

H-1B TECHHIRE



H-1B TECHHIRE GRANTS:

GRANTEES HELP JUSTICE-INVOLVED INDIVIDUALS ACHIEVE SELF-SUFFICIENCY PEER LEARNING CALL SUMMARY

Our H-1B TechHire (TH) Technical Assistance (TA) Team recently moderated a peer-to-peer conference call on “Engaging Justice-Involved Participants in TechHire Programs.” Led by TH TA Coach Jessica Kendall, this call provided grantees with a forum to share lessons learned and promising approaches for TH participants interact directly with their TH colleagues. This resource brief was developed to highlight trends, strategies, and information shared during this discussion and offer insight into the challenges and current approaches taken by TH grantees.

OVERALL TRENDS

Today, state and federal U.S. prison facilities house over 1.5 million prisoners, nearly 450,000 people enter these systems each year. An equal or greater number of individuals return to their communities annually.¹

Finding and sustaining work is often a difficult task for returning individuals. Many have limited job skills and education and encounter employer reluctance. About 75 percent of returned citizens are jobless a year after release, which only increases the risk of re-offending.²

Three TechHire grantees—Flying HIGH, Inc. in Ohio, Polk State College in Florida, and the State Technical College of Missouri—primarily serve justice-involved individuals as they return to society. A November 2017 peer learning group call among them aimed to exchange ideas, brainstorm challenges, and identify promising practices. In their honest and lively discussion several themes arose relating to participant recruitment, screening and assessment, employability skill building, and employer engagement.

Finding the right fit

TechHire provides intensive training to individuals ready for middle- to high-skilled careers in a variety of high-growth sectors: IT; Advanced Manufacturing; Healthcare; and Financial Services. For grantees recruiting individuals inside prison or work release facilities, how do they best assess prospects’ readiness? This has been a challenge for Polk State, where some individuals sign up but don’t follow through. While many are serious about the opportunity, some use it to simply reduce time off of their sentences (allowable under Florida rules). State Tech saw value in the possibility of using sentence reduction opportunities as a way to motivate and spark change among prospects, but also suggested interviewing potential participants about their readiness for change. Sharing their interview tool, State Tech asks

¹ Carson, E. A., & Sobel, W. J. (2014). Prisoners in 2014. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

² Petersilia, J. (2003). When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Travis, J. (2005). But they all come back: Facing the challenges of prisoner reentry. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press; Duran, L., Plotkin, M., Potter, P., & Rosen, H. (2013). Integrated reentry and employment strategies: Reducing recidivism and promoting job readiness. New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center; Visser, C. A., Debus-Sherrill, S. A., & Yahner, J. (2011). Employment after prison: A longitudinal study of former prisoners. Justice Quarterly, 28(5), 698–718.

prospects where they see themselves in 10 years, what they value most, how they handle stress, and how they resolved a recent conflict. Flying HIGH recruits participants after release, assessing readiness through a nine day process that includes soft and employability skill building, addressing workplace behavior, interview and job search skills, among others.

Check out State Technical College of Missouri's participant readiness interview tool [here](#).

Gathering information on risks and needs

When TechHire grantees recruit justice-involved individuals into their programs, part of finding the right fit also requires a close look at individuals' service needs and risk for recidivating. Ken Chapman, reentry coordinator for Missouri's Departments of Corrections (DOC) shared how the DOCs assess risk and needs inside facilities. They assess past criminal history, educational history, vocational training, as well as needs related to mental health and health status, financial skills, transportation, budgeting and family reunification to develop a transition plan and assess risk. If TechHire grantees could access these assessments it could help them identify potential program participants, but also guide training and case planning supports. This could be particularly helpful for grantees with small staff sizes where they may not be able to conduct comprehensive assessments on all potential participants.

To learn more about risk-needs assessments, visit:

- Congressional Research Service, "Risk and Needs Assessment in the Criminal Justice System"
 - <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/misc/R44087.pdf>
- The National ReEntry Resource Center, "Risk Assessment Instruments Validated and Implemented in Correctional Settings in the United States"
 - <https://csqjusticecenter.org/nrrc/publications/risk-assessment-instruments-validated-and-implemented-in-correctional-settings-in-the-united-states/>

Building employability skills

Many DOCs offer employability skills training 'behind the walls.' So does Flying HIGH, Polk State, and State Tech either before or shortly after release. They cover similar topics in these employability skills training, from interview preparation to anger management. *What* is covered to support soft and employability skill building is essential, but so is *how* the material is delivered. Grantees spoke about the importance of experiential learning and simulating real world experiences for program participants. For example, they video tape mock interviews with participants so they can assess their performance and improve.

Check out these resources on employability skills:

- U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, "Skills to Pay the Bills"
 - <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/softskills.pdf> (this guide includes activities to engage young people in employability skills training. The guide is geared to all youth, including those who are out of school and a part of TechHire's target populations).
- Seattle Jobs Initiative, *The Importance of Soft Skills in Entry-Level Employment and Postsecondary Success*
 - http://seattlejobsinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/SJI_SoftSkillsReport_vFINAL_1.17.13.pdf

Engaging willing employers

"Most employers don't come to us and ask if we have any good felons they can hire," said Jeff Magada from Flying HIGH. But they do, he said, ask if we have any qualified candidates for their open positions. All three grantees serving justice-involved individuals offer training and job placement supports in the advanced manufacturing sector. It's likely, they said, that their employer partners have current and successful employees with criminal backgrounds, they just didn't know it. The keys to successful engagement with employers, they said, include taking care to match the right participants to employers' needs, offering participants supportive services, and dispelling myths about hiring justice-involved individuals.

To read more about engaging employers, see:

- National Institute of Corrections, *“The Employer-Driven Model and Toolkit: Strategies for Developing Employment Opportunities for Justice-Involved Individuals”*
 - <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/028098.pdf>
- Urban Institute, *“The Goals and Dimensions of Employer Engagement in Workforce Development Programs”*
 - <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/2000552-The-Goals-and-Dimensions-of-Employer-Engagement-in-Workforce-Development-Programs.pdf>

The road to self-sufficiency can be a difficult one for many returning citizens. The Flying HIGH, Polk State, and State Tech teams are committed and passionate about the participants they serve and walk with them as they strike their own paths to employment.

As you continue to work with and support justice-involved individuals, I encourage you to continue the discussion on the TechHire Community of Practice, [here](#), to share your success stories, promising practices, but also challenges you would like to brainstorm with your TechHire peers!