



Partners for Reentry Opportunities
in Workforce Development

RETENTION TIP SHEET

Overview

Recruiting participants for PROWD is vital, but it is equally important to retain participants through their completion of the program. PROWD grantees have an incredibly arduous task of retaining incarcerated participants and developing strategies for a seamless transition to Stage 2. Additional barriers to retaining participants during this transition are addressed in this resource. During Stage 2, participants will enter supervised release, reside in Residential Reentry Centers (RRCs), and experience their first glimpse of freedom. In Stage 3, participants will be free from Bureau of Prisons (BOP) supervision, and grantees should focus on encouraging participants to complete training, retain employment, and maintain engagement with the program. This resource identifies evidence-informed retention strategies that can encourage participants to remain involved in PROWD activities through Stage 3.

Pillars of Retention

- 1: Relationships and Trust-** Relationships and connections are critical to retaining and engaging participants. Participants will be more likely to stay in a program when they feel connected to staff and other participants.
- 2: Communication-** Maintain frequent communication and contact with participants through implementation and after the program ends. This helps to remind participants of your appreciation for their involvement, to show that they are valued, and to keep their contact information current.
- 3: Convenience-** Participation should be made as easy as possible. Provide simple-to-read descriptions of the program. Make sure participants are fully aware of the commitment to participation.
- 4: Appreciation-** Participants who feel appreciated and counted on may be more inclined to return. Provide positive verbal feedback and affirmation to participants (e.g., look for ways to point out what they are doing well and note the progress that they have made).

TIPS

Stage 1 (Prison)

- Provide intensive case management to identify participants' needs and the supportive services needed for successful reentry.
- Provide information and forms to complete for services post-release, such as state identification cards, Medicaid, etc. Receipt of these items will build confidence in the program.
- Bring in speakers, virtually or in person, that can assist them in understanding how to navigate for services post-release. We encourage you to bring in speakers with lived experience of incarceration or community violence, who can be non-judgmental and that can assist them in understanding how to navigate for services post-release. Furthermore, speakers with lived experience can model trust and life after successful reentry. Speakers may include representatives from local housing authorities, Health and Human Services, mental health and substance abuse centers, clothes closets, etc. This helps build a feeling of welcoming support and confidence that they can navigate the systems for services.
- Peer mentoring is a proven strategy for retaining participants. Grantees should pair participants from the graduating cohort with new participants and start a peer mentoring program where they can meet at least once weekly during non-class time. Grantees may also request to invite graduates from the first cohort to speak to the new class or provide group mentoring as a class session.
- Provide exposure to employers that are willing to hire participants. Employers should convey that they seek employees to fill their gaps. They should also provide information on their benefits and career advancement. Grantees should consider providing this opportunity virtually or by video and may want to consider featuring multiple employers in a video. Unless the employer is familiar with recruiting from a prison, the intense security and prison environment may leave a negative impression that may transfer onto the participant. However, it is essential to involve employers as early as possible so that participants feel there is real potential for employment after completing the program.
- Seek incentives for milestones that the prison can offer, such as additional phone or recreation time. If this is impossible, inform participants about incentives provided during Stage 2 or 3, such as pre-paid telephones or tablets.

- Maintain engagement with participants throughout their time in prison and as they transition to the RRC. After completing Stage 1 of the program, participants may still have time remaining in incarceration. Grantees should send graduates weekly updates on the progression of their submissions for Medicaid and other services. Grantees should also have weekly virtual meeting days with graduates.
- Remember, forward-thinking is the key!

Stage 2 (RRC)

- Have a welcoming appointment card included in the participants' documents they receive upon release. Ensure you receive prior approval from the RRC for the participant to attend the orientation meeting at the grantee's program site. RRCs have an onboarding process prohibiting the participant from leaving the RRC for the first week or two.
- Request to meet on-site at the RRC or at a minimum a phone call with the participant within the first few days of release. The participant needs to know that you are still there. If this is not possible, request to include a welcome letter with contact information for their next steps.
- Communicate weekly with participants during their first 30-60 days to encourage them and ensure they successfully navigate the systems to receive services.
- Peer mentoring has proven to be beneficial during these periods of transition. Peer mentors with lived experience can more easily develop trust and a personal story on navigating reentry successfully. Grantees should work with the RRCs to create a peer mentoring program with successful graduates from previous cohorts to mentor new participants at the RRC. The earlier this intervention, the better. Peer mentors and mentees may meet at the RRCs or off-site. Grantees should maintain a record of these meetings and may be required to share this information with the RRCs.
- Grantees should send a group email or text messages to announce meetings, new services, reminders of the importance of engagement with case managers, and affirmations. This should also include success stories.
- Grantees should develop opportunities for participants to meet employers at events to foster connections that may lead to employment.
- Trainers should remember to offer affirmations and positive feedback often, but also additional time to help participants that need more help.
- Employers should be visible in the training and could serve as speakers or featured trainers.

- If providing pre-paid cell phones or tablets, consider offering them for use and then ownership as an incentive for completing the training especially if these were offered as incentives during stage 1.

Stage 3 (Post-Release)

- Employers should become more visible through mock interviewing and/or presentations during training sessions. Employer visibility helps to encourage participants to complete training and to become eligible for employment considerations.
- Grantees should provide a monthly schedule of employment events, such as job fairs, job preparation workshops, or various informational occupational speakers. Registration for these events should be required so case managers can send reminder emails or text messages.
- Remember to make any meetings convenient for participants. Consider offering flexible schedules that include nontraditional hours.
- Use personal and collaborative tones in emails and text messages that foster positive relationships.
- Peer mentoring by persons with lived experience has proven helpful for both the mentor and the mentee. These connections foster a feeling of value and commitment to the program and increase the likelihood of retaining participants to complete the program and beyond. Grantees should work with the RRCs to develop a peer mentoring program with successful graduates from previous cohorts to mentor new participants at the RRC.
- Financial incentives for meeting employment milestones can help retain and verify employment milestones. Grantees should require documentation of meeting employment milestones to receive incentive payments.

Behavioral Interventions/Understanding Participant Success

Understand participant drop-off. To implement behavioral interventions, grantees must understand when and why participants drop out of programs. Closely tracking when participants leave programs and contacting them to find out why they left the program can provide grantees with helpful information for developing strategies to minimize participant drop-off. Conversely, upon graduation grantees should follow-up with participants to learn what incentivized them to stay in and complete the program.

Closely track the effects of behavioral interventions. Determining whether behavioral interventions change participant behavior as intended or whether additional changes are needed is crucial.

RESOURCES

[Reentry Podcast: Reentry Program Participant Recruitment and Retention](#)

This podcast is produced by the [American Institutes for Research](#) and features Saad Soliman, a reentry navigator with [JustLeadershipUSA](#). The focus is on the recruitment and retention of formerly incarcerated individuals.

[Tips to Enhance Participant Retention](#)

This toolkit is intended to inform America's Promise Grantees about strategies to increase participant retention and improve completion rates that lead to employment in their field of study.

[SWFI Retention and Engagement Tip Sheet](#)

This tip sheet highlights strategies that Strengthening Working Families Initiative (SWFI) grantees used to help maximize the engagement and retention of participants. It presents tips and examples from SWFI grantees and related programs in the following areas: building relationships with participants, structuring programs to meet their needs, and using behavioral interventions to keep participants engaged.