



Summary of 2016 Employment Forums and Strategies to Address Employment Barriers for Persons who are Homeless and/or who have Criminal Backgrounds

Process Overview

In April through June of 2016, ECHO and the Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable jointly convened three community conversations focused on addressing systemic barriers to employment for persons who are homeless or who have criminal backgrounds with the proposed outcome of developing a strategy for local action with 1-3 priorities for implementation.

Forum #1: April 13, 2016

The first meeting was focused on building understanding about current local climate and opportunities to address barriers to employment for persons who are homeless or who have criminal backgrounds. A panel of system leaders from Austin Community College, Workforce Solutions Capital Area, Goodwill Central Texas and Triad Building Maintenance (private employer) participated, and addressed issues related to outcome measurement and data, ensuring inclusive approaches, employment readiness, coordination, and existing community assets. Twenty-six (26) participants attended this session.

Forum #2: May 11, 2016

The second meeting focused on better aligning policy with the realities faced by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and homelessness. A panel of four people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and homelessness told their personal stories and highlighted the barriers they had faced in seeking employment and attempting to move forward. Twenty-five (25) participants attended this session.

Forum #3: June 8th, 2016

The final meeting focused on identifying ways to address systemic barriers to employment for persons who are homeless or who have criminal backgrounds. Eighteen (18) participants attended this session. The agenda for the last meeting was an interactive exercise in which participants rotated in small groups to discuss three proposed outcomes:

1. Institute institutional policy changes to promote more employment opportunities for persons who were previously screened out;

2. Engage employers to better understand the value of hiring persons who have been homeless and/or who have criminal backgrounds; and
3. Advocate locally and regionally to promote employment opportunities and remove barriers.

Key Strategies

Based on the feedback received in the forums, three areas emerged as high priorities for action for the Roundtable, ECHO and system partners to address systemic barriers to employment for persons who are homeless and/or who have criminal backgrounds in Travis County:



Advocacy

- Participate in the regional Workforce Development Plan
- Support Fair Chance Hiring implementation
- Further collaboration between employment case managers, employers, and the criminal justice system



Education

- Conduct outreach to employers including HR professionals representing large and mid-size employers, and small and minority-owned businesses
- Develop communications tools to inform the general public about employment barriers



Collaboration

- Promote best practices through a learning community approach
- Support the creation of new paid peer employment opportunities

Approach

Based on feedback from the participants in the three forums, ECHO and the Roundtable developed guiding principles for use in implementation of the strategies listed above. The approach will:

- Focus on existing community strengths and assets rather than deficits;
- Engage and support the inclusion of stories of people with lived experience; both from the employee and employer side;
- Promote evidence-based and outcome-focused strategies;
- Use person-centered language; and
- Support building relationships across sectors and strata.

Forum Evaluation Results

The results of the survey completed by participants in the final employment forum on June 8th are listed in the table below.

<i>Which of the three forums did you attend?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 attended April 13th: Addressing System Barriers to Employment • 11 attended May 11th: Perspectives on Employment from People with Lived Experiences of the Criminal Justice System and Homelessness • 18 attended June 8th: Identifying Strategies to Address Barriers to Employment
<i>Overall, to what extent were the forums useful to you?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot: 7 • Quite a bit: 8 • Some: 2 • A little bit: 1 • Not at all: 0
<i>I benefited the most from:</i>	<p>Collaboration with peers and learning from each other: 12 responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing what other community members/organizations are doing and seeing that the struggle to collaborate and break down silos is universal • Resource sharing • Great conversations • Learning about the different groups that are trying to help people on reentry • Collaborating with colleagues and professionals in the same field. Understanding our concerns are very similar • Collaboration • Connected with other individuals from other organizations • Having discussions with those from different agencies/work places • Hearing from other case managers • Learning from peers • Meeting with people • Greater understanding of local resources and gaps existing in those resources <p>June 8th forum: 5 Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The forum on June 8th because it was more like a focus group and it seemed like ideas are going to be used for some possible solutions • Talking about the ideas and strategies in forum #3 so that those ideas can turn into actions • Group talks • The conversations at the different groups • I found the workgroup session in the third meeting to be constructive <p>May 11th forum: 3 Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The panel of individuals with lived experiences was very impactful and made this dialogue even more relevant. • The panels • Hearing client stories <p>April 13th forum: 2 Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning about upcoming Regional Workforce Plan • Employer engagement ideas • Data

<p><i>I benefited the least from:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 13th forum • Would have liked more time to talk to others at the events • Overuse of acronyms • The forum on May 11th. As a caseworker I am familiar with lived stories. I wish employers and other individuals from the public were the audience so they could get more educated • Conversations didn't stay on topic
<p><i>I would like to learn more about:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Next Steps (9 responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The next steps and how to make progress in lifting employment barriers for people with backgrounds ○ How we continue to stay in contact and reach out to more people providing services in the area ○ How to create a village. Boots on the ground solutions. ○ Continuing the conversation so that those who are homeless/have backgrounds can have increased access to employment opportunities that all others have ○ The strategies that you will be moving forward with ○ Who in this community is involved in this work and what they are doing, needs resources, assessments ○ Start an action plan to take next steps soon ○ Group needs to make changes and turn those words and ideas into actions ○ Clearer next steps • Advocacy (5 responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Regional Workforce Plan – Mayor’s initiative (2 Responses) ○ Policies in place to assist this specific target population on state, county, and city levels ○ Reentry advocating to employers ○ Ban the Box • Other (5 responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Terminology ○ Hearing more experience stories from employers and persons who have criminal background ○ What IS working in our local vocational programs/resources ○ How to collect quantitative and qualitative evidence based research regarding the hiring of reentry ○ How to market research to employers
<p><i>One suggestion I have for improving future events is:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get Employers Involved (3 responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Getting employers in the room who are supportive of hiring those people who have endured homelessness or who have criminal backgrounds • More Diverse Audience (4 responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Better outreach for a more diverse audience ○ Get more people involved ○ Have a more diverse group attend not just those who work in services ○ Getting policy makers involved • Panelists More Prepared (2 responses)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Make sure the clients/panelists are more educated about the organizations here ○ If there is going to be a panel with people experiencing barriers to employment have them come prepared with resumes, contact info, to share and collaborate with the agencies that are present and willing to help them. ● Other (5 responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White board/sticky notes for ideas ○ Have the forums closer together seems like some information was lost or forgotten by attendees ○ 1:00 is rough due to lunch how about 1:30 ○ Different location, parking is difficult ○ More focus in group conversations
<p><i>As a result of these forums, I am making the following commitment to addressing employment barriers for persons who are homeless or have criminal backgrounds:</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continue to build relationships in our community to rally together to address these issues ● Continue advocacy work ● Educating management, peers, and community on the benefits of a second chance ● Work on more peer to peer opportunities ● NAMI needs to know about more of the agencies here that have good resources ● Continue to attend and input at these forums, if you can gather all these different people like you did then you can convince our leadership to organize for the less fortunate ● Continue educating myself and sharing what I've learned with others and doing what I can to effect changes ● Educating myself about policies and resources ● Continue working with employers to educate ● Continue working closely with reentry programs on collaborating and transparency ● Give my time and energy ● Attend reentry employment specialist training ● Try to build a better relationship with employers and encourage them to hire persons who are facing homelessness and have criminal backgrounds by sharing personal stories ● Continuing to create a village. Take what I know and teach to co-workers ● ATCIC is committed to building a more robust supported employment program ● Advocate for paid peer positions and send workforce programs to COA reentry employment specialist training ● Connect with our employment team to see how we can engage employees, create awareness of positive benefits of hiring clients ● Helping those persons with criminal backgrounds ● Educate staff and employees ● Increase integration in service provision