Employment Engagement Reduces Recidivism

Michael Bullis, Professor, University of Oregon

Finding a job and working successfully is one of the hallmarks of being an adult in our society. The benefits that work can provide in terms of money, self-direction and fulfillment, life structure, and “position” within our culture, are central to the way in which an individual – as well as others – view themselves. These experiences also act to shape the subsequent opportunities and the life-course an individual will follow (Osipow, 1983). There also is no question that being successful in terms of finding, securing, and maintaining an appropriate and meaningful job is one of the major goals of virtually all adolescents in our country (Benz & Kochar, 1996; Crites, 1989). Most adolescents will succeed in finding, maintaining and even advancing in work as they leave school and enter the workforce, but the same cannot be said for formerly incarcerated adolescents who leave the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) and return to the community.

In our recently completed TRACS study (Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in community Settings; Bullis, Yovanoff, Havel, & Muller, 2001) we followed a sample of 531 youth who were paroled from OYA and documented their community readjustment experiences at 6 month intervals after leaving OYA; following some youth for up to four years after their return to the community. Relative to the employment experiences, the study participants performed poorly – much more poorly than data amassed from other studies of the community adjustment experiences of youth with or without disabilities who are not incarcerated. The following results standout for the TRACS sample –

Results for the TRACS Sample

- 78.7% of the sample was competitively employed at some point in the project.
- A “typical” job for this sample = farm labor or menial service work, 30.7 hours/week, 11.7 weeks in duration, & $5.36/hour
- Most jobs were found through a family member or friend.
- Why jobs ended – 48.7% Quit 29.0% Fired or Laid Off 23.4% Seasonal 22.3% Arrested/Incarcerated
- Employment rates across interviews – 6-months after leaving OYA = 29.2% 12-months after leaving OYA = 28.4% 18-months after leaving OYA = 27.9% 24-months after leaving OYA = 31.0% 30-months after leaving OYA = 32.9%

These results clearly point to the importance of assisting youth on parole to facilitate a successful transition for a Project SUPPORT youth leaving the youth correctional facility:

- Job search skills training (e.g., mechanics of resume development and interviewing skills) should take place PRIOR to parole while the youth is in the youth correctional facility.
- Conducting the VR intake interview within the youth correctional facility with the VR Counselor and TS can provide a head start on the (Continued on page 3)
Employment Outcomes

- Approximately 50% of all project participants are employed at 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months after exiting the youth correctional facility.

- 20% of youth who successfully exit Project SUPPORT earn more than $9.50 per hour. Another 20% earn between $7.50 and $9.50 an hour.

- 60% of youth successfully exiting the project are working 35 hours or more a week.

Employment Strategies Are More Than Just Finding the Youth a Job:

Molly Edwards, Multnomah County Transition Specialist

Working with youth on employment strategies they can use to find, secure, and keep a competitive job is an ongoing process throughout Project SUPPORT’s services. This process begins in the youth correctional facility and continues through the youth’s transition into the community. Employment services finally end when the youth either (a) exits Project SUPPORT with either a stable job in his or her interest area (b) engages in a long-term career-related school and/or training program.

Pre-employment training is imperative to youth with disabilities who are exiting custody. The youth receive pre-employment training in the youth correctional facilities. The Project SUPPORT transition specialist should build on these skills through one-on-one instruction. These individual meetings help foster a mentoring relationship between the youth and the transition specialist – a cornerstone for the youth’s buy-in to the project.

The period of time after exiting the institution is new, unfamiliar and challenging for the youth. After leaving the facility, it is crucial for the transition specialist to engage the youth in job search activities. Staff from Vocational Rehabilitation and the Workforce Investment Act agencies also can be involved in providing vocational support services to youth. The transition specialist, along with these community agencies, assist the youth with job leads, notices of job fairs, completion of job applications, interviewing techniques, and appropriate communication and dress for their designated work site. Many times youth will be employed in a “starter” job to learn these basic workplace social behaviors while he or she is being trained for a job related to his or her career interest.

After the youth secures employment the transition specialist has regular meetings with the youth to discuss job retention, problem solving on the job and to address independent living skills. This process is not always smooth. Often youth in Project SUPPORT lack work experience and an understanding of appropriate workplace behaviors. Frequently, the transition specialist works directly with youth in a number of the following ways: (a) communicating with his or her employer about absences, (b) how to handle an anger issue on the job, or (c) being on time. The youth may suffer natural consequences of being fired from a position as he or she learns basic job retention skills. During these times it is essential for the transition specialists to continue to work with the youth to secure other employment and build his or her employment skills.

To maintain and broaden employment and training opportunities for the youth, however, the transition specialist also must support the youth beyond the employment sphere. Each youth
In last issue, Chad’s transition plan was developed in the youth correctional facility to ready him for the community. In this issue, Chad has just been released into the community.

Chad was paroled to his aunt’s house yesterday. He is excited to begin classes and the construction certification program at the local community college; however he has to wait to begin school until the new term begins in two weeks. The transition specialist, parole officer, and Chad’s aunt are concerned about his free time until classes start and want to engage Chad quickly in other of his interests defined in the project’s transition plan. (see issue 2) They work in tandem to help Chad begin his guitar lessons and other activities in the community.

Chad has no income and his Aunt lives on a modest budget, so Chad will need assistance to purchase a monthly bus pass – his only source of transportation. In addition, steel-toed boots and a tool belt are required for the construction program. An employment plan written by Chad’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor, who was part of his transition plan team in the facility, enables VR to purchase these items for Chad. To help pay for the cost of the guitar classes, Chad and the transition specialist negotiate with the guitar instructor. The instructor agrees that Chad can do janitorial work before class to pay for the lessons until he begins to work and can pay for the lessons himself.

To support his transition back into the community, Chad feels that he needs some ongoing support to follow-up on the drug abuse treatment he received in the youth correctional facility. He and the transition specialist locate an AA meeting close to his aunt’s house. Together, Chad and the transition specialist, figure out the bus route from his aunt’s house to his AA meeting and then also to his community college course work. While they are on campus at the community college, they meet with Chad’s advisor, take a tour of campus and find his classrooms along with the construction program’s area.

Chad’s transition plan required that he would pay his aunt $100 rent. Instead of paying rent for the first month, Chad and his aunt develop a list of house repairs that need to be done and that Chad can practice using tools he will be using in school.

While Chad is waiting to begin classes, the transition specialist meets with him to continue to practice riding the bus by riding to the local Employment Division. At that office the transition specialist begins to work with Chad on how to access and use the various job search tools and services provided by the Employment Division.

Next issue will focus on Chad’s continued community experiences.
(Continued from page 2: Finding youth a job)

has a diverse set of needs that the transition specialist will support. These may include: (a) ensuring the youth maintains a medical plan to access needed prescribed medications, (b) a stable place to live, (c) a work schedule that accommodates various treatment groups, (d) maintaining healthy leisure time activities, and (e) consistent transportation to the work site.

Overall, Project SUPPORT’s goal is to provide youth with the skills and tools necessary for self sufficiency and success on the job. The mentoring relationship developed between the transition specialist and the youth assists in identifying and supporting the diverse and unique needs of each project youth in their employment endeavors.

(Continued from page 3: Strategies)

goals there must be: (a) clear communication about expectations for success, and (b) a clear understanding of the youth’s priorities, barriers, and concerns.

These general strategies for collaboration between the transition specialist and VR counselor will support a youth’s successful transition into the community and into a job.