Of course, we are a college and how does that tie into what we're doing? But if it can't, if they don't have a driver's license or a State ID and can't access basic services, how can they focus on their education and employment goals? So, we're just reducing those needs to get them what they need so that they can become employed.

[0:51:28]

Brian Walsh: And then let's talk about funding. You have a wide variety of services. You have your clothing closet, your food bank, you're building, all of that. How do you cover all of these different costs? Do you cover the cost of the ID and the birth certificate? What are some of the partners? I mean, obviously you have the federal funding from the ARES grant, from the CAREERRS grant, you have Second Chance Pell for tuition within the prisons. You have lots of financial aid, but where else have you been able to find funding to support your efforts?

[0:52:07]

Diane Good-Collins: Well, we're also funded by corrections. In the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services has the Vocation and Life Skills Grant, which as I shared with earlier was through Legislative Bill 907. And then on top of that, we work with MCC's Foundation to connect to private funders and foundations that are willing to support the work of reentry that is not covered by the other funding sources.

[0:52:39]

Brian Walsh: So you should be able to find private funders who will support this work?

[0:52:44]

Diane Good-Collins: Yes. And, you know, I can never forget the individuals that will just go out and, you know go to the Dollar Tree and spend a hundred dollars to buy toothbrushes and toothpaste and just do an anonymous drop. The support that we have from the college area wide is significant. So, we'll have people from records, to financial aid, to the President's Office, or the Academic Affairs coming in and dropping off loads of clothes, or shoes, or hygiene items. It's amazing. It's the, it's in our blood here at MCC.

[0:53:26]

Brian Walsh: Okay. And last question, do you, does MCC offer any funding to people returning from prison for things like moving, phone bills, that sort of thing? How do you handle that?

[0:53:40]

Diane Good-Collins: Yes. So, we have, yes. Through our foundation. Yes, we have supported people with utility bills and things like that. Yes.

[0:53:50]

Brian Walsh: Okay. And then a question that came up through the chat was about people who've released from prison often have restrictions on interacting and meeting with other people who've released from prison. You have the beautiful Reentry Program on your campus, which would--assumes that people are going to be meeting each other and talking and supporting each other. How have you overcome some of those barriers that exist?

[0:54:13]

Diane Good-Collins: Yeah. So, a lot of it, I believe is again, just advocating and helping people to understand why the interaction is happening. And, you know, evidence--peer mentoring is an evidence-based practice, and corrections understands that. And they allow us to bring people with lived experience back into the prisons and see the value of it. And also, we partner with Parole and Probation and they also understand the value of that. So, people are here and they're going to workshops, or classes, or the peer support groups that we offer. They're very supportive of that we have not had any issues.

[0:54:53]

Brian Walsh: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for joining us for the Q&A. We really appreciate your insights. I'm going to pass this over back to Nick. Go ahead.

[0:55:03]

Nicholas Read: Great. Thank you so much, Brian. And thank you to our panelists as well for making the time to talk through those questions. This wraps up our session for today, but just a few reminders. Please check out an abundance of Reentry Week content on our website. The quickest way to get to it is reentryweek.org and you'll find days and days of on-demand and live content available to you. On that site, you will also find a link to a Feedback Form throughout the week, whether it's for this specific event or anything about Reentry Week, we encourage you to just provide your feedback on that form. And if you have any questions for our panelists that didn't get covered, please reach out to us info@nationalreentryresourcecenter.org. We'll get us an email. And feel free to share your thoughts pass along any questions, and we hope you will join us for many more events throughout Reentry Week. Thank you all so much and have a great rest of your day.

[0:56:00] END

This project was supported by Grant No. 2020-CZ-BX-K003 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.