

Mock Job Fairs in Prison— Tracking Participants

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PROTECTING THE PUBLIC by confining inmates in secure institutions and providing opportunities for them to prepare for the transition from prison to their communities as law-abiding citizens are two cornerstones of the mission of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). These transition opportunities include mandatory literacy to achieve a GED; English as a Second Language for those who need it, and occupational training and work in Federal Prison Industries (FPI) to acquire the skills essential for post-release employment. In addition, BOP policy requires all federal prisons to offer release preparation programs addressing such life skills as parenting, financial management, problem solving, stress management, avoiding substance abuse, and related free-world survival skills.

The BOP also places heavy emphasis on teaching inmates job search and job retention skills, since we know that employment is one of the best indicators for post-release success. Prior to 1996, several federal prisons held job fairs, but they focused on providing job and related employment information, very similar to job fairs held in high schools and colleges. This format did not address the more extensive needs of men and women who had been in prison and out of the labor market for many years. Their long enforced absence from the labor market required additional attention to their job readiness and job search and retention skills.

The Crime Prevention Institute (CPI) is a non-profit organization based in Texas. Under the leadership of its executive director, Robb Southerland, it introduced mock job fairs into Texas prisons to help meet these

special inmate employment needs. Mock job fairs were open on a voluntary basis to selected prisoners within a year or less of release. These prisoners participated in job interviews (generally five during the one-day mock job fair) conducted by professional company recruiters from employers operating businesses in nearby communities. A critical ingredient of these mock job fairs was the assurance by CPI that company recruiters were not required or expected to make any job offers. The purpose of the job fair was educational: to help inmates learn and practice job interviewing skills.

Despite these assurances very few companies initially were willing to become involved. Many employer representatives had never been inside a prison and had no intention of doing so. It took many written and telephone invitations followed up by personal visits to company personnel offices and informal contacts with local chambers of commerce and other employer associations to convince a handful of employers to participate in the first mock job fairs in Texas. Based on these early efforts and their modest results, Southerland was able to obtain a \$450,000 grant from the Texas Board of Criminal Justice to fund job fairs in additional Texas prisons. By 1995 over 250 companies were participating in the CPI mock job fair program. Apple Computers, Doubletree Hotels, IBM, Wal-Mart and Motorola were among the better known national companies that were joined by many local community employers in these efforts.

National attention was focused on this exciting new program in August 1996 when the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), under

the leadership of Marilyn Moses, program manager, published *Project Re-Enterprise: A Texas Program*. This report described in detail the origin and growth of the Texas mock job fair program and highlighted its possible replication by other correctional systems. This was followed up by NIJ's sponsorship of a national conference, *It's Our Business*, in Austin, Texas, September 30 to October 1, 1996. This conference exposed a diverse mixture of employers and criminal justice representatives (including BOP staff) to the potential value of inmate employment assistance programs. Shortly thereafter the BOP decided to strengthen its existing inmate release preparation programs by establishing an inmate placement program branch, which would build on practices already proved successful in other corrections systems and explore new program possibilities.

The bureau had a long history of mandatory literacy programs, and by 1991 had established the General Development Diploma as its literacy standard. Promotion to all institution and prison industry jobs above the entry level was contingent on achieving the diploma. In addition, institutions were required to provide occupational training programs reflecting both the institution's maintenance skill requirements and current free-world employment opportunities. These programs, coupled with the training and work opportunities provided by employment in FPI, helped prepare many federal prisoners for post-release employment.

What was missing was a direct connection between the releasing inmate and potential employers. Many prisoners were not involved in legitimate employment at the time

of their arrest and incarceration, and many also lacked legitimate job skills. These problems, coupled with long absences from the labor market due to their incarceration, presented special challenges to correctional administrators trying to reduce the recidivism rate by connecting released offenders to early employment.

Employment Enhancement Programs

In an effort to focus more attention on post-release employment, the Federal Bureau of Prisons established the Inmate Placement Program Branch (IPPB) in October, 1996. The branch focused on the following activities:

- Holding mock job fairs at appropriate federal prisons to educate inmates in the proper conduct of job interviews and to expose company recruiters to the skilled labor pool available among inmates about to be released;
- Training inmates scheduled to participate in job fairs in resume preparation, the conduct of job interviews, positive coping and related job readiness skills;
- Soliciting from employers lists of job openings to be posted in prisons, and encouraging about to be released inmates to apply for listed job openings;
- Responding to inmate correspondence about post-release employment and encouraging federal prisons to establish employment resource centers to provide on-site information and assistance to federal prisoners.
- Encouraging federal prisoners soon to be released to prepare employment portfolios which include, at a minimum, a certified copy of a birth certificate, a social security card, a resume, an application for a driver's license, a picture identification, education transcripts and documentation of work and related experience while incarcerated, and copies of education/training achievement certificates and diplomas;
- Training staff assigned to inmate employment enhancement programs;
- Serving as a resource and information clearinghouse for similar programs in other federal agencies and in state and local correctional systems.

The Mock Job Fair Experience

Thanks to the energy and commitment of

BOP field staff, inmate employment programs in federal correctional institutions have grown impressively in the three years since the IPPB was established. The most impressive growth has been in the mock job fair effort. Federal correctional institutions (FCI) are encouraged to hold annual mock job fairs to assist federal prisoners to strengthen their job search skills.

Similar to the Texas model, company recruiters are invited into federal prisons to provide inmate participants with realistic job interview experiences, followed by immediate one-on-one evaluations of their performance. Each participating inmate is required to enroll in job fair preparation classes ranging from 14 to 25 hours of instruction. Instruction is frequently provided by nearby education and training organizations such as El Camino College at FCI Terminal Island, Metropolitan Detention Center in Los Angeles and Metropolitan Correctional Center in San Diego, Redlands Community College at FCI El Reno, Pima College at FCI Tucson, Eastern Arizona College at FCI Safford, Women and Youth for Self Reliance at FPC Phoenix, Tarrant County Community College at Federal Medical Center, Fort Worth, and Holmes Community College at FCI Yazoo City. In some cases the training is provided by local correctional institution staff who are already involved in substance abuse, release preparation, or some other related inmate education program.

Courses include how to prepare job applications and resumes, the importance of good grooming and proper posture during the interview, how to answer some of the tough questions regarding individual felony records, and how to focus on the positive ex-

periences during incarceration. Institutions are encouraged to hold job fairs that combine scheduled job interviews with information resources. Staff from motor vehicle, social security, employment service, community corrections centers (halfway houses), federal probation, and other agencies that released offenders can expect to contact are invited to staff information desks during the job fair; they may also provide relevant publications. At many of the job fairs, the longest lines of inmates waiting to speak to resource visitors have been in front of the motor vehicle administration, community corrections center, and probation information tables. This may reflect the main areas of anxiety and concern shared by inmates close to release.

A *Mock Job Fair Handbook* has been published by the BOP, which walks involved staff through the many steps that lead up to the job fair day, and tells how to conduct the fair itself. Sample letters to community-based employers and educational and community service agencies are included in the handbook, and the importance of planning and follow-up procedures is also highlighted. Special sections discuss the selection of inmates for job fair participation and pre-job fair training. Over 750 hard-copy handbooks have been distributed not only to federal correctional staff but also to staff in many state and local correctional systems, and the handbook has been translated into French by correctional colleagues in Canada. The handbook is also available on the IPPB web site: www.unicor.gov/placement. This web site, from which the handbook can be downloaded, has received over 9000 "hits" since its establishment in 1997.

The table below reflects the growth of the

Mock Job Fairs

FISCAL YEAR	NUMBER OF FAIRS	NUMBER OF BOP INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED*	NUMBER OF FEDERAL PRISONERS INVOLVED
1997	4	4	305
1998	15	12	715
1999	37	25	1,661
2000 (thru 12/8/99)	14	6	570
Total	70	47	3,251

* Each institution is counted once, even if it had multiple job fairs.

job fair program in the three years since its inception, particularly in the number of inmates who have participated. The growth is particularly impressive because organizing job fairs is voluntary, as is inmate participation in them. Staff members undertake responsibility for the conduct of the job fairs on a collateral duty basis.

Job Fairs by Reason

As of December 8, 1999, 47 federal prisons had held 70 mock job fairs. Over 3,000 federal prisoners and approximately 1000 company and service agency representatives have participated. Many institutions have held multiple job fairs and now schedule them annually. The numbers in parentheses in the chart below indicate the total number of job fairs held at each institution. Institutions such

as Danbury and Lexington, which have held information job fairs for many years, combined their most recent fairs with inmate job interviews. A regional listing of BOP job fairs is shown below.

Consequences

The mock job fairs have had several unexpected results. Foremost perhaps has been their impact on the cooperating company recruiters. Many of these entered a prison for the first time to take part in a job fair, sometimes very reluctantly. They left impressed not only with the professionalism of the staff and the orderly appearance of the institution and its procedures, but also with the skilled labor pool they found among the inmates they interviewed. Education and community service agency representatives also eagerly became

partners in the program and, like the company representatives, asked the institution to be sure to invite them back to the next job fair. Although the primary focus of the job fair was the education of the inmates, it soon became apparent that company and community representatives were sharing actively in an educational experience.

Inmates have testified that pre-job fair training coupled with the interview experience increased their self-confidence and taught them the importance of preparing a resume and collecting and safeguarding educational and work-experience transcripts, a social security card, a certified copy of a birth certificate, and other documents critical to post-release employment. They learned that having such documents in hand, preferably arranged in an orderly employment portfo-

Regional Listing of BOP Job Fairs

	Northeast	Mid-Atlantic	Southeast
	FCI Danbury (2)	FMC Lexington (3)	FCI Yazoo City (2)
	FCI Fort Dix	FCI Petersburg	FCI Marianna
	USP Lewisburg (Camp) (2)	FCI Cumberland	FCI Estill
	LSCI Allenwood (2)	FPC Alderson	FPC Coleman
	FPC Allenwood	FCI Morgantown (2)	FCI Talladega
	FCI Fairton	FCI Elkton	
	FCI Loretto	FPC Seymour Johnson	
	FCI Allenwood		
	FCI Schuylkill		
Total: Job Fairs:	12	10	6
Institutions:	9	7	5
	South Central	North Central	Western
	FCI Bastrop	FCI Greenville (2)	FCI Terminal Is. (2)
	FPC Bryan (2)	FCI Pekin (2)	FCI Tucson (2)
	FCI El Reno (5)	FCI Oxford (2)	FCI Phoenix (Camp) (2)
	FMC Fort Worth	FCI Sandstone (3)	FCI Safford
	FCI La Tuna	FCI Florence (2)	FCI Sheridan
	FCI Forrest City (3)	FCI Waseca	FCI Dublin
	FCI Big Spring	FMC Rochester	MDC Los Angeles
	FCC Beaumont (LOW)		FDC SeaTac
	FDC Oakdale		FPC Nellis
			MCC San Diego
Total: Job Fairs:	16	13	13
Institutions:	9	7	10
Grand Total: Job Fairs:	70		
Institutions:	47		

lio, will expedite post-release job interviews and actual employment. They came away from training aware that readying themselves for a job will help them use their community corrections and probation time more effectively. They are encouraged to line up job interviews before their final days in prison, rather than wait until they have been released to the community.

Most important, their interviews with company recruiters have convinced them that many employers will seriously consider hiring qualified released felons based on what they observe, on an individual case-by-case basis, during structured post-release interviews. Several companies have written to inmates interviewed during a job fair to remind them that the company is interested in their particular qualifications and asking them to apply to them for employment after release. Several companies have reported that they have already hired inmates interviewed during job fairs. Others have probably done so also without reporting it. All these experiences encourage releasing inmates to prepare for a more orderly transition to their families and communities.

The IPPB has made two videotapes of the recent job fairs at FCI's Terminal Island and Yazoo City. Employers, community representatives, and inmates eloquently express their appreciation of the job fair experience. Wardens of both institutions describe the staff enthusiasm for the program and highlight its low cost.

Follow Up and Evaluation

A report evaluating the job fair at the Federal Prison Camp at Bryan, prepared by Dr. Jane M. Tait of Development Systems Corporation (DCS), included the following comments:

- On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 the lowest and 10 the highest, inmates rated the program at 9.7.
- The program was rated a 9 by the staff.
- All employers responded yes to "would you consider hiring ex-felons after the pilot experience?"
- All respondents would participate in future fairs. Respondents suggested they be held two or three times a year.

The report concluded with the observation that inmates' self-confidence and self-esteem were developed and expanded as a result of participation in the job fair, and that

inmates became more aware of community-based services and job opportunities.

Additional evaluations were made of job fairs at FCI Terminal Island, California by El Camino College, at FCI Tucson by the University of Arizona, and at FCI's Phoenix and Big Spring by DSC. All found the same results reported by Dr. Tait: high ratings of the event by all staff, inmate, and company participants. All participants also indicated that they would be willing to participate in future job fairs, and many suggested that job fairs be held more often than once a year.

Many variables, often invisible to the researcher, contribute to human behavior and frustrate any outcome measurements. Successful recidivism studies, for example, which correlate prison programs with post-release success, require the most rigorous research standards, over extended periods of time, and involve the commitment of major resources not readily available for most corrections research. In addition, there is a built-in difficulty in all corrections research, because ex-offenders' fondest wish is to disconnect themselves from any part of the criminal justice system, particularly their former jailers. Correlating inmate employment enhancement programs with post-release outcomes, particularly recidivism, will not be easy. However, one result can be measured empirically, and immediately. Efforts by corrections staff to initiate and implement inmate employment assistance programs remind the men and women in prisons that they will be released some day, and that programs are in place to help them get ready for the transition back to their families and their communities. Most important, the available help includes practical assistance in finding and holding a job. The presence of company recruiters during prison job fairs—talking to the inmates, evaluating their job interview skills on an individual basis, and reassuring them that employers will hire qualified ex-felons—is a behavior-changing experience for most participating inmates. Posting job opening lists is also clear evidence to both inmates and corrections staff that post-release employment is a realistic goal for ex-offenders. The message is unmistakable: Many significant people are serious about connecting the released offender with a job, which everyone hopes will be the terminal point of the corrections experience. The kind of hope this picture engenders may be the most cost-effective option available to corrections managers and their community partners.

It is still too early to evaluate the impact of all BOP inmate employment efforts, but their consistent growth reflects a welcoming acceptance by participants. Approximately a dozen companies now provide job opening lists to be posted on federal prison bulletin boards. And an increasing number of inmates are preparing employment portfolios, in some cases assisted by local institution inmate employment centers. These positive activities contribute to a safer and more normal institution environment, regardless of their impact on recidivism.

Training Offender Employment Placement Specialists

The Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 authorized the establishment of an Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement (OCJTP). This new office was created within the National Institute of Corrections and was mandated to encourage and support job training and placement services for both incarcerated and released offenders.

As early as 1995 the OCJTP initiated training programs for offender employment specialists (OES). These programs were designed primarily for state and local corrections staff, whose job responsibilities included job placement of released offenders. Local and state probation and parole, as well as halfway house and work-release center staff, were also eligible to apply for this training, which took place at the NIC Academy in Longmont, Colorado. The staff of federal corrections agencies were also eligible for participation, but their expenses were not covered by NIC. The week-long training covered:

- Reintegration and Transition
- Pre-Employment and Job Readiness Skill
- Job Development and Placement
- Marketing
- Community Resources and Coordination
- Job Retention

Participants generally came in teams of two from across the entire United States and from such diverse agencies as state and federal probation services, state departments of labor, state and local departments of corrections, community correction centers, non-profit groups that provided a wide range of services for released offenders, community and technical colleges, and county jails. IPPB

staff have served as instructors focusing primarily on mock job fairs and the overall IPPB mission.

These cooperative efforts with NIC inspired the IPPB to initiate its own OES training program aimed at the preparation of BOP staff to assume offender employment program responsibilities. To date, four BOP training sessions of 30 trainees each have been completed and two more are planned for Fiscal Year 2001. A special task group comprised of BOP staff who have completed OES training and have successfully conducted inmate employment programs at their institutions will be assembled during the week of April 16, 2000 to review the BOP inmate employment program and to consider future directions. They will be assisted by education, employer and community agency representatives that have participated in past and current inmate employment programs. A group of BOP wardens will also join the task group to share their views about the program and its future. This task group may be meeting at a critical juncture in the growing sensitivity of political leaders and the general public to the high cost of imprisonment and to the need to consider effective but less costly options. Certainly changing inmates into taxpayers is a worthy goal.

Clearinghouse Services

The IPPB, in collaboration with NIC's OCJTP, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Correctional Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the National Institute of Justice, has undertaken to serve as a clearinghouse for information about inmate employment programs. This collaboration includes regular meetings with representatives from other government agencies to review and coordinate programs of mutual concern. In addition to a wide distribution of the *Mock Job Fair Handbook*, the IPPB has provided on-site and other assistance to both federal and state prisons and local jails that planned to hold job fairs and engaged in related inmate employment programs. Regional jails in California, Maine, and West Virginia and state correctional institutions in Florida and Minnesota are among the non-bureau corrections agencies that have held mock job fairs with the assistance of the IPPB.

Inmate Correspondence

The IPPB also responds to letters from federal prisoners seeking individual job search assistance, and so far there have been over 700

of these. Correspondents provide a resume, and then receive the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of potential employers in the area where they expect to be released. This information comes from a database contained in the American Labor Market Information System, (ALMIS), housed in five CD-ROM discs. IPPB staff are working with institutional staff to develop this capacity to respond to inmate requests for job search assistance at the institutions where the inmates are located. The ALMIS discs and training in their use are provided by IPPB staff.

Since no security risks are involved in the use of computer-based CD-ROM discs, some institutions are training inmates to provide this service in newly created inmate employment resource centers. An employment resource center handbook is available from the IPPB to guide local staff in the establishment of these centers.

Future Plans

The BOP inmate employment program can point to many accomplishments during its short history. However, events are moving so fast in technology and in all segments of the economy that each day presents new opportunities to connect offenders with jobs more effectively. The IPPB is exploring two new such options to accomplish this. Inmates in six federal prisons—one in each of the BOP six regions—are encouraged to prepare individual resumes which will be placed on "Americas's Job Bank" (AJB), an Internet employment service maintained by the U.S. Department of Labor. Since prisoners are prohibited from access to the Internet, they will put their resumes on discs and place them in special mailing envelopes to be mailed to VQUEST (a company under contract with the BOP), which will then enter the resumes on AJB's Internet web site (<http://www.ajb.dni.us>). Interested companies will be able to respond directly to the inmates and post-release interviews and related arrangements can then be made. This new program began at the beginning of federal Fiscal Year 2000, and will run for one year. Each of the pilot federal prisons has adopted procedures to facilitate this new effort, and at the end of the one-year trial period the program will be evaluated to determine its future in the BOP. If the outcome is positive, the BOP will consider offering the opportunity to all exiting federal prisoners at a modest cost—probably about \$5.00 per resume placement.

A second pilot involves the possible use of

JOBLINE, a job search by telephone. This service was also developed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor, at the request of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), to permit visually impaired people to access the AJB. The use of the telephone rather than Internet to access jobs listed on AJB may be a viable direct job search option for individual incarcerated offenders. The IPPB is actively exploring this alternative with the NFB and the DOL.

One further effort to expand offender employment programs in all correctional systems is directed to the education committee of the American Correctional Association (ACA). The committee is being asked by its BOP member to recommend that ACA education policy be modified to place greater emphasis on inmate employment programs.

The Bottom Line

The BOP regards its inmate employment program as eminently successful. Inmates who have gone through the program have developed job application and interviewing skills as well as greater self-assurance as they learn that many companies will hire qualified ex-offenders. The partnerships formed with companies and community agencies have forged a shared responsibility for the transition of offenders into employment and more positive life-styles. Probation service staff have expressed the importance of programs that increase inmate job readiness skills, since they realize how these skills contribute to positive post-release experiences.

However, the question that is always asked about prison programs, including inmate employment enhancement programs, is whether they reduce recidivism. We already know from existing research that federal prisoners who participate in substance abuse, academic and occupational education, and also prison industry employment and related programs return to prison at a significantly lower rate than those who do not participate. Common sense suggests that improving job search and retention skills that result in early post-release employment will further reduce the recidivism rate. However, common sense does not satisfy the many who have a stake in correctional programs. The BOP is trying to develop ways to respond to this interest in experiential data in cooperation with field probation staff, who are in a unique position to measure the effectiveness of the job fair participation segment of inmate employment programs.

The majority of federal prisoners leave prison under the supervision of a probation authority. One way to examine how the job fair program affects recidivism would be to track exiting inmates who have participated in job fairs to determine whether or not the program has a positive impact on their success rates. Local probation officers could be a critical source of this information. The desire to support the common-sense conclusion with experiential data led to a meeting in November 1999 of representatives of the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Federal Corrections and Supervision Division (FCSD) of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts, the division which supervises federal probation. Participants explored ways of tracking the post-release experience of inmates who participated in job fairs to determine if such participation reduces recidivism.

Further discussions are anticipated, and we hope to jointly design a follow-up research plan to test the positive results of this important new correctional effort. In the meantime, the BOP plans to continue its many-faceted offender employment program and to pursue new and expanding options.

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