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# INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

## The Salvation Army Community Corrections Center

by Gloria Valentino,  
Manager, The Learning Resource Center  
Chicago, IL

Since its founding in 1865, The Salvation Army has been a religious and social service organization, motivated by love for God and practical concern for the needs of humanity. *The Salvation Army Correctional Services Program* is an extension of that concern to individuals in the criminal justice system – to victims, to offenders, and to their families – through the provision of caring services. Their main objective is to assist individuals in becoming self-sufficient, productive citizens in the society at large.

In this endeavor, *The Salvation Army Community Corrections Center* provides transitional housing and services for offenders referred by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Federal Courts under a contract with the U.S. Department of Justice. A profile of the person being referred is reviewed by The Salvation Army Program Administration for acceptance to the facility. Typically, no high-risk individuals are accepted into the program.

Upon arrival, the “resident” is assigned an advisor who conducts a needs assessment and helps develop an Individual Program Contract (IPC). The IPC addresses all areas of the resident’s needs and goals: educational financial, employment, etc. and includes a time schedule for their achievement. The contract is signed by the Resident Advisor and the resident.

During their stay at our facility, the residents have access to the Chaplaincy, substance abuse programs, counseling, life skills workshops, recreation, and the use of *The Learning Resource Center* – which is where I come into the picture.

### An Overview of the LRC Approach

The main focus of the LRC program is work release – residents are required to be employed by day and to return to the facility in the evening. Once they have met all requirements of the program, they receive home-weekend privileges and, of course, all residents *want* to go home;

herefore, employment is their primary concern! Interestingly, many residents arrive with their jobs in place. After their initial orientation, usually within a week, those residents can go to their jobs and will, shortly after, get their weekend “home” passes.

**“... all residents want to go home; herefore, employment is their primary concern!”**

For unemployed residents, *The Learning Resource Center* provides access to materials that will assist them in their job search: phone use,

fax machine, classified newspaper ads, phone books, networking, recruitment and most importantly, *The Job-Seekers Audition Workshop*. This I developed as a result of hands-on experience and specifically designed for ex-offenders. The focus here is on communications: what to say; how to say it; when to say it; how and when to explain their situation.

Workshop participants are from all walks of life: professionals, as well as advanced, unskilled or limited education. The challenge is to develop workshops that are enjoyable and adaptable for everyone.

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Instead of just the typical job search workshop, I titled it *The Job Seeker's Audition*. The *resume* is their script and the *interview* their audition. Just like the actor in a play, the job seekers have to know their lines. To accomplish this, the job search process includes three parts:

#1 - *The Preparation* -

Prepares job seeker to answer the questions: Who are you? What do you want to do? What can you do? Where do you want to do it?

#2 - *The Interview* -

Tell me about yourself and why I should hire you?

#3 - *The Follow Through* -

Did you listen in the Interview? What does the employer want and need?

By using the techniques taught in the workshop, residents have learned how to take control of the interview, knowing what to say and when to say it. And, their first challenge is to explain about being at the Salvation Army. Honesty is always the Best Policy! Their ability to explain their situation is the first step toward finding meaningful work. As a result of this strategy, many residents have found employers who will give them another chance to make productive lives for themselves and their families.

### Evolution of the Program

When I started this work I had no experience whatsoever in the criminal justice system. How in the world, I asked myself, would I be able to work with former prisoners – criminals – ex-offenders? In the past, I had developed and conducted workshops on a variety of topics: job search/ interviewing techniques, goal setting and motivation; but never for ex-offenders. I wasn't comfortable even saying the words prison, jail, ex-offenders; how was I going to work effectively under those circumstances?

I came to see my job as two -fold: one, practical concerns; two, assisting individuals to become self-sufficient, productive citizens. How am I going to help residents get jobs and how can I assist them in becoming self-sufficient, productive citizens? Who in the world will hire ex-offenders? This was the challenge for me; and the challenge for the residents as well.

They have to convince me they have something to offer an employer. In convincing me, they learn to extend this clarity into their job interview. I not only want to know their skills, I want to know who they are as people. I make it perfectly clear I am not a job developer. I am not the one who finds them jobs.

My formal title "Manager, Career Development" didn't sit right with me so I decided to call myself "Coach." The Coach of a winning team helps the players before they get on the field; I had to do the same. As a Coach, I take a practical approach and assist

individuals in becoming self-sufficient, productive individuals. This was how I could do the job I was hired to do – and to do it, I developed rules that all the players can follow in order to win the game.

Just as a good coach spends time helping the players build their confidence and recognize talents they often overlook, I help residents understand what their goals are, and turn their weaknesses into strengths. My job is about preparation and, I think, was best described by Vince Lombardi:

"They call it coaching" he said, "but it is teaching. You do not just tell them – you show them the reasons."

That is how *The Learning Resource Center* evolved. The LRC is the residents' training ground. What they do in there, they'll do on the job. If they don't follow the rules in the LRC, they won't magically change when they get a job.

As well as Coach, I am a CEO – Challenger – Encourager – Optimist. These characteristics are exactly what residents need to move on to the next step in their lives. *It isn't just about getting a job; it's about getting a better life.*

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**“ . . . I help residents understand what their goals are, and turn their weaknesses into strengths.”**

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I challenge them – I encourage them – and finally when they convince me they have what it takes,

the optimism kicks in for us both. They are now prepared to play the game – they can go on to a job interview equipped with the ingredients necessary to convince an employer to give them a chance. The job interview is their playing field. However, unlike the sports Coach, I'm not there to give them signals. They do it alone and in order to do this they need a specific game plan.

Creating a good resume is essential to finding a job, but just as important is the job seekers' attitude and sense of self-worth. Among the things needing to happen for the job-seekers are: one, make peace with their situation; two, evaluate all the good things about themselves.

When asked the question: "Is there one skill people should focus on developing to help them find professional success?" Sharon O'Malley Monahan, partner in the law firm of Fleischman and Walsh, Washington, DC, replied: "I'd say communication. You need to be able to communicate. You see that in every study we do on leadership....Communication is the foundation of everything a professional does. This is true of any industry."

This is true for the job-seekers as well. They need to develop the skills necessary for Communication – **AND** – they must have *Goals*. Our goals create our destiny.

I want to introduce you to a former resident, "RS." He arrived at the Salvation Army in April, 2000, after being "away" 20 years. He is now enrolled in school and working for a manufacturing institute in Chicago, as a recruiter for their training program. He is a great success story. He did what he had to do to turn his life

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around. It started before he got here. It started in his mind.

Here is how "RS" describes it:

"There are people that wake up each day and embrace it, like a new found love. I, on the other hand, would wake to attack the new morn. I went through a period of life that made me feel invincible. Whatever I believed, that was the way things were! Whatever I wanted, I had!!

Then the big chill came. I was knocked to the bottom of the world over night. I was unable to move around on my own. I was no longer allowed to enforce my beliefs on others. I lost my Super-man-like qualities.

I found, through my inability to move about on my own, that I had emotions. Emotions that, at first, led me to feel sorry for myself then to feel sorry for the life I had let slip by.

Just when you may think things can get no worse than they already are – they do!

I was told that I had a life-ending disease. Total devastation of all my will was at hand. Instead I found a very controlled anger that left me with a desire to accomplish a few small goals in life.

Story line – I'm alive still, and I'm working towards those goals with a view that I will live."



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