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Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Building Bridges to Employment

Building Bridges to Employment (BBtoE) is a three-year reintegration program at the Massachusetts Department of Correction, federally funded through the Department of Education. During the first years of its existence, the program has gained valuable information regarding obstacles, thought patterns and experiences, that can be applied in any correctional site, state or county, male or female, to educate the offenders and staff on the real life situations this population encounters. All results, whether positive or negative, greatly improve our understanding of the challenges and needs of this unique population.

The goal of *BBtoE* is to reduce recidivism. The assistance we provide directly benefits both the offenders, and our communities. In order to achieve our goal *BBtoE*, together with the inmate, designs a comprehensive Reintegration Plan that is a realistic reflection of his/her needs. *BBtoE* continues to assist these offenders for one year after their release, utilizing the existing community services that are available, and matching the needs of the offenders to those agencies.

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The participants must meet two criteria: first, they must have completed a vocational training while incarcerated. Some of the choices offered are Welding, Culinary Arts, Building Trades, Horticulture, Computers and Barbering. Second, offenders must be within twelve months of a definite release date and able to complete the first two phases of the program while incarcerated. Once those eligible have been identified, they are invited to an Orientation and introduced to *BBtoE*.

All who decide to participate in the program begin to design their Reintegration Plan, with their Life Skill Instructor, immediately during Orientation. This plan is a terrific catalyst for offenders to start thinking about specifics relating to their release. Often, offenders will procrastinate, not addressing the specifics that

wind up causing great distress, as well as overwhelming feelings that exacerbate their already precarious status. The Reintegration Plan includes their goals, and the life changes they need to make in order to stay out of prison. The Plan attempts to incorporate all academic, vocational and programming activities in which they participated during incarceration. This exercise challenges the offenders to utilize all the positive resources obtained over their incarcerated years.

Also during Orientation, the Life Skill instructor will learn where these individuals plan to live upon their release. If they are homeless or returning to the Boston area they are referred to *Impact Employment Services* immediately; anywhere else in Massachusetts the Reintegration Counselor will assist them. It is vital to identify their return address early. The task of

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finding housing and employment is a great challenge; as is gaining the offenders trust in *BBtoE*, in order that they will disclose their residence upon release.

Prior to release, *Impact* will meet individually, at least twice, with those who are returning to the Greater Boston area. The goal of the meetings is to establish a professional rapport with the offenders, and to learn about their needs on an individual basis. This professional rapport is crucial to the follow-up: The offender who has been released is more likely to stay in contact with a "familiar" person and program.

BBtoE is a three-phase program. The first phase is a 12-week Life and Employability Skill training facilitated by the Life Skill Instructor. Groups meet for two hours at a time once a week. During this time Life Skill Instructors will facilitate groups on the following topics: Goal Setting, Decision-Making, Time Management, Money and Credit, Communication, Assertiveness, Stress and Health, Exploring Interests, Interview Skills, Strengths, First Impressions, Job Progression.

Upon completion of this first phase, offenders will leave Life

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Experience has proven that offenders think very differently while they are incarcerated and often their plans do not reflect their real upcoming needs.

and Employability Skills with concrete things such as a cover letter, resume, thank you letter, their RMV information and a completed Massachusetts Health Insurance application as well as the essential "soft" skills, such as communication, assertiveness, listening skills, time management etc. These skills compliment the vocational training they learned while incarcerated and are necessary to help the ex-offender maintain employment.

They will also receive a *S.A.G.E.* (*Self-Assessment Group Evaluation*) interpretation. *S.A.G.E.* is administered to all participants and it assesses offenders' interest, aptitude, learning style, temperament, and work attitude. An 8-page report is

generated and interpreted, then given to the offender to keep. Although it concentrates on employment, the staff also encourages the offender to think about hobbies that could result from these identified interests. Now that they will not be involved in criminal activities, it is essential to explore legal activities/hobbies that they could participate in or attend upon release. Exploring these avenues with the inmates is important for balancing their Reintegration Plan.

The second phase of the program is a four to six week Employability Skills Training and Implementation Program (ESTip) facilitated by a Reintegration Counselor. Offenders hone the employability skills that they were taught in phase one and learn new skills on how to keep a job. Specific plans are designed to identify inmates housing, employment, counseling, transportation, child support issues as well as anything else we are qualified to assist them with. Importantly, we always remember that we can not and will not work harder than the inmate. He/she needs to be involved in this process at all times.

The third phase, "follow-up", begins the day the offender is released. Ex-offenders are in the "follow-up" phase for one year. The Reintegration Counselors or *Impact* does this follow-up in the form of telephone calls, writing letters or meeting the ex-offender at a recovery home or Community Resource Center. While in this phase ex-offenders can still obtain assistance through *BBtoE*. The staff is not counseling the now ex-offenders, they are simply referring them out to utilize their own community services.

This third phase is the most exciting and educational for the staff, since we are maintaining contact with the ex-offenders and learning about their achievements and obstacles. We bring this information back into the classrooms to instill some hope

to the current offenders, and to educate them about obstacles recent ex-offenders have experienced.

Experience has proved that offenders think very differently while they are incarcerated, and often their plans do not reflect their real upcoming needs. The now ex-offender is out of his/her element and flirting with recidivating. The key, if they choose to use it, is the professional rapport established with staff during the *BBtoE* program. This is the foundation on which they can build their new freedom.

To date we have 106 offenders in the program, either in Life Skills, or ESTip. There are 121 ex-offenders who have gone through all or a portion of the program and are now on the street and have been for less than 1 year. These offenders are predominately monitored through phone calls or letters until they reach their 1-year release date. There are 49 offenders who

have completed their 1-year "follow-up" phase from the program. One hundred and eighty-six offenders completed SAGE. Seven offenders have returned to custody since their release. Of the seven not one completed both phase I and phase II.

BBtoE is proud of the accomplishments achieved thus far and looks forward to continuing to assist others who are interested in this population. Please contact me at LAMullaney@doc.state.ma.us if you have any questions.

Lynn Mullaney is the Reintegration Manager at the Massachusetts Department of Correction supervising the D.O.E. federally funded Building Bridges to Employment grant. Lynn has a M.Ed in Mental Health and Rehabilitation Counseling and is a candidate for her License in Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counseling.



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