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Improving the Employment Rates of Ex-Prisoners Under Parole

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IN RECENT YEARS, there has been increased awareness of the challenges faced by prisoners who are returning to their communities. This has undoubtedly been spurred by the growing number of prisoners being released and the high rate of recidivism reported by criminal justice officials. It is estimated that more than 630,000 men and women will be released from federal and state prisons in 2004, more than double the number leaving correctional facilities in 1988 (Office of Justice Programs, 2004). Research has shown that roughly two-thirds of former prisoners will re-offend within three years of their release, creating public safety problems in their communities, disrupting the lives of their fragile families, and imposing a tax burden upon their fellow citizens (Langan and Levin, 2002). As a consequence of this growing problem, criminal justice policy makers are seeking to identify correctional and post-release practices that minimize the likelihood of re-arrest and a return to prison.

Many interrelated factors affect recidivism rates including, but not limited to, employment, housing, substance abuse, family support, health and mental health problems, and peer pressure. Given that these factors are inextricably intertwined, most prisoners returning to their communities are faced with complex and enormous challenges. This article will examine what may be one of their biggest challenges: securing and maintaining employment with a living wage. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that 33 percent of inmates in State prisons in June 1991 were not employed during the month before their arrest (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993). The unemployment rate for the general population that year was 6.8 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002).

While the exact relationship between employment and recidivism is complex and not fully understood, there can be no doubt that it is vitally important in the re-entry process.

A good job is likely to serve as a deterrent to illegal behavior by limiting opportunities for misconduct and providing social incentives for crime-free behavior. Since the vast majority of prisoners returning to their community need to support themselves and their families, it would be impossible for them to succeed without securing employment. The importance of steady employment is undoubtedly recognized by parole officers. In a survey that asked Missouri parole officers to identify the most important aspect of programs for improving parolees' chances for success, the activity most frequently cited (34 percent of respondents) was keeping the offender in steady or stable employment (Seiter, 2002).

Further evidence of the value of employment in the reentry process can be found in recent statistics gathered by the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services System. In 2003, unemployed offenders under their supervision were revoked at a rate that was more than 500 percent higher than that for those who were employed (Burris et al., 2004). Eighty percent of the offenders who were revoked that year were unemployed.

This article will review and analyze the methods that are currently being used by parole agencies to assist former prisoners in their search for employment. Although many states have abolished discretionary release by parole boards, more than 753,000 men and women were under parole supervision on December 31, 2002, an increase of 2.8 percent from the prior year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). Parole agencies could, therefore, continue to play a critical role in the supervision of ex-prisoners and, ultimately, the reduction of recidivism rates. To determine the strategies used by these agencies to maximize the employment rate of parolees, a survey was mailed to parole agencies throughout the United States. This paper presents the findings of that survey, analyzing the data and making policy recommendations based on the information collected.

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The Challenges Faced by Ex-Prisoners Seeking Employment

Most ex-prisoners face enormous barriers in their search for employment. One major obstacle is limited educational achievement. In 1997, roughly 38 percent of State and Federal inmates did not have a high school or general equivalency diploma, a rate more than twice that found in the general population (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Given the high positive correlation between educational achievement and wage earnings, the lack of educational skills can be a severe impediment to successful reentry. While parole officers can and should set educational objectives for the persons they supervise, it is far more practical to set these goals during incarceration and to provide prison-based educational services. There is significant evidence that prison educational programs can contribute to a reduction in recidivism rates (Steurer, Smith and Tracy, 2001; Harer, 1994; Piehl, 1994).

A second barrier faced by many ex-prisoners is a poor employment history and the lack of marketable work skills. Breaks in employment caused by incarceration and the stigma associated with a criminal record all contribute to the poor work record that is characteristic of many former prisoners. And while there are many examples of prison-based vocational programs that offer market-driven training, most are designed to meet the operational needs of correctional facilities, not the long-term employment needs of prisoners.

Mental health, substance abuse, and health problems also pose significant barriers for ex-prisoners seeking employment. It is estimated that 283,000 persons with mental illness are incarcerated in our country's jails and prisons (Ditton, 1999). More than 80 percent of State prisoners reported past drug use in 1997 and more than half indicated that their offense was committed under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). Despite the prevalence of substance abuse problems in this population, less than 10 percent of State

prisoners in 1997 reported being treated for drug abuse since admission (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). Health care problems are also a significant factor. Compared to the U.S. population, the prisoners have an eight to nine times greater likelihood of having HIV infection and a nine to ten times greater likelihood of being infected with Hepatitis C (Rand Corporation, 2003). In many cases, health and mental health, and substance abuse problems are co-occurring, making treatment and case management a challenging task.

Ex-prisoners are further hindered by obstacles such as laws prohibiting ex-felons from certain occupations and the prejudice many employers have toward hiring them, the lack of identity documents, interview-appropriate clothing and transportation needed to secure work, the shortage of child care assistance, poor or nonexistent family support, and homelessness. They must also contend with internal obstacles such as a poor self-concept, negative beliefs and a general lack of knowledge about their own interests and capabilities.

Any effort intended to increase the employment rate of parolees must systematically take these internal and external barriers into consideration. Specifically, this requires an assessment of needs, the development of an action plan that is reviewed periodically and adjusted accordingly, and referrals to appropriate social service and health care agencies. The complexity of the barriers faced by most ex-prisoners makes it difficult for them to achieve success in securing legitimate work without ongoing assistance. Without guidance and support, the search for employment is likely to be a very frustrating journey with many dead-ends and short-lived jobs. Persons who feel trapped in poor paying jobs with little room for advancement are likely to feel that they have little to lose by engaging in criminal behavior.

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The Role of the Parole Officer

Given the many obstacles faced by former offenders who are reentering the world of work, there is clearly a need for parole agencies to provide employment-related assistance. Parole officers can have an enormous positive impact upon the employment rate of the persons they supervise. They can use their assessment and planning skills to help parolees make appropriate career decisions and develop a realistic career plan. Because they are familiar with employers who hire persons with criminal records, they can use this knowledge to provide parolees with practical guidance in their search for employment. They can also provide parolees with the guidance they need to remain employed. The parole officer can prevent job loss by watching for indicators of relapse and providing timely, structured interventions. When necessary, they can require ongoing drug-testing of those under their supervision, thus encouraging parolees to remain abstinent from drugs and increasing the comfort level of employers who hire them.

Conversely, parole officers can have a negative impact upon the employment prospects of the people they supervise. This may happen, for example, if they schedule supervision meetings that conflict with the parolee's work schedule or if they make site visits that are disruptive to the employer's business. Additionally, if they are not trained to provide employment-related services or do not have access to current labor-market information, their guidance may actually lengthen the job search process.

Even if they are trained and have information resources at their disposal, parole officers typically have large caseloads and multiple responsibilities, limiting their ability to provide employment-related guidance. It would be unreasonable to expect parole officers to serve as job developers, a function that requires extensive and constant outreach to potential employers, or to serve as workforce development specialists, a role that requires extensive training and appropriate supervision. These tasks are better performed by specially designated staff or outside agencies through contracts or letters of agreement. It also makes sense to address some employment issues prior to an inmate's release to the community. For example, parole officers are frequently called upon to help persons under supervision acquire the identity documents needed to secure employment: i.e., birth certificate and social security card. This task should be performed prior to release, allowing the parole officer to focus on supervision issues and permitting the ex-prisoner

to secure employment as quickly as possible. The same case can be made for other workforce development activities, such as job readiness instruction or resume preparation.

Ideally, correction and parole officials should work together to ensure that prisoners are ready for employment upon release and that workforce development services are not wastefully duplicated. Parole officials also need to ensure that staff is provided with the training and tools needed to assist ex-prisoners in their search for employment. They must build working relationships with the one-stop career centers funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. While these centers are mandated to work with job seekers from all walks of life, their capacity to serve former prisoners and their sensitivity to their special needs varies considerably. Parole agencies, therefore, need to be proactive in building relationships with one-stop center personnel. To that end, it may be useful for them to explore the Offender Workforce Development Training offered by the National Institute of Corrections. This training provides three weeks of instruction to teams of service providers, bringing together criminal justice and one-stop personnel from regions throughout the United States and encouraging the development of strong interagency ties.

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Strategies Used by Parole Agencies to Increase the Employability of Persons under their Supervision

To determine and evaluate the strategies used by state parole authorities to increase the employment rate of persons under their supervision, a two-page survey with a pre-addressed stamped envelope was mailed to the agency heads of every state parole agency on March 31, 2004. A follow-up letter, survey form, and return envelope were mailed to non-respondents on May 10, 2004. The remaining non-respondents were sent e-mails on June 29, 2004 and called the following month. Thirty-two parole agencies completed the survey.

The survey examined the delivery of employment-related services and determined if this assistance was provided in-house, by referral, or under contract with other agencies. It did not determine the percentage of parolees who receive these services, because that information was not generally available. Therefore, the information gathered shows trends in the method of service delivery, rather than the extent to which these services are provided.

The survey also determined, where available, the employment rate of persons under supervision and the extent to which these rates are used to measure the performance of their personnel. In addition, surveyed agencies were asked to estimate the number of ex-prisoners who did not possess the documents needed for employment: e.g., social security cards and birth certificates.

[Table 1](#) presents the methods of service delivery used by agencies that responded to the survey. Since most agencies rely on multiple methods for service delivery, the percentages may total greater than 100 percent. The table is followed by a description of each service, the role each plays in meeting the employment needs of ex-prisoners, and a brief analysis of how these methods are being used and can be improved upon.

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Vocational Assessment and Career Guidance

A vocational assessment and the development of an individual action plan are the cornerstones of successful job placement and retention efforts. This is especially true for individuals who have not developed a career plan and have a spotty work record. The vocational assessment process helps a job seeker understand his or her interests, work values and skills as well as any barriers that stand in the way of achieving career goals, including housing, substance abuse and health problems, and educational deficits. It includes the development of an action plan that will guide the individual's participation in treatment, educational, and vocational programs and, ultimately, job seeking activities.

Ideally, the assessment process should begin in the correctional facility and continue upon

release, permitting the ex-prisoner to “hit the ground running.” One-stop career centers and community-based employment and training agencies invariably offer this service and most parole agencies rely on outside agencies for vocational assessments. Neither the extent to which these assessments are included in the parole record, nor the availability of assessments conducted before release was examined by the survey. In-as-much-as it is important to conserve resources by avoiding duplication of effort, it is essential that assessments conducted in prison be made available to organizations providing employment services outside of prison. These practices would promote the efficient use of resources and should be considered by agencies involved in the reentry process.

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Job Readiness and Pre-employment Instruction

Another important strategy for increasing the employability of persons under supervision is the delivery of instruction that provides the soft skills needed to find and maintain employment. This includes learning how to conduct a job search, problem-solving skills, oral communication skills, personal qualities and work ethics, and interpersonal and teamwork skills. In addition, it is useful and necessary to provide trainees with information and resources related to employment.

As is the case with vocational assessment, job readiness and pre-employment instruction should be initiated before release from prison. This would decrease the amount of time it takes to secure work following release, thus reducing any risks associated with periods of unemployment. While many prisons offer this type of instruction, parole agencies apparently see a need for providing it upon release, either directly or through another agency. Forty percent of responding agencies offered this instruction to their parolees and 40 percent had contracts with outside agencies for this service. The need to provide this service may be based on a perceived lack of preparedness demonstrated by released prisoners and may indicate a lack of confidence in the efficacy of prison-based vocational programs.

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Assistance in Securing Documents Needed for Employment

As mentioned earlier, parole officers are frequently called upon to help persons under their supervision secure identity documents needed for employment. More than 62 percent of responding agencies reported providing this service in-house, making it the employment-related service that is most frequently delivered directly by parole agencies. When asked to estimate the percentage of parolees who needed these documents, the average percentage reported by 19 agencies was 36.53 percent. Six agencies reported that more than 50 percent of the persons under their supervision left prison without these documents. On a more positive note, two agencies report that less than 1 percent did not have these documents. Given the extent to which parole agencies directly provide this service, it is clearly a barrier that is recognized as needing attention. Since it may take a considerable period of time and effort to secure these documents, every effort should be made to do so before release. It would not be unreasonable to require those men and women seeking parole to obtain these documents as part of the application process. Failure to have these documents before release delays the job search process and adds an unnecessary barrier to employment. It also places a burden on the parole officer that would be more efficiently handled by the correctional system.

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Job Placement Assistance

Job placement assistance is a service that connects job seekers to employment opportunities related to their skill level and interests. The service is usually provided by individuals who specialize in identifying job vacancies and meeting the recruitment needs of employers. Typically, the placement service is offered at no cost to employers and marketed to them as a way of identifying suitable job candidates for hard-to-fill jobs. The service may also provide the

job seeker with access to current labor market information, job postings, the Internet, fax machines, and telephones, all for the purpose of expediting the job search process.

The need for providing these services is generally recognized by parole agencies. More than 40 percent of the respondents indicated that they provided job placement services in-house. Twenty-four percent provided this service via a contract and more than 65 percent indicated that they provided it through referral. Only two of the respondents indicated that they did not provide the service either directly or through referral.

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Fidelity Bonding

The Federal Bonding Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor and is intended to alleviate many of the concerns employers have in hiring ex-offenders and other high-risk persons. The program provides fidelity bonds ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 that protect employers from work theft or dishonesty. Because most commercial policies do not cover “at-risk” persons such as ex-offenders, the Federal Bonding program gives employers insurance coverage that might not otherwise be available and helps alleviate any concerns they may have about hiring ex-offenders.

In 34 states and the District of Columbia, the bonds are purchased by government agencies, one-stop career centers, or non-profit agencies and provided to employers at no cost. The survey results indicated that this tool is not likely to be employed by parole agencies. Only 6 percent reported that they provided this service directly and 37 percent reported that they did not provide the service at all. In comparison with other services, this tool appears to be underutilized.

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Work Opportunity Tax Credit

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) provides employers with financial incentives for hiring targeted groups of job seekers, reducing income tax liability by as much as \$2,400 for every qualified new worker. Ex-felons belonging to low-income families qualify for the credit.

The WOTC is a powerful tool for securing the attention of employers who are reluctant to hire former prisoners because of concerns of trustworthiness. It can be used as a marketing tool or employed directly by the job seeker during the hiring process. As with the Federal Bonding Program, the WOTC is not likely to be used directly by parole agencies. Only 12.5 percent of responding agencies reported that they marketed the WOTC directly. More than 21 percent reported that this tool was used through contracts with vendors and 59.4 percent reported that it was used via referral to other agencies. Given its potential value in the job search process, it is advisable for all parole officers to become familiar with the Work Opportunity Tax Credit’s requirements and benefits. It is also advisable for parole officers to provide information and guidance about the tax credit to the persons under their supervision.

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Post Placement Guidance and Follow-up

Practitioners have long recognized that helping ex-prisoners keep a job can be more challenging than helping them find a job. Providing follow-up guidance, helping offenders deal with crises, and maintaining a network of support are all critical elements of employment retention work. Despite its importance, many parole agencies do not provide this service. While 61 percent of the respondents reported providing retention services through referral, 34 percent indicated that this service was not offered at all, either directly or via referral to another agency. Thirty-four percent reported providing it directly.

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Tracking the Employment Rates of Parolees

Given the importance of work in the reentry process, the rate of employment is a valuable indicator for measuring the effectiveness of post-release services and supervision. Only 21.8 percent of responding agencies reported that they tracked the employment rates of persons under their supervision. Where they were tracked, employment rates for 2003 ranged from a high of 97.5 percent to a low of 45 percent. The absence of a universally accepted definition for offender employment rate and the differences between local economies makes it impossible to compare parole agencies at this time.

Fewer than 16 percent of the responding agencies reported using the employment rates of persons under supervision to measure the performance of parole officers. One agency indicated that they were doing so on a pilot basis, presumably to determine its value.

It's surprising that employment rates are not universally tracked by parole agencies. More than 78 percent of the responding agencies had employment as a condition of parole, validating its importance in the reentry process. The agencies that do not track employment rates of the persons under their supervision may lack the data needed to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of their staff interventions and services. This indicator, when adjusted for local employment conditions, also gives parole managers an opportunity to measure their performance against agencies in other jurisdictions.

The value of tracking the employment rate of persons under criminal justice supervision and using a coordinated approach to the delivery of work-related services is considerable. Using this approach, the United States Pretrial Office for the Eastern District of Missouri decreased the unemployment rate of the persons under its supervision by 52 percent over the course of four years (Burriss et al., 2004). Missouri's Eastern District also reported that by the end of FY 2003, their revocation rate was 28 percent lower than the average for the federal system, despite a 54 percent increase in the number of persons under their supervision.

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Policy Recommendations

Given the barriers to employment faced by most persons leaving prison and their pressing need to support themselves financially, criminal justice agencies must carefully consider all avenues for improving the employment prospects of the persons they supervise. No single branch of the criminal justice system can be expected to solve the problem of offender unemployment. This is a problem that must be addressed early in the criminal justice process, beginning in prison and continuing long after release. Nor can the criminal justice system be expected to successfully address this issue without the support of partners in the community. The need to use a "systems" approach has been recognized by the federal government in their Reentry Partnership Initiative, which is actively promoting collaborations in the planning and implementation process.

Based on the survey results, it can be concluded that parole agencies recognize the value of employment-related services and, to varying extents, have engaged community-based resources to increase the employment rate of persons under their supervision. However, the large number of persons leaving prison without the documents needed to secure employment and their lack of readiness for the job market are symptoms of a systemic problem and the failure to use community resources to the fullest extent possible. I offer four policy recommendations intended to address the unemployment problem in a systematic way.

1. Criminal justice agencies should provide a continuum of employment-related services to offenders from admission into prison through their release into the community.

The process of preparing a prisoner for employment upon release should begin early during his or her incarceration with a comprehensive vocational assessment. This assessment would guide the delivery of employment-related services, providing benchmarks against which progress can be measured. To ensure a continuity of services, the assessment should be made available to the

parole officer as well as the staff of community-based agencies providing employment-related services. This would ensure that services are provided according to a plan and reduce the likelihood of duplicated effort.

Clearly, some services should be provided before release. These include securing identity documents needed for employment, learning how to conduct a job search, and life skills instruction. Persons released into the community must be ready to conduct a job search within days of their release, not weeks or months later. Parole agencies should focus their efforts upon job placement and retention. This may involve working closely with a Department of Labor-funded One-Stop Career Center or a community-based agency serving the needs of the hard-to-employ. Special attention should be given to the deployment of strategies that promote the employment of offenders, including fidelity bonding and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. Parole officers should be knowledgeable about these strategies and be able to ensure that they are used whenever necessary.

To ensure that services are integrated, policies and procedures related to employment services should be developed jointly by correctional, parole, and community-based agencies. The vocational assessment, for example, should be approved by all agencies engaged in providing services and supervision. Prison-based vocational and pre-employment services should be designed with input from parole and community-based agencies to ensure that this training adequately meets post-release needs. All too often, prisoners are trained for jobs that do not exist in the community, making the job search process a very frustrating task.

2. Parole agencies should measure the employment rate of persons under their supervision and report these rates on a quarterly basis.

It has often been said that what gets measured gets done. Any efforts intended to improve the employment rate of ex-prisoners must have measurable objectives. At the present time, most parole agencies do not have a yardstick against which they can measure the effectiveness of their employment interventions. Nor do they have any way of comparing the efficacy of their methods with those of other states. Measuring and reporting employment rates not only provide this benchmark, they send an important signal to supervisory and line staff about the importance of providing employment-related services where needed.

To ensure consistency between reporting agencies, the term “employment rate” needs to be defined and common methods for measuring the employment status of parolees need to be adopted. It is recommended that parole agencies use the definitions and systems developed by the U.S. Department of Labor to measure the efficacy of welfare-to-work programs. These definitions and systems have been developed and refined over the course of many years and provide a nationally accepted benchmark for parole agencies to use. The rate should be adjusted according to local employment conditions and regularly reported to the public via the Internet or other methods.

3. State agencies should use the employment rates of the persons under their supervision as an indicator for measuring the performance of parole officers.

The use of employment rates as a factor for measuring the performance of parole officers sends two powerful messages to line staff. First, it underlines the importance of ensuring that parolees under their supervision find and maintain employment. Second, it conveys the expectation that parole officers will be proactive in matters related to employment.

Before employment rates can be used as a factor in performance evaluations, a base-rate for a state-wide or local segment of the parole population needs to be established. For example, if the state-wide employment rate of parolees is 55 percent, the performance of parole officers will be measured against this benchmark. This assumes that caseloads are assigned on a random basis. If officers are designated to work with special populations, e.g., ex-prisoners with mental health disorders, a separate benchmark would have to be established.

4. A universally accepted definition of recidivism should be adopted by state criminal justice agencies and used to benchmark the effectiveness of their efforts. The executive and legislative branches of government should set goals for the reduction of recidivism and hold agency heads accountable for achieving those objectives.

The ultimate goal of criminal justice agencies is to promote public safety in a way that is just, fair, and efficient. While measuring and increasing the employment rate of ex-prisoners will contribute to that goal, we know that employment alone does not preclude criminal behavior. There is, therefore, a need for a broader metric and objective. Specifically, we need to measure the re-arrest and re-imprisonment rates of former prisoners and set goals for reducing recidivism.

Holding criminal justice officials accountable for the reduction of recidivism will promote the use of evidence-based strategies described in this paper. It will also discourage the use of practices that are counter-productive, such as revocation, when less restrictive and costly sanctions would suffice.

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Conclusions

There is considerable evidence that prisoners are often ill-prepared to obtain employment upon release, frequently lacking the basic identity documents and skills needed to secure work. Parole agencies generally recognize the challenges faced by ex-prisoners in their search for employment and offer a wide range of employment-related assistance either directly or through agreements with other agencies. However, many parole agencies do not track the employment rates of persons under their supervision, making it difficult to determine the effectiveness of the measures that are being employed.

If we are to determine what works best and for whom, common definitions and databases related to employment rates must be developed and used to measure the effectiveness of the interventions used by parole agencies. Additionally, policy makers must set goals for the employment rate of those under parole supervision, holding agency staff accountable for achieving these objectives. Related goals should also be set for the other branches of the criminal justice system. To that end, interagency planning is needed to ensure that the offenders receive the appropriate employment interventions at the appropriate time. This planning must take into account the rapidly changing nature of employment opportunities in this country, making adjustments as required.

These recommendations will undoubtedly require an investment of resources into pre- and post-release employment strategies. However, they will also give government officials an opportunity to determine the most effective strategies to employ and to reduce duplication where it exists. Ultimately, the reduction in criminal justice and other costs associated with recidivism should offset the investments made. Given the public's desire to reduce the cost of government and see further declines in the crime rate, the time has come to make these investments.

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Table 1: Methods Of Service Delivery Used By Parole Agencies

	Service Provided by			
	Agency	Vendor	Referral	Not Provided
Vocational Assessment and Career Guidance	43.75%	28.13%	65.63%	3.13%
Job Readiness and Pre-employment Instruction	40.63%	40.63%	62.50%	3.13%
Assistance in Securing Documents for Employment	62.50%	21.21%	3.13%	9.38%
Job Placement Assistance	40.63%	27.27%	65.63%	3.13%
Surety Bonding	6.25%	15.63%	43.75%	37.50%
Work Opportunity Tax Credit	12.50%	21.21%	59.38%	15.63%
Employer Career Fairs	18.75%	6.25%	46.88%	34.38%
Post Placement Guidance and Follow-up	34.38%	24.24%	37.50%	21.88%

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