The importance of connecting court-involved youth to employment opportunities has received considerable attention by policymakers and youth-serving programs over the past decade. Similarly, facilitating successful reentry from juvenile corrections facilities has recently become a front-burner issue at both the state and national levels, as juveniles released from secure confinement have recidivism rates ranging from 55 to 75 percent.

Overcoming barriers to the employment of juvenile offenders through practical and effective programmatic strategies has become increasingly important as studies continue to find promising outcomes associated with employment for high-risk and court-involved youth. Yet, a particular component of workforce development for young offenders has remained a stubborn challenge: securing, maintaining, and advancing employment opportunities for court-involved youth.

**IDENTIFYING PRACTICAL APPROACHES**

Interviews with five nationally recognized programs that work significantly with court-involved youth uncovered a number of practical approaches to overcoming employment barriers for juvenile offenders. The programs were selected from among the National Youth Employment Coalition’s PEPNet-Awarded initiatives. PEPNet (the Promising and Effective Practices Network, www.nyec.org/pepnet) is the nation’s leading resource on what works in youth employment programming. The five programs include: 1) Career Development Program Bay Cove Academy, a comprehensive school-to-work
program organized into developmental phases that works with youth coming out of secure detention; 2) **Career Exploration Project/Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES)**, which provides pre-internship preparation and part-time internships at small businesses and non-profits for first-time felony offenders ages 15-19; 3) **Gulf Coast Trades Center (GCTC)**, a residential academic and occupational training program offering intensive, highly structured but individualized programs to adjudicated young men and women, ages 16-19; 4) **Home Builders Institute/Project CRAFT**, a construction industry-sponsored program that integrates youth development strategies into hands-on occupational training, employability skills development, job placement assistance, and follow-up to court-involved youth who are at least 16 years old; and 5) **Marin Conservation Corps**, a one to two year comprehensive program that provides paid service to the environment for court-involved youth who work in crews under an experienced supervisor.

The programs surveyed had program completion rates of 85 percent or more (Gulf Coast Trades Center); recidivism rates as low as 6.2 percent (Project CRAFT); average starting wages of $7.76 (Project CRAFT); employment retention rates for graduates of 86 percent one year after graduation (Bay Cove); and numerous other successful outcomes, such as documented wage progressions and college enrollments.

**ENGAGING EMPLOYERS, BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, AND MEETING EMPLOYERS’ NEEDS**

From a practical standpoint, having an employment specialist who is passionate about his or her work and who believes in the youth on whose behalf he or she works, is the first step to success. The surveyed programs also responded that understanding labor market demands, making successful youth-employer “matches,” and engaging employers are fundamental to overcoming barriers.

**Qualified & Enthusiastic Employment Specialists:** Surveyed programs responded with a consistent theme: Employment specialists (also referred to as Placement, Transition, Career, or Reentry Specialists or Job Developers) are essential players in overcoming barriers. Qualified employment specialists: 1) are good listeners; 2) have excellent written communication skills; 3) appreciate a holistic approach to employment for youth that includes families, probation officers, employers, and literally everyone in their communication links; 4) are creative; 5) have limitless energy; and 6) are “for real.” As a result of years of program development, best practice research, and trial and error, the surveyed program’s practice emphasized “getting your boots dirty,” as job development is done in the field, not from behind a desk.

**Training for High-Demand Occupations:** High-demand occupations are those for which there are more opportunities in a labor market than skilled workers. Effective training in high-demand occupations is important for court-involved youth, as they gain a competitive advantage in the labor pool when they possess the specific occupational skills sought by employers. The Marin Conservation Corps, for example, reviews labor market projections during its strategic planning meetings every three years. The information they gather is used to improve and change training programs offered to youth. Focus groups, advisory committees (Gulf Coast Trades Center), and including employers in curriculum development (Project CRAFT) are other ways programs garner employer input.

Involving employers informs both the identification of the occupations on which to focus and the content of occupational and “soft skills” training. Service providers can also contact their state or local workforce investment board or a local one-stop career center to ascertain local labor market demands and trends.

**Youth-Employer Matching:** Employers are more easily engaged when employment specialists match not only skill and labor market needs, but also individuals. Rather than place all youth in one industry or occupation, for example, Bay Cove finds internships and employment for each youth based on the student’s individual interests and strengths. The student is more likely to stay on the job if skills and interests match the employer needs.
Identifying receptive industries and appropriate occupations for court-involved youth is another factor in the employee-employer match. Some industries that the surveyed programs find to be receptive to court-involved youth are construction, landscaping (and tree surgeon companies), mechanical/bicycle shops, film-making (production assistants), music, computers/technology, and fashion.

**JOB READINESS**

Being “job-ready” means understanding what to expect in the workplace and what is expected of employees. In addition to appreciating the importance of punctuality and developing a positive work ethic, young offenders need to be taught how to work under direct supervision, take orders and directions, deal with criticism, and work productively with co-workers. Programs often role-play difficult and common workplace situations to prepare youth to respond appropriately. Often referred to as “soft skills,” youth must learn non-technical workplace competencies, including “problem-solving and other cognitive skills, oral communication skills, personal qualities and work ethic, and interpersonal and teamwork skills.”

At the Gulf Coast Trades Center, youth are assessed on a variety of skill areas, not just occupational. Educational progress and behavioral readiness are also important factors that are addressed by multiple professionals who make up the youth’s treatment team. Before they begin the job search, each youth must demonstrate a level of maturity and progress in the program.

**Anger Management:** Anger management is a key part of the employment preparation process for many young offenders, as many have histories of aggressive behavior and problems with self-control. Anger often contributes to the reasons court-involved youth quit or are fired. CASES recommends curricula that includes sessions on stress reduction, stopping the escalation, problem-solving communication, and identification of thoughts and emotions that serve as triggers to anger.

**Work Experience:** Internships, subsidized employment, transitional employment, or other types of paid or unpaid work experience are effective ways for young offenders to learn about the expectations of the workplace and launch a career. Many of the surveyed programs provide subsidized work experiences that allow young offenders to earn income, develop skills and a work ethic, and give back to their community through service. In addition, some surveyed programs pay the youth’s wages during the first few weeks or months of a job in the private sector, a strategy often referred to as “try-out” employment or “on-the-job training.”

At CASES, youth are placed in internships with mostly private sector employers, but paid by CASES. These students, who would otherwise have had little or no work experience, are able to secure employment and develop a resume and references. At HBI/Project CRAFT, youth are trained through a pre-apprenticeship program, providing hands-on construction training. Students receive an industry-validated certificate, which they can present to an employer as proof of their accomplishments and skill development/competencies. Paid or unpaid, a qualified employee is one with experience and knowledge that is attractive to an identified industry.

**OVERCOMING STIGMAS**

Stigmas assigned to young offenders by both employers and program employees are of particular concern when working to overcome barriers to employment. Many employers may have a sense of fear or apprehension based on a youth’s involvement in the juvenile justice system. In addition, program staff can unknowingly stigmatize a youth by referring to them as a “juvenile” or “troubled youth” in the presence of employers. Positive and optimistic attitudes by youth and employment specialist alike consistently help to overcome the stigma barrier.

**Persuading Employers to Hire Young Offenders:**
The first steps to persuading an employer to hire a young offender involve: 1) appropriately presenting the program to the employer and focusing on the reputation and quality training provided to youth; 2) using stigma- and jargon-free language to positively persuade the
employer that the young job applicant is qualified and prepared to work; and 3) addressing any apprehension or concerns the employer may have. The initial communication with an employer should not be about the student’s past; rather, it should present the youth as a qualified potential employee who is part of a training program.

**Addressing Their Juvenile Court Record:** In many instances, when a youth applies for a job he or she will face the question, on an application or in an interview, “Do you have a criminal record?” The legal answer is almost always “no” for most adjudicated juvenile offenders. Historically, in most states juvenile justice is a civil, not a criminal system. Being adjudicated a delinquent is not legally equivalent to a criminal conviction. However, employers do not always appreciate this technical distinction, and if they find out later about a criminal involvement, could react negatively.

Complicating the process is the issue of expungement, a practice in many states that involves the sealing or destroying of legal records so that an adjudicated youth’s record is not available to the public. Those who help young offenders secure employment need to understand the laws and communicate those laws to the youth. For information on relevant laws in your state, visit the National Center for Juvenile Justice’s web site at http://ncjj.servehttp.com/NCJJWebsite/faq/faq.htm.

The surveyed programs find expungement and a juvenile’s legal status less significant than the way in which the young person handles the situation. Even if juvenile records are sealed in their state, the programs advise youth to be open about the fact that they have a record, but to do so “with a plan.” Be truthful about the past, but accentuate the new attitude, training, skills, and lifestyle youth have developed and will bring to an employer. For example, when advising youth on how to answer questions about criminal history the Gulf Coast Trades Center uses an approach they call the “Sandwich Technique.” Youth are advised to start with a positive response, explaining how they can be a productive employee. Then they explain that at one point they did get into some trouble, without providing specifics. Finally, they explain that while they were at the center, they were able to turn their life around, learned a skill, earned a GED and a driver’s license, and they are confident they can do the job.

**Federal Bonding Program:** Sometimes employers need greater assurance to convince them to take a chance with a young offender. The Federal Bonding Program was created by the U.S. Department of Labor to alleviate these types of employers’ concerns by allowing them to purchase fidelity bonds to indemnify them for loss of money or property sustained through the dishonest acts of their employees. For more information, go to: http://www.doleta.gov/wtw/documents/fedbonding.cfm.

## SUCCESSFUL FOLLOW-UP AND SUPPORT

Successful programs recognize that job retention and launching a career are the vital program outcomes, more so than mere job placement. Once a young person is employed, frequent follow-up contact with both the youth and the employer is one of the most critical elements to promoting job retention. Averting or addressing the problems that arise in the first few days, weeks, and months on the job contribute significantly to long-term job retention. Visiting the workplace, connecting with employers before or after work hours to avoid interrupting their daily operations, or meeting with youth and their families on the weekends are ways program staff stay informed of how things are going at the workplace. Program staff seek to address issues and problems before they escalate to the point that the youth either is fired or quits. However, the frequency of contact with the young worker and the employer should diminish over time.

Programs successful in promoting job retention have found a variety of innovative incentives to encourage youth to stay on the job. One method for accomplishing this goal is for programs to set up future “trust accounts” for them during the program, paying them to stay in the program, but deferring that payment until they have obtained and retained employment for a specified period. Another strategy is to work with the employer to document the skills the young person is developing and the relevance of these skills to future employment opportunities.
Salvaging Employer Relationships: The youth who is fired or worked for three weeks and never returned to work are phenomena experienced by just about every program and dreaded by all. Overcoming barriers to employment requires quickly addressing a situation in which one youth has potentially tarnished the reputation of the program and, in so doing, prevents newly trained youth from being hired. The CASES program retains an employee, who is also a program graduate, to fill vacancies left by youth. Whenever a student does not fulfill his or her responsibilities to an employer, the CASES employee temporarily fills the position until another graduate is ready to take the job. Thus, employers are never “burned.”

A QUICK REFERENCE TO OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Practical approaches to overcoming barriers to employment for youth in the juvenile justice system employ very simple, but well-planned, programmatic operations carried out by qualified employment specialists who work to reduce stigmas, while assisting youth to find and retain employment. In summary, the PEPNet-Awarded programs surveyed in this bulletin identified a number of practical solutions, including:

- employ employment specialists who understand the needs of the local labor market, business, and youth;
- utilize a holistic approach to job development, placement, and follow-up;
- research and approach receptive industries;
- involve employers in all aspects of the program;
- train for high-demand occupations, revise skills training as needed, and incorporate employer feedback;
- match potential employers to individual youth based on youth interests and skills;
- teach soft skills, anger management, and the requisite skills for demand occupations;
- help employers overcome stigmas through truthfulness, modeling respect for youth, and focusing on youths’ strengths; and
- offer quality customer service to employers.

With the practical strategies offered here, programs that provide occupational and employment preparation to youth involved in the juvenile justice system are well within reach to overcoming barriers to employment.

RESOURCES

Juvenile Confidentiality and Records


Labor Market Statistics

Promising Practices Organizations and Links


Publications on Employment for Court-Involved Youth


Juvenile Sanctions Center
Publications

TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
BULLETINS:

• “Introducing the New Juvenile Sanctions Center”
  Vol. 1 No. 1, 2002

• “Structured Decision Making for Graduated Sanctions”
  Vol. 1 No. 2, 2002

• “School-Based Probation: An Approach Worth Considering”
  Vol. 1 No. 3, 2003

• “Promising Sanctioning Programs in a Graduated System”
  Vol. 1 No. 4, 2003

• “A Practical Approach to Linking Graduated Sanctions with a Continuum of Effective Programs”
  Vol. 2 No. 1, 2004

• “Using Federal Title IV-E Money to Expand Sanctions and Services for Juvenile Offenders”
  Vol. 2 No. 2, 2004

• “Three Innovative Court-Involved Reentry Programs”
  Vol. 2 No. 3, 2004

• “Resource Reallocation: The Clark County Experience”
  Vol. 2 No. 4, 2004
Juvenile Sanctions Center Publications

TRAINING PUBLICATIONS:

• Graduated Sanctions for Juvenile Offenders: Vol. I
  A Training Curriculum Guide 2003

• Graduated Sanctions for Juvenile Offenders: Vol. II
  A Training Curriculum Guide: Dispositional
  Court Hearing to Case Closure, 2005

• Graduated Sanctions for Juvenile Offenders: A Program Model

  Sanctions: Dispositional Court Hearing to Case Closure, 2005

• Juvenile Sanctions Center, Monograph I, 2003

• Juvenile Sanctions Center, Monograph II, 2005

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