Offenders: The Last Work Force Development Frontier

By Marilyn C. Moses

***Editor's note**: Opinions expressed herein are solely the author's and do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Today, immigrants come to the United States with the same optimism as those who came before them — the sky is the limit for hardworking individuals in our free and open marketplace. Our marketplace, however, has not always welcomed all enterprising people. Native Americans and those who came to this country against their will have struggled for fair access and the opportunity to share in this country's prosperity. Women have sought the freedom to work and be compensated fairly. People of all ethnic groups, creeds and races have asked only for an equal opportunity to apply their skills and talents. Those with physical and mental challenges have struggled for the dignity and freedom that come from gainful employment. Many employers now are discovering that seniors are a value-added commodity to their labor force.

Although the struggle for inclusion and equity continues, our attitudes about work and the workplace have undergone a significant change. We have moved from an exclusionist labor force to one that values diversity. In fact, we now insist that those receiving public assistance enter the work force regardless of their desire to do so. Some economists have asserted that our sustained economic growth has been achieved, in part, because we have recognized the high cost of restrictive employment practices and responded accordingly. To remain competitive, we have come to realize that we cannot afford to waste the skills, talents and potential of any person, regardless of his or her race, creed, gender, sexual preference, physical or mental challenges, or past history. Having said this, one could argue that offenders are our last untapped work force.

A significant number of offenders were not involved in the economic mainstream at the time of arrest and conviction. In most correctional systems, inmate productivity is the exception rather than the rule — offenders rarely have the opportunity to contribute to our country's gross domestic product during incarceration. After release, the ex-offender faces many of the same barriers to employment he or she did prior to incarceration and at least one new one — a criminal record.

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The National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) first significant involvement in the offender work arena began in the early 1980s, shortly after Congress passed the Justice System Improvement Act of 1979. This legislation permitted the business community, with some restrictions, to form partnerships with correctional manufacturing operations to employ inmate labor to produce items to be sold on the open market. For its part, corrections welcomed private sector employment of offenders because it provided inmates with an opportunity for real work experience, work ethic development, job training and real pay. Payment of prevailing wages for inmate work made possible the ability to compensate crime victims, pay child or family support, and partially offset the cost of incarceration. Moreover, work became a valued correctional management tool because it reduces inmate idleness and contributes to institutional stability.

During this time, NIJ took the leadership role among federal agencies in the development of correctional industries. Sponsored research included studies on effective correctional industry management practices, enabling state legislation, cost-effectiveness and the dynamics of a corporation's decision to open a manufacturing operation inside a correctional facility. Considerable resources were devoted to transferring the results of this research to practice. Today, a sister agency, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), in partnership with the Correctional Industries Association, continues what NIJ began and provides training, technical assistance and certification of private sector prison industries. Under BJA's supervision and guidance, corporate participation in these types of in prison industry operations has grown significantly during the past decade.

More recently, a number of correctional administrators approached several federal agencies regarding the dearth of information on the issue of post-release employment and re-entry issues in general. NIJ joined with the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Correctional Education (OCE) to research and document various approaches to life skills training and post-release job placement strategies. A series of publications written with practitioners' needs in mind, resulted from this effort (see sidebar). While the programs highlighted

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in these publications were selected, in part, because of their varied approaches, correctional administrators can easily discern the common threads that run through the development and implementation of a sound offender job placement and retention program. The fact that these publications continue to be among the most sought-after documents produced by NIJ is a testament to their value and usability.

The foundation in offender job training, placement and retention laid by NIJ, NIC and OCE provided the basis for two other tangential efforts. The first was NIC's development of a training curriculum for offender job placement specialists. This course, originally offered at the Longmont Training Academy in Colorado, has proved to be the most requested training course in the history of the academy. Due to the demand, NIC has begun to offer this course in an expanded distance-learning format.

The second offshoot of this earlier work and a new area of development is offender re-entry. Offender job training, placement and retention remains at the center of what now is termed "re-entry." However, re-entry is more encompassing and involves the integration and delivery of a "bundle" of community support services, which may include drug treatment, housing, continuity of health care and offender supervision, inter alia.

Today, NIJ continues its work with a number of federal, state and local partners on the development and testing of a variety of approaches to offender re-entry management. With NIJ's assistance, several offender re-entry partnerships have taken hold in communities across the country. In addition, re-entry courts have been developed and their efficacy is under examination.

Finally, NIJ has contributed to the effort that led to partnerships between the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Justice's newly funded National Re-Entry Initiative. Details of this initiative and funding opportunities for correctional systems will be made public shortly.

Countries likely to continue to thrive in this global marketplace are those that invest in capital formation and use all human resources fully — including the more than 2 million incarcerated offenders, the majority of whom will be released to communities across our country. Policymakers, economists, correctional administrators and crime victims have presented a challenge to NIJ and its partnering agencies — to develop and test innovative approaches to this seemingly intractable work force development challenge. Because so much is at stake, NIJ remains committed to finding effective ways to use this untapped human resource and assure public safety at the same time.

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Resourceful Publications

NIJ and NIC, as well as OCE, have individually and jointly sponsored a number of publications that are of interest to employment and corrections professionals involved in offender job training, placement and retention. To obtain a copy of these publications, write the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000; 1-800-851-3420; e-mail: askncjrs@aspensys.com.

- *Correcting Corrections: Missouri's Parallel Universe*. Research in Brief, May 2000. (NCJ 181414)
- *National Institute of Justice Journal*, July 1999. (JR 000240)
- *Case Management in the Criminal Justice System*. Research in Action, 1999. (NCJ 173409)
- *Washington State's Corrections Clearinghouse: A Comprehensive Approach to Offender Employment*. Program Focus, 1999. (NCJ 174441)
- *The Delaware Department of Correction Life Skills Program*. Program Focus, 1998. (NCJ 169589)
- *Chicago's Safer Foundation: A Road Back for Ex-Offenders*. Program Focus, 1998. (NCJ 167575)
- *Texas' Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders)*. Program Focus, 1998. (NCJ 168637)
- *Successful Job Placement for Ex-Offenders: The Center for Employment Opportunities*. Program Focus, 1998. (NCJ 168102)
- *The Orange County, Florida, Jail Educational and Vocational Programs*. Program Focus, 1997. (NCJ 166820)
- *Labor Markets, Employment and Crime*. Research Preview, 1996. (NCJ 160166)
- *Work Release: Recidivism and Corrections Costs in Washington State*. Research in Brief, 1996. (NCJ 163706)
- *Project Re-Enterprise: A Texas Program*. Program Focus, 1996. (NCJ 161448)
- *Work in American Prisons: Joint Ventures With the Private Sector*. Program Focus, 1995. (NCJ 156215)

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