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Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Reauthorization
Examining Successful Models of Employment for Justice-Involved Individuals

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Chair Scott, Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Foxx, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Pamela Lattimore and I am the Senior Director for Research Development for the Division for Applied Justice Research at RTI International.

To briefly introduce myself, I have been conducting research on programs and interventions for justice-involved individuals including prisoner reentry programs since I was in graduate school at the University of North Carolina in the 1980s. This work has included evaluations of an innovative vocational program for youth in North Carolina prisons and multisite, multimethod evaluations of federal initiatives including the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative and the Second Chance Act. Prior to joining RTI in 1998, I worked as a visiting scientist and later a Division Director at the National Institute of Justice conducting research on criminal behavior and overseeing NIJ's corrections research portfolio.

To set the stage, it is important to know that justice-involved individuals in general lack education and employment experience; and are often challenged with behavioral health issues including drug use. For

example, 30% of adults in federal and state prisons in 2014 did not have a high school diploma.[1] And justice-involved youth generally have lower education levels than their non-justice involved peers and lack job experience and soft skills such as interviewing.[2] This lack of education and employment histories suggests that, for all practical purposes, many of these individuals have never had the opportunity to adopt positive adult roles, as was suggested in a recent joint Brookings and American Enterprise Institute report.[3]

Even though we have seen some decline in prison and community supervision populations over the last several years, there are still approximately 2 million individuals in our prisons and jails—most of whom will return to our communities—and nearly 5 million others currently in our communities on probation or parole. Lack of education, skills, and work experience combined with employment barriers due to their criminal histories makes it difficult for justice-involved individuals to attain meaningful employment even after they have repaid their debt to society.

Education and workforce programs offer a solution to the employment and educational needs of those involved with the justice system—offering transformative opportunities that can lead to a better life

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[1] According to the 2014 U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 30 percent of adults incarcerated in federal and state prisons did not have a high school diploma. The PIAAC survey also found that 34 percent of state and federal prisoners were not in the paid workforce prior to incarceration. [Rampey, B.D., Keiper, S., Mohadjer, L., Krenzke, T., Li, J., Thorton, N., & Hogan, J. (2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIACC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training: Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: 2014* (NCES 2016-040). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf]

[2] Justice-involved youth generally have lower education levels than their non-justice-involved peers and a history of previous involvement in their school's disciplinary system, including high rates of suspension and expulsion. Leone, P., & Weinberg, L. (2012). *Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems*. Washington, DC: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/addressing-unmet-educational-needs-children-and-youth-juvenile-0

These youth also have few if any previous job experiences, lack soft skills such as interviewing or resume building, and often lack the necessary job-training skills to secure and maintain gainful employment [Rampey, B.D., Keiper, S., Mohadjer, L., Krenzke, T., Li, J., Thorton, N., & Hogan, J. (2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIACC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training: Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: 2014* (NCES 2016-040). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf].

[3] Bushway, S. and Uggen, C. (2021). Fostering desistance. In: *A Better Path Forward for Criminal Justice: A Report by the Brookings-AEI Working Group on Criminal Justice Reform*. https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/a-better-path-forward-for-criminal-justice/

for the individuals and their families and safer communities as criminal activity is curbed or stopped all together. Criminologists have long held that education is an important correlate of crime prevention. Individuals who participate in higher education are more likely to have positive, supportive peers[4]; higher impulse control[5]; and improved problem-solving abilities[6]. Education is recognized as an important life-course alternative to incarceration that prepares students for labor market advancement.[7] Research also consistently demonstrates that low academic skills, underemployment, and a criminal lifestyle are interrelated[8]. Criminologists have posited that desisting from criminal behavior may require an individual to transform to a "self" that believes they can attain a more positive, productive future. Education is a recognized process for supporting transformation. All of us in this room owe at least some of who we are to the educational pathways that have been afforded to us.

The return on investment for correctional educational programs is well documented. A recent study by RAND estimated that every $1 invested in these programs resulted in $4 to $5 of taxpayer savings in reincarceration costs in just the 3 years following program participation. The savings were due to a 13-percentage point reduction in recidivism.[9] Thus, these programs provide societal benefits both from less crime as reflected in the reduced recidivism and reduced expenditures on prisons and jails.[10]

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[4] Akers, R.L., & Sellers, C.S. (2009). *Criminology Theories: Introduction, Evaluation, and Application*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[5] Gottfredson, M.R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[6] Andrews, D.A., & Bonta, J. (2006). *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*. New York: Anderson Publishing.

[7] Laub, J.H., & Sampson, R.J. (2003). *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[8] Laub, J.H., & Sampson, R.J.. (2003). *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Also, Western, B. 2006. *Punishment and Inequality in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

[9] Davis, L. M., Bozick, R., Steele, J.L., Saunders, J., & Miles, J.N.V. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs that Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2957.html

[10] Cost-benefit analyses conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy employ a methodology that estimates lifetime benefits that accrue to programs. They suggest the return on $1 investment in education and employment programs for

I would like to offer several suggestions about programs and interventions for justice-involved individuals that follow from my decades of research.

First, program offerings in correctional facilities should be sufficient to ensure that participants are able to earn stackable credentials that will lead to living-wage employment with career advancement opportunities. Although correctional education is well documented as an evidence-based, cost-effective approach to preparing incarcerated adults for release, education services offered by correctional facilities often are disconnected from community-based education programs and meaningful employment and career advancement opportunities. Programs that lead, for example, to credentials in construction trades or commercial driver's licenses offer individuals opportunities to earn living wages and, importantly, respond to labor shortages that currently impact construction projects across the country. However, when correctional programs are not coordinated with programs in the community, youth and adults are often not able to complete coursework and earn credentials as they transition in and out of the criminal justice system. This represents a lost opportunity if programs begun in prison or jail cannot be completed because the program is not available in the community or is offered on a different schedule. This is particularly important for programs in local jails, where individuals are usually held for shorter periods of time but may have multiple admissions. One solution, for example, is funding for grant programs that supports greater coordination and articulation between community colleges and local jails and state prisons so that an individual can easily continue, and complete coursework begun during incarceration following their release.

Second, earning while learning programs should be encouraged. Our research shows most individuals in prisons and jails are eager to participate in programs during incarceration, but there are substantial drop offs in participation following release. Financial support may be the best route to

justice-involved youth at $8.14 and for adult transitional reentry programs from incarceration into the community at $18.21. https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost

encouraging participation and completion. This is particularly critical for individuals who owe restitution, fees, and fines—and are subject to further punishment including reincarceration—if they fail to meet these financial obligations. Many justice-involved men also owe child support and justice-involved women are raising children—an additional financial obligation. The need for money now may result in individuals taking dead-end jobs with little prospect for a better future. If these individuals cannot afford to complete programs, communities also lose—through a lost opportunity to increase human capital and prevent future criminal activity that harms society and threatens public safety. Providing financial support during the educational process may provide long-term returns to society's investment once the education results in gainful employment.

Third, robust evaluations are needed that are realistic in expectation and supportive of iterative improvement in the quality and effectiveness of education and employment programs for justice-involved individuals. My experience with reentry program evaluations has led me to recognize that initiatives must give programs sufficient time for development, implementation, and refinement—2- or 3-year grant programs are too short to develop multi-faceted programs to address the all needs, assess how well the components are achieving targeted objectives, refine or strengthen underperforming components, and repeat until the programs can be assumed to be functioning as intended[11]. For example, a reentry program focused on education and employment will include education, vocational education, and job readiness skills as well as other components that address other needs. The appropriate questions to ask about the program's educational components are (1) Did the education result in increased skills and knowledge? (2) Did the increased skills and knowledge lead to a job related to the education that was

[11] Lattimore, P. K. (2020). Considering reentry program evaluation: Thoughts from the SVORI (and other) evaluations. In B. Orrell (Ed.), *Rethinking reentry: An AEI working group summary* (pp. 7–38). Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Also, Lattimore, P. K., & Visher, C. A. (2021). Considerations on the multi-site evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative. In. P. K. Lattimore, B. M. Huebner, & F. S. Taxman (Eds.), *Handbook on Moving Corrections and Sentencing Forward: Building on The Record* (pp. 312–335). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

sufficiently meaningful (e.g., with benefits, a career path) to encourage retention? (3) Did a meaningful job result in desistance from a criminal lifestyle? This simple logic model points to the need to assure first that an intervention achieves its primary objective—in this case increased learning. It is only after an affirmative answer to that question that it is appropriate to determine whether meeting that objective is followed by the other expected outcomes—living-wage employment with opportunities for career advancement, and if that is achieved, reductions in criminal recidivism. If the learning achievement is lacking or insufficient, the program should be strengthened—not necessarily abandoned—and new data should be collected to see if the revised program results in increased (and retained) learning. This process takes time—and 2 or 3 years is generally not going to be enough time.

Fourth, more research is needed on "What Works for Whom" and "How Much Is Needed." We know that correctional education programs are effective. We need to know more about the types of programs that work, for whom specific programs are most effective, and how much education is needed to improve the chances for meaningful employment. And, we need to understand how education and employment skills fit within the constellation of overall needs of justice-involved individuals such as substance abuse and mental health treatment, housing, transportation, and childcare. This suggests studies to understand how to best sequence the delivery of programs and services to individuals.[12] But to date there has been little research that seeks to determine how the order in which individuals are offered programs to

[12] In our evaluation of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, we found programs and services focused on individual change for adult prisoners—like cognitive behavior therapy, vocational training, and education—were associated with reduced recidivism. [Lattimore, P.K., & Visher, C.A. (2009). *The Multi-site Evaluation of SVORI: Summary and Synthesis*. https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230421.pdf; Lattimore, P.K., & Visher, C.A. (2013). The impact of prison reentry services on short-term outcomes: Evidence from a multisite evaluation. *Evaluation Review 37(3-4): 274-313*; Visher, C.A., Lattimore, P.K., Barrick, K., & Tueller, S. (2017). Evaluating the long-term effects of prisoner reentry services on recidivism: What types of services matter? *Justice Quarterly, 34(1): 136-165*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2015.1115539)]. Our findings were consistent with those of Doris MacKenzie who also found that programs focused on individual change were more successful for the justice-involved individual than programs that provided practical support. [MacKenzie, D.L. (2006). *What works in corrections.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.]

address multiple needs affects outcomes. Just as "readiness for change" is an important marker for success in substance abuse treatment, we need to understand how to prepare individuals so that they are ready to benefit the most from education programs.

Finally, recidivism should not be the primary measure for assessing the quality and effectiveness of education- and employment-focused reentry programs. As I have said, I have spent my entire career studying correctional programs and criminal recidivism. The first—and often only—question I have been asked about our findings has been about recidivism. Did the substance abuse treatment reduce recidivism? Did the reentry program reduce recidivism? Except for some criminal thinking and cognitive behavioral programs, most programming implicitly assumes a path that includes intermediate changes that are required to reduce recidivism. In this case, high quality education and employment programs must first increase knowledge and skills and these new talents must lead to better employment. It is only then that the impact on recidivism should be assessed. This is why it is so important that studies of correctional programs include other outcome measures.[13] In the case of education programs, these measures include learning gains, program completion, credentials earned, enrollment in further education, quality of employment, wages earned, and career advancement. Federal support to attain these outcomes for justice-involved individuals will not only help them and their families but will make our communities safer and increase our nation's supply of skilled labor providing a substantial return on investment.

Chair Scott, Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Foxx, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity. I am happy to answer any questions.

[13]For example, Sec. 242 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of (WIOA) supports the conduct of independent evaluation and assessment of adult education and literacy activities, including "the extent to which the adult education and literacy activities increase the literacy skills of eligible individuals, lead to involvement in education and training, enhance the employment and earnings of such participants, and, if applicable, lead to other positive outcomes, such as success in re-entry and reductions in recidivism in the case of prison-based adult education and literacy activities."