

What Re-Entry Services Can Do to Strengthen the Basic Skills of Former Inmates

A “Can-Do” Guide of
The Open Door Collective
www.opendoorcollective.org

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Audiences and Purposes

This guide is primarily written for what we are calling “re-entry agencies.” These are the governmental and non-governmental organizations whose mission is to help formerly incarcerated individuals to successfully transition to work, family, and civic roles.

The purpose is to help these agencies better understand (a) the central role that basic skills and related educational credentials can play in successful prisoner re-entry and (b) how re-entry agencies can collaborate with basic education providers to help returnees develop necessary basic skills.

The guide is also written for basic education providers, policy makers, and funders interested in supporting effective collaborations between re-entry and adult basic skills service providers.

The Open Door Collective is a national network of adult educators and others who promote high-quality adult basic education as a tool for poverty reduction and forward-thinking social and economic development. (Visit www.opendoorcollective.org.)

Challenges and Opportunities for Returning Inmates

Formerly incarcerated individuals ¹ typically face a complex web of factors that – depending on how they are dealt with – can make or break a returnee’s ability to successfully re-integrate into work, family, and civic roles. These factors include *external* (environmental or contextual) variables and *internal* factors (i.e., strengths or limitations that returnees bring with them).

Obstacles can include: health problems, limited job opportunities (when employers are reluctant -- or possibly prevented by law or company policy – to hire persons with criminal records or gaps in their work histories); . . . families reluctant to re-connect with formerly-incarcerated members; transportation problems (when a return can’t get a driver’s license, auto insurance, or car loan); and landlords reluctant to rent to someone with a criminal record or a limited rental history. Many returnees also lack the basic literacy and math skills, English fluency, high school credential, occupational skills and experience, and the “navigation” skills and self-confidence needed to locate, make appointments with, do paperwork for, and otherwise take advantage of employment, health, legal, and other opportunities potentially available to them. ²

On the more positive side, many former inmates do possess significant skills, positive motivation, educational credentials, a work history, support from families, friends, employers, labor unions, and public and private organizations (including faith-based groups). These are strengths that can be built on.

(Visit <http://www.openculture.com/2015/11/the-myth-of-sisyphus-wonderfully-animated-in-an-oscar-nominated-short-film-1974.html> for one view.)



Why Returnees Need Solid Basic Skills

For successful re-integration, a returning inmate needs what might be called a “re-integration tool kit” equipped with a range of basic skills, technical know-how, productive attitudes, credentials, a transition plan, and a system of social and practical supports.³

Twenty-first century “basic skills” are much more than the ability to read and write simple text and understand and use numbers. To attain, retain, and advance in employment, returning inmates – and the workforce as a whole -- increasingly need to be able to find and interpret complicated written information; listen to, interpret, and convey oral information accurately; access and communicate written information digitally and in hard copy; and think critically, solve problems, and work in teams (often with co-workers from diverse backgrounds). Many jobs also require specialized math skills, to manage quantitative information and make decisions.

Formerly incarcerated individuals need such skills to not only perform job-specific tasks but to carry out other responsibilities upon which their well-being and that of their families depend. For example, returnees need basic skills to manage their wages and benefits; understand and pursue training and promotion opportunities; understand and protect their rights as workers; maintain their health and safety on the job; and transition into a new career or retirement.

Basic skills and a secondary school credential are also vital if a returnee is to succeed in post-secondary education and thereby greatly increase her/his likelihood of attaining a family-sustaining wage and benefits and avoid reincarceration.⁴

Outside the workplace, workers need basic skills to manage everyday personal and family responsibilities (e.g., transportation, healthcare, financial management, housing, security, childcare, eldercare) if they are to be able to get to work regularly and on time and to focus on work. By modeling an interest in education and basic skills, returnees can help ensure that their children succeed academically and otherwise – and reduce the likelihood of intergenerational incarceration.

The well-being of U.S. workers, their families, their communities, and the economy as a whole is intertwined with workers’ abilities to apply basic skills to the many tasks required to attain, retain, succeed in, and advance in employment. The stakes of not having strong basic skills are even higher for returning inmates because they must overcome special challenges relatively quickly if they are avoid unemployment, discouragement, a return to old behaviors, re-arrest, and re-incarceration.

Put another way, the basic skills – or lack thereof -- of returning inmates have major implications not only for the former inmates themselves but for their families, communities, local economies, government budgets, public health, and public safety.

A Mixed Bag: Options for Returning Inmates Who Want to Strengthen their Basic Skills

Options for those returnees who want to strengthen their basic skills and otherwise move ahead with their education are a mixed bag of positive efforts by returnees and service providers colliding with limited resources.

Gaps in returnees' basic skills and academic readiness

Inmates and returnees nationwide have lower completion rates for high school and post-secondary education, lower levels of basic skills, and higher incidence of learning disabilities that can impact academic and other measures of success. They also tend to lack the social and economic supports upon which productive attitudes and behaviors depend.

Positive returnee efforts to upgrade their basic skills

The good news is that many inmates and former inmates have recognized that they need to upgrade their basic skills, earn a secondary school diploma or equivalent, and enroll in post-secondary education. In so doing, they gain useful skills, knowledge, productive support systems, and credentials they need in their work, family, and civic roles. They take advantage of relevant education provided (pre-release) in correctional facilities and (post-release) in their communities, in re-entry agencies, at their workplaces, through their labor unions, or on-line. And they do so with social and practical supports from their families, communities, and service agencies.

Returnee educational efforts slowed by multiple factors

However, many other currently- and formerly-incarcerated individuals do not do so, due to a number of factors, including:

- a lack of adult basic education programs in their correctional facilities, communities, re-entry agencies, workplaces, and/or labor unions;
 - learners' prior negative experience trying to upgrade their skills;
 - a lack of transportation or childcare that would allow them to participate and persist as students;
 - a lack of awareness about the potential benefits of participation and how to go about enrolling;
 - scheduling conflicts with returnees' family or work responsibilities;
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The Fortune Society is a New York City non-profit founded in 1967 as an outgrowth of an Off-Broadway play. It currently provides multiple services to nearly 7000 incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated individuals per year.

In addition to job development, healthcare, housing, nutrition, and family services, Fortune's education program uses a participatory approach to help returnees achieve personal and professional goals. Topics include basic literacy and math, computer skills, preparation for the high school equivalency exam, transition to higher education, and job skills and career exploration.

In one innovative example of project-based learning, learners in a computer animation class learn how to make short films around personally-relevant issues (and thereby meet several learning objectives at once).

Classes are taught by dedicated professional teachers and volunteers (including undergraduate students participating in a service learning course at nearby New York University).

- returnees’ lack of confidence that “I can do it!”;
- adult education programs not always being ready and able – and funded -- to provide the particular kinds of basic education that potential learners need for the many types of tasks they currently or hope to perform. Creating such customized learning takes time, expertise, and staffing that programs might not have, especially if they have not been provided with necessary funding, professional development, and access to relevant curricula.
- long waiting lists at many adult education programs— especially for English language classes.

The mixed bag, in sum

While significant models of well-designed and -supported basic skills programs have been created for returning inmates – including by re-entry agencies (on their own or in collaboration with other stakeholders) -- there are many factors that can make or break formerly incarcerated individuals’ abilities to enroll and persist in basic skills programs that meet their particular needs.⁵

What Re-Entry Agencies Can Do

“Re-entry agencies” can include a mix of governmental and non-governmental agencies that have as their primary or secondary purpose the goal of helping returning inmates avoid re-incarceration and re-integrate into positive roles as workers and members of their families and communities. These agencies typically see the importance of education (both prior to and after release from prison) as a key component of a comprehensive re-entry strategy for individuals and communities. In some cases, prisons, post-release service centers, and partner agencies (e.g., community colleges) have significant histories of helping returnees develop basic skills, technical skills and knowledge, and career and life

plans. Clients learn how to apply these assets to academic, work, family, and civic goals.

In re-entry education programs, clients might, for example, prepare for GED exams or occupational tests and enroll in post-secondary education. They might also learn their rights and responsibilities as citizens; and learn how to manage their salaries and benefits, maintain their health, strengthen personal and family relationships, and help their children succeed academically and otherwise.

Re-entry agencies often work with local adult education programs to set up such services. Re-entry specialists also might provide guidance (e.g., on how to help returnees deal with legal, administrative, or health issues) to staff and students of local adult education agencies in recognition that some of the adult education students – or the family members -- might also have criminal records that block their success.

By building partnerships with local adult education programs, re-entry agencies can strengthen and expand basic education supports for individuals with criminal records and for the families and communities that depend on them. Such partnerships can also improve public understanding of and support for re-entry efforts as a whole.

Forward-thinking employers and other stakeholders (e.g., healthcare institutions, public safety agencies, labor unions) can all benefit from effective educational services that help former inmates. Re-entry agencies have know-how, networks, and other resources that they can contribute to a comprehensive community re-entry system.

As a representative of a re-entry agency, please consider what you are already doing, what you might do, and what you might help others do in the following areas:

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Phase I: Initial planning

Develop your background knowledge – and share what you know with others interested in this topic -- about why and how re-entry agencies have involved themselves in efforts to strengthen basic skills for their own clients and for other returnee residents of their communities and states.

Nationwide, for several decades, significant good work has been done to develop effective models of basic skills services for current and former inmates. These services typically have been customized to the particular skills needs of various populations of individuals with criminal records. In addition to wanting to pursue academic and occupational goals, some returnees are particularly motivated to develop their own basic skills so they can help their children succeed academically.

These existing, effective models can be learned from and built on. It would be very helpful for your re-entry agency to assign one or more staff members to read relevant reports and talk with re-entry organizations and other stakeholders (including adult education programs) to clarify what they have done in this area, why and how they got involved, results of their basic-skills-related efforts, and tips for what to do and not do. (See “For More Information” at end of this guide.)

You might then talk further with resource persons at your state or community level, to clarify more specifically what basic skills supports are currently available, where the gaps are, and how you might work with existing organizations to carry out one or more of the activities described next.

“Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.”

Nelson Mandela

Consider why you might get involved in the issue of basic skills for returning inmates.

- a. Do you want to strengthen the skills of your current re-entry clients? Or are you concerned about the skills of potential future clients who might be coming to your agency over the longer term? Or both?
- b. Are you concerned about the basic skills needs of people with criminal records in your community, county, region, and/or state who may not be connected to a re-entry service of any kind? (Do you see the implications this has on the well-being of those individuals’ families [especially their children], their employability, their likelihood of criminal recidivism, public safety, and the community’s general quality of life?)
- c. Or are you motivated by some combination of a and b – or possibly for another reason?

Phase II: Get involved in one or more ways.

With your initial planning in mind, you might now get involved in one or more of the following ways:

1. Support basic skills development for clients of your re-entry agency.

If you don’t already have a basic skills program in place and believe that some of your current clients might benefit from literacy, English language, math, or college preparation services, consider working with an adult education provider to set up a basic skills support system for those clients.

While experience has shown that such a program can have significant benefits for both the participating returnees and the

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re-entry agency and community as a whole, it needs to be set up in a respectful, efficient way. It can be tied in with the agency's other support services and training efforts, customized to help the clients meet a range of goals (e.g., employment, integration with family and community, personal health, legal needs, etc.)

To ensure relevance and efficiency of such an effort, it is important to learn from past experience. For example, there are a number of guides available (See "For Further Information" below) that describe steps that adult educators and other partners can take to help hard-to-serve populations succeed in various kinds of career pathways.

In some cases, rather than set up an in-house education program at your agency, you might refer clients to one or more local education providers for specific kinds of basic skills assistance (e.g., classes or tutoring in English, job-related writing or math, GED test prep). In other cases, you might set up in-house individualized tutoring sessions run by outside basic skills instructors who might co-plan and co-teach with an in-house re-entry expert. These activities might be designed with input from local employers, labor unions, health agencies, legal services, social services, or other partners, depending on the goals and needs of the learners.

While these education activities are underway, your staff and possibly representatives of partner agencies might be shown how they can support the success of the program participants when they are interacting with your agency or after they have left. For example, if the education program is helping clients improve the English-language skills they need to communicate at the workplace or in their community, English-speaking agency staff and/or representatives of partner agencies can be shown how to take the time to speak clearly and helpfully to the English language learners when they interact with them, to help them practice their English skills in authentic ways.

Agency meetings and other communications (e.g., flyers, forms, schedules, web sites) aimed at re-entry clients can likewise be structured to use clearly-written, plain-language documents and clear oral language, to ensure that all clients can contribute to and benefit from those communications.

Your agency might also advocate that employers provide various kinds of incentives – in the forms of release time, recognition, certificates, promotion opportunities, and bonuses and salary increases – to clients of your agency whom they hire if the clients continue to develop their basic skills and meet agreed-upon goals (e.g., passing the GED exam or succeeding in an occupational training course).

And, as with any improvement initiative, your agency's representatives should monitor the education program, make continuous improvements as needed, and use the lessons learned in the program to inform whether and how to continue to support clients who might need to strengthen their basic skills.

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The Bedford Hills (NY) Correctional Facility offers college-prep (writing and math) and degree programs to women inmates, through a partnership with Marymount Manhattan College. Students have access to books, supplies, a computer lab, library, and study area. Reflecting the College's commitment to providing a rich college experience, Bedford students are offered multiple academic and extracurricular activities, including guest speakers, skills enhancement workshops, Read Arouns (where they share creative work), poetry slams, exhibits of students' art, and a student-written newsletter distributed to all inmates.

2. Support basic skills development in your community.

Your community might already have a number of programs that are, in some way, providing basic skills-related supports to community members who have criminal records.

These programs might be based in community colleges, public school adult education classes, community-based non-profits, volunteer adult literacy programs, or other organizations. Often, these service providers communicate and collaborate in a formal or informal network, possibly tied to a workforce investment board or similar umbrella agency. Re-entry agencies might work with these existing education resources by:

- Providing in-kind assistance (e.g., advice on how to serve people with criminal records, serving on boards of directors) to education program staff.
- Providing guest speakers and/or handouts for use in basic skills classes or training sessions for adult education teachers.
- Establishing a two-way referral relationship with the education agency (i.e., with the education agency referring students to your agency for assistance and vice versa).
- Helping the education agency to write funding proposals and connect with funders.

3. Plan and advocate for educational opportunities for individuals with criminal records.

Given the importance of adult basic education as a resource for people with criminal records, it is in the interest of re-entry agencies to advocate for basic skills services in their communities. You can do so by:

- Participating in local and state workforce development boards and speaking on behalf of strengthening educational opportunities for individuals with criminal records. Be prepared to not only describe the problem of limited basic skills for these populations but to recommend specific actions (e.g., improved coordination of services, increased investments) that various stakeholders can take.
- Advocating for this issue when communicating with other stakeholders, including other re-entry agencies (e.g., in state or community re-entry task forces), public policy makers, and/or funders.
- Participating in the planning and piloting of new basic skills systems for various populations who have criminal records (e.g., youth, parents, women, people with limited English proficiency, people working in particular industries, individuals with disabilities).

A Community College Partnership

In 2007, inspired by the Fortune Society model (described above), staff of Union County College in New Jersey secured a grant to create a prisoner re-entry initiative. Called “RISE” (for “Return, Improve, Serve, Excel”), the project was a collaboration of UCC, the Nicholson Foundation, local partners (e.g., a non-profit re-entry service provider, a state-funded day-reporting center, county human services), and state-level organizations (e.g., parole board, a community college network).

UCC took the lead in (a) a county re-entry task force (where stakeholders met monthly to share information and strategies; (b) job-related basic skills and computer classes and job development for clients of the day-reporting center;

(c) enrolling returnees in GED and credit courses, (d) training partner staff in re-entry issues; (e) awareness-raising activities (e.g., a day-long re-entry conference, a video, pamphlets); and (f) writing of funding proposals for re-entry services. College staff also participated in state-level meetings where re-entry strategies were shared, with special emphasis on college roles.

RISE was later re-named (to “Reconnections”) and transferred to the local United Way and then to the county workforce office. Twelve years later, it continues providing re-entry services in the county’s two employment centers, with county funding.

In conclusion . . .

Re-entry agencies -- in partnerships with adult educators and other stakeholders -- can make a significant difference on this issue of educational opportunities for inmates and returnees.

In so doing, you can enhance trust and collaboration among stakeholders who have common interests but too often don't communicate and collaborate.

Such thoughtful, informed, patient leadership can have multiple benefits for diverse stakeholders at this time of challenge --and opportunity -- for our nation.

For further information . . .

- *Visit www.opendoorcollective.org for resources on how adult education programs and other stakeholders can help various adult learner populations participate effectively in work, family, and civic roles. In particular, see the resources related to services for individuals with criminal records at <http://www.opendoorcollective.org/criminal-justice-and-adult-education-resources.html> and <http://www.opendoorcollective.org/education-in-adult-basic-skills-can-contribute-to-reducing-incarceration-and-alleviating-poverty.html>.*
- *Contact your state and/or local workforce investment board and adult education agency to learn how you might work with adult educators.*
- *Communicate with other correctional educators in your state and nationally. Learn from their experience and adapt what they've learned to your own education efforts.*



*“He who opens a school door,
closes a prison.”*

Victor Hugo

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Endnotes

- 1. The author acknowledges the need to be respectful in how we refer to individuals who have been incarcerated. A number of terms are used here, including “returnees” (which we believe is a relatively non-pejorative term), “returning inmates,” “former inmates,” “formerly incarcerated individuals,” and “individuals with criminal records.” We are open to suggestions about how best to use terms that are respectful, positive, sensitive, and clear.*
- 2. This discussion of the challenges and supports returnees have draws heavily on the author’s three years of work with a re-entry initiative in New Jersey and on five years of interactions with the Fortune Society. In the former, our county re-entry task force carried out numerous discussions with service providers and former inmates to identify helpful supports for local returning inmates. Likewise, university students volunteering as teachers at the Fortune Society reported what they learned from FS staff and basic skills students about returnees’ hopes, successes, and frustrations.*
- 3. See the “Reentry Education Tool Kit” at <https://lincs.ed.gov/reentryed/>.*
- 4. Visit the John Jay Prisoner Reentry Institute at <http://johnjaypri.org/educational-initiatives/higher-education-policy/>.*
- 5. See “Current Issues in Correctional Education” at http://www.caalusa.org/correct_ed_paper.pdf.*