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Vocational and Life Skills Evaluation Annual Report: Grant Cycle 3: Year 2 July 1, 2019-June 30, 2020

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VOCATIONAL & LIFE SKILLS EVALUATION ANNUAL REPORT

Grant Cycle 3: Year 2



**JULY 1, 2019 –
JUNE 30, 2020**

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VLS DATA HIGHLIGHTS

About **40%**
of people released
in 2018
had received
VLS programming

VLS
participants are
more likely
to find employment
post release

87% of participants
successfully
completed
the programs
they started

The average
participant works
with about
3
VLS programs

Over **7,000**
individuals have
been served by VLS
programs at the end
of the grant cycle

VLS programming
is operating in
10
NDCS
facilities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report presents data evaluation updates for the Vocational and Life Skills Program (VLS) for the second year of Grant Cycle Three. VLS was created by the Nebraska Legislative Bill 907 in 2014 to improve the transition for individuals returning to the community after incarceration, increase public safety, and reduce recidivism. VLS includes a balance of providers that address different types of participant needs that develop and manifest in different ways. This report contains 1) a VLS logic model, 2) descriptions of the eight funded programs and a matrix of services provided, 3) a snapshot of participation across the programs, 4) participant characteristics and feedback, and 5) overall initiative and individualized evaluation results into the second year of the grant cycle.

The Nebraska Center for Justice Research (NCJR-UNO) evaluates the VLS initiative. NCJR reports to the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) regarding the implementation process and data updates on a monthly and quarterly basis. NCJR has collaborated with VLS service providers to create individualized evaluation plans with manageable goals contributing to the overall initiative goals. The intermediate goals of VLS have developed over time and are currently focused on providing increased responsiveness to individuals facing a variety of barriers and challenges to successful reentry. The evaluation team is also working with NDCS to systematically match needs to intervention across grantees and increase the utilization of quality evidence-based interventions. The diversity of programming available is a challenge to evaluate, but it does make it possible to address whole-person needs.

During the second year of Grant Cycle Three, VLS grantees generally met their individualized performance and outcome measures (pgs. 26-33), despite being significantly challenged by COVID-19. NDCS facilities needed to limit provider entry throughout 2020 and 2021 to reduce the spread among staff, visitors, and incarcerated persons. This inhibited the grantees from being able to provide all program offerings within facilities, significantly reducing numbers served. Program leadership also paused in person services throughout the year to keep program staff safe. Even when in person services resumed, quarantines and staff getting ill from the virus were a common occurrence also reducing services offered to the reentry population. Therefore, although small organizations saw a reduction of services, larger organizations saw an increased demand from incarcerated persons finding it even more difficult to find housing, employment, and social interaction in a global pandemic. The evaluation team has noted when COVID-19 may have significantly skewed the results presented in this report and plan to study additional adverse effects in the future.

THEORY OF CHANGE

NDCS seeks to increase the overall quality of life and meaningful employment among VLS participants, which can indirectly reduce recidivism.¹ Reentry programming reduces the barriers individuals face as they reintegrate back into the community, but the environments to which they return are often conducive to criminal behavior. Thus, programming alone is not a complete solution to recidivism, but it can equip individuals with valuable skills that can alleviate strain in the reentry process. Skills developed through programming help individuals improve their quality of life.

The VLS initiative allows NDCS to fund eight service providers that support individuals during the reentry process. Some VLS providers focus on job training that has been demonstrated to increase earning potential and reduce economic strain. Others offer education that seeks to broaden individual perspectives, increase readiness for more advanced vocations, and increase self-efficacy. Finally, mental health is addressed by some VLS service providers to increase functionality and self-esteem. *Collectively, VLS service providers deliver interventions aimed at increasing prosocial behaviors, confidence, competence, job skills, and social awareness.*

Individuals chose to participate in crime for a variety of reasons, such as limited legal income or antisocial attitudes developed during childhood. Nevertheless, the decision to change one's lifestyle and efficacy of available social support systems must occur for the individual to initiate change and strive towards gaining stakes in conformity.² Sometimes even meeting people who have been successful in reentry can be motivation to change patterns of criminal behavior. Many VLS staff have a lived experience with incarceration and substance use that can motivate participants and increase trust needed to tell staff what they really need to be successful. Once striving towards conformity, the likelihood of future offending *may* decrease.

When the VLS program was initiated in 2014, lawmakers were discussing the importance of community supervision of persons released from prison. These discussions were informed by a Council of State Governments (CSG) study indicating that people with short prison sentences were often released without community supervision and that Nebraska lacked parole guidelines to ensure people convicted of serious felonies received community supervision.³ The interests of public safety suggest that a period of community supervision is a prudent component of the efforts to assist individuals making a safe transition. An unintended consequence of community supervision however, such as drug tests, portable breath tests for alcohol, and home visits to check for weapons or criminal associations, is that these supervision efforts can result in revocations and new arrests that perpetuate the cycle of returns to prison.⁴

VLS programming focuses on promoting meaningful employment through a variety of case management and supervision strategies. Some examples of supervision provided through VLS program offerings include: highly structured residential placements; mental health-focused transitional housing; cognitive-based programs that address criminal thinking and promote pro-social thinking; vocational training programs that prepare individuals for careers in industry; and educational courses that promote individuals' educational and career goals. Although focus and dosage (or intensity) vary, VLS grantees are placing individuals in supervised, pro-social environments that hold participants accountable for attendance and completion, while promoting cognitive and behavioral change targeted at meaningful employment and long-term community success.

In addition to improving the quality of life among participants and their families, increased employment rates among participants also benefits the state of Nebraska by reducing strain on general social services, by increasing tax contributions, and by contributing to safer communities.⁵ The logic model on page eight of this report illustrates this theory of change that is possible with the support of multiple agencies, employers, and service providers.

¹ Visher, C. A., Debus-Sherrill, S. A., & Yahner, J. (2008). Employment after prison: A longitudinal study of former prisoners. *Justice Quarterly*, 28, 698-718.

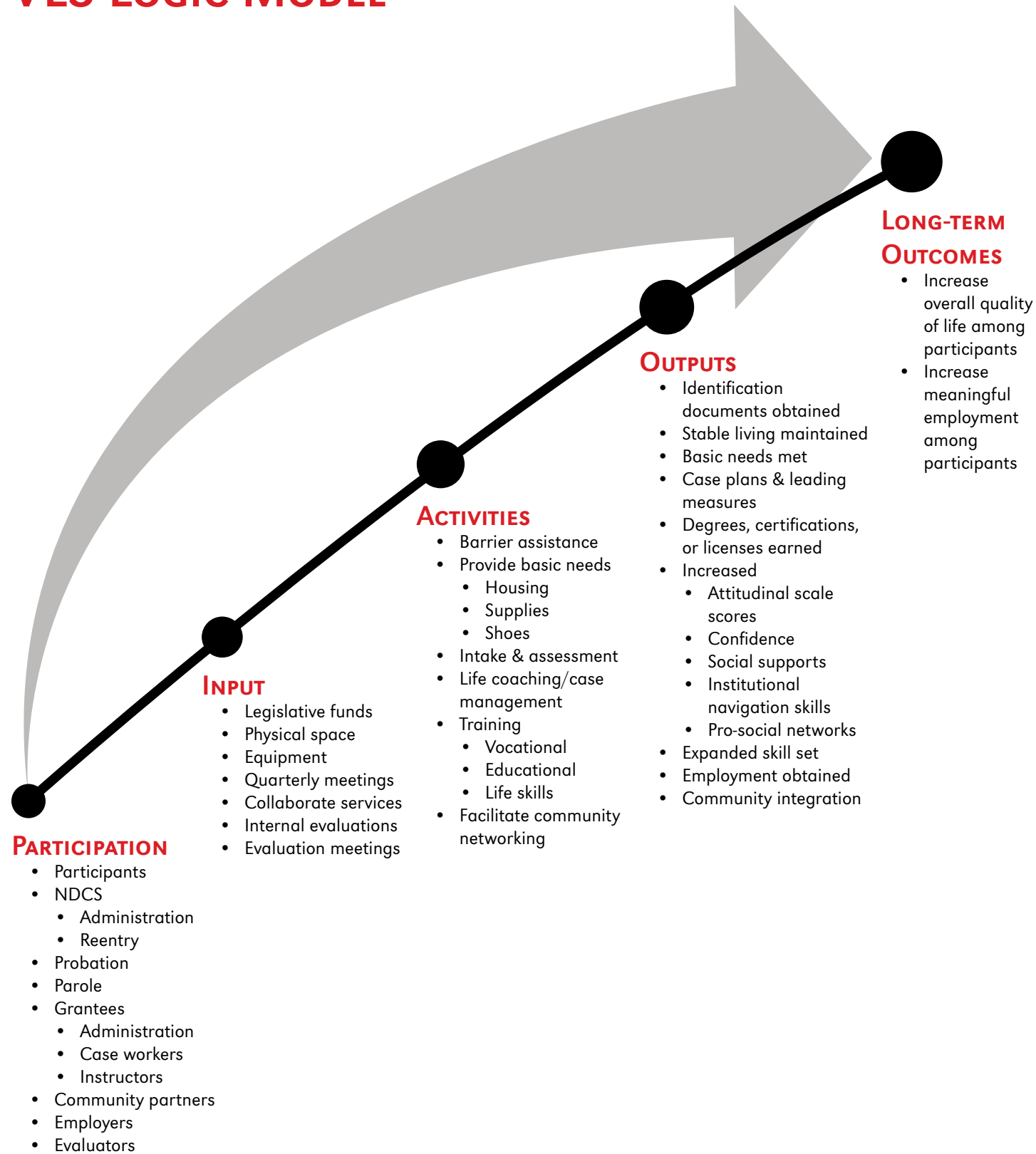
² Sampson, R., & Laub, J. (1993). *Crime in the making*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

³ Council of State Governments. (2015). *Justice Reinvestment in Nebraska: Analysis and Policy Framework*.

⁴ Lowencamp, C.T. & Latessa, E.J. (2004). *Understanding the Risk Principle: How and why correctional interventions can harm low-risk offenders*. National Institute of Corrections.

⁵ The Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2013). *Integrated reentry and employment strategies: Reducing recidivism and promoting job readiness*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation; Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice; and the U.S. Department of Labor.

VLS LOGIC MODEL⁶



⁶ A logic model shows the sequential steps programs plan to take to reach desired outcomes.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

ASSOCIATED BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS (ABC)

ABC is part of a national company that provides trade-specific apprenticeship training and work-based learning opportunities for careers in the construction industry. ABC offers classes in correctional facilities and ABC facilities in Lincoln and Omaha.

BRISTOL STATION

Bristol Station allows formerly incarcerated individuals to transition into the community in a residential setting. They provide opportunities of self-discovery and encourage participants to develop sustainable pro-social routines.

MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION (MHA)

MHA provides peer-run behavioral case management and “wrap-around” support services in Lincoln. This holistic approach provides participants with access to services on an as-needed basis. Services include evidence-based programming, peer-group activities, and education classes and are provided in a residential and facility settings.

METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE (MCC)

MCC is a public education institution that supports the RAP 180 program to provide education and work readiness training both within correctional facilities and on the Omaha campus. They provide college courses, workshops, employment consultations, and a food pantry for those in need. Participants at MCC can earn a GED or Associate’s degree.

MID-PLAINS COMMUNITY COLLEGE (MPCC)

MPCC is a public education institution that includes a division of Business and Community Education (BCE). The BCE provides communities and businesses with educational programs. They provide trainings and certifications on the MPCC campus with the escort and supervision of NDCS employees.

RECONNECT, INC.

ReConnect, Inc. offers short courses that balance life skills and cognitive restructuring techniques with employment training to help clients reach their full potential. Located in Omaha, ReConnect hosts job fairs to connect clients, employers and provides pre-release services in correctional facilities.

TRADE

TRADE is a program administered by the Center for People in Need. It provides comprehensive services and opportunities to support low-income, high needs individuals in correctional facilities and at the CFPIN facility in Lincoln. Services include courses or trainings, but focus on relational, cognitive, and technical skillsets.

YORK COLLEGE (YC)

YC is a private education institution that provides participants with education courses and prepares them for gainful employment using a spiritual approach to improve cognitive thinking skills and relationship skills. Participants can earn an associate degree for passing all the classes included in the program.

VLS PARTICIPATION

PARTICIPANTS SERVED						
PROGRAM	NEW PARTICIPANTS IN YEAR TWO OF GC3	TOTAL SERVED IN YEAR TWO OF GC3	SUCCESSFUL COMPLETIONS IN YEAR TWO OF GC3	TOTAL NEW PARTICIPANTS IN GC3	TOTAL SERVED IN GC3	TOTAL SUCCESSFUL COMPLETIONS IN GC3
ABC	297	507	263	704	803	516
BRISTOL STATION	69	89	41	125	149	85
MHA	585	763	524	1,248	1,415	1,118
MCC	874	1,217	832	1,783	2,053	1,618
MPCC	175	175	169	366	366	355
RECONNECT	591	904	577	1,201	1,360	960
TRADE	199	237	146	476	496	327
YC	11	11	0	21	21	10
TOTAL	2,801	3,903	2,552	5,924	6,663	4,989

NEW PARTICIPANTS

New participants are the subset of the total who were new to the programs in the specified time period. New participants with each program are counted only once, which is reflected in the time they began participation.

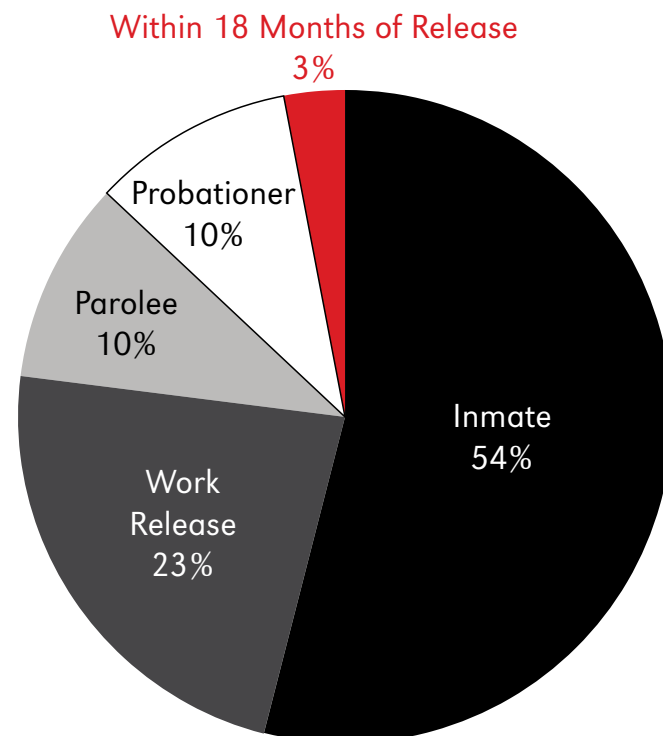
TOTAL SERVED

Total served is a count of participants that were actively participating in a program during the year. If the same person is a participant in multiple programs, they are counted once in each program as a unique participant.

SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED

Participants are considered successful when they finish all program requirements developed by service providers. Once they meet these program objectives, they are exited from the program and marked as successfully completed. Success looks different for each participant and varies across programs as well. Because of this, there will be no comparisons between programs based on successful completion numbers.

NEW PARTICIPANT INTAKE STATUS



SELF-ASSESSMENT MATRIX FOR REENTRY PROGRAMS

Grantee leads were asked to complete the Self-Assessment for Employment-Focused Reentry Programs, created by the National Reentry Resource Center (NRRRC) in Year One of Grant Cycle Three (GC3). The self-assessment is designed to help employment-focused reentry programs gauge their current capacity to provide integrated reentry and employment interventions to improve employment outcomes and reduce recidivism. This tool assesses the extent to which programs are adopting promising practices from the workforce development field to improve work outcomes for hard-to-employ populations, including people returning to communities from incarceration or who are on parole and probation supervision. It also assesses for the program's use of the service-delivery principles that have been shown to reduce recidivism and can be used to build the employability skills of this population. More information and the full assessment may be found at <https://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/publications/self-assessment-for-employment-focused-reentry-programs/>

MATRIX NAVIGATION KEY		ABC	BRISTOL STATION	MHA	MCC	MPCC	RECONNECT	TRADE	YC
		OFFERING NRRC'S RECOMMENDED PROGRAMMING IN THIS AREA	OFFERING A PORTION OF NRRC'S RECOMMENDED PROGRAMMING IN THIS AREA	NOT OFFERING NRRC'S RECOMMENDED PROGRAMMING AT THIS TIME					
JOB READINESS	Education								
	Training								
	Soft-skill interventions								
	Transitional-job placements								
	Non-skill related interventions (supportive services)								
JOB PLACEMENT & RETENTION	Non-transitional subsidized employment opportunities								
	Job coaching								
	Job development								
	Employment opportunities								
	Retention and advancement services (participant-facing)								
	Retention and advancement services (employer-facing)								
	Financial work incentives								
ENGAGEMENT	Staff dedicated to case management duties								
	Trainings for staff dedicated to case management duties								
	Communication								
	Cognitive-behavioral interventions								
	Peer supports								
TIMING	Pre-release services								
	Services in the community begin after release								
INCENTIVES	Non-financial incentives								
	Financial incentives								
COORDINATION	Coordination with community supervision or corrections								
	Communication with family or community supports								
	Case conferencing								
STRUCTURED TIME	Structured programming								
	Transitional job or unsubsidized employment programs								

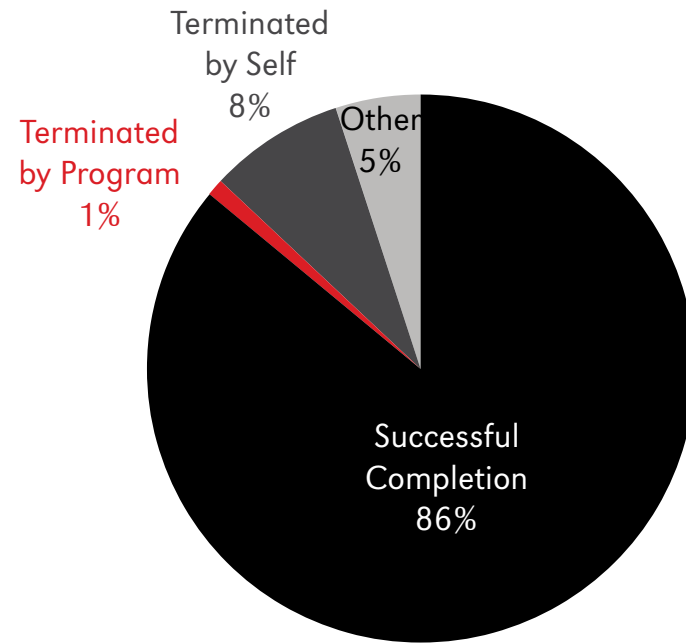
PROGRAM COMPLETIONS

There have been **2,552** successful completions out of the **2,979** participations that ended in Grant Cycle Three.

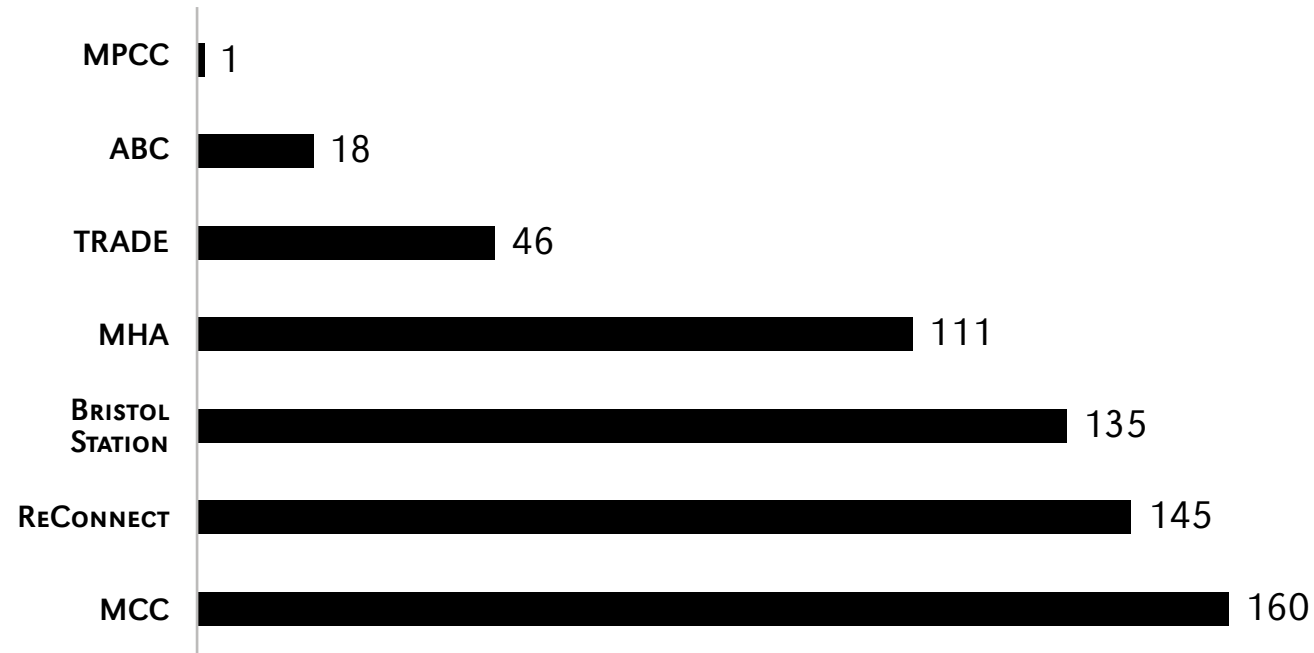
Participants are considered successfully completed when they meet all requirements of program staff.

Although most participants successfully completed programming (**86%**), others have stopped for a variety of reasons: decided to leave on their own accord (terminated by self), asked to leave by the program (terminated by program), or other reasons (moved, referred to other agency, pandemic limitations, among other reasons).

The average VLS participant completes programming in **114** days.



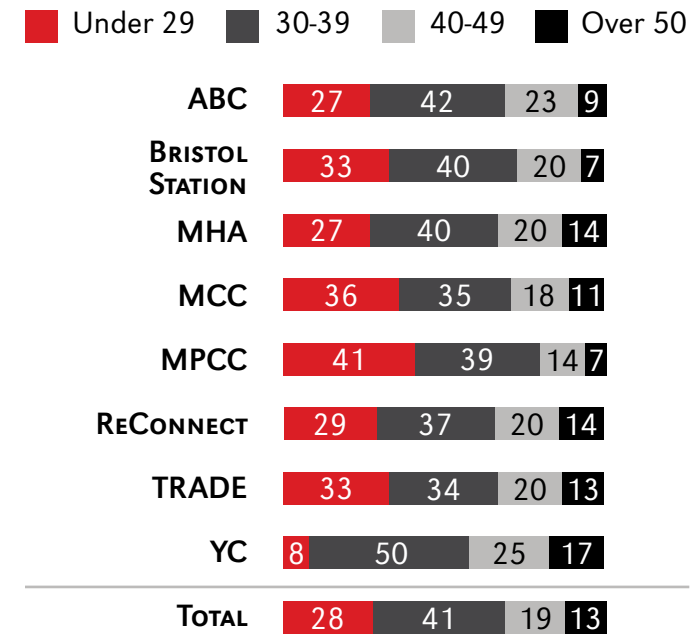
AVERAGE DAYS UNTIL SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM COMPLETION



PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Program staff collect a variety of self-reported demographic information from participants in their programs. If an individual participated in multiple programs, their demographic information is counted for each participation, so the data is based on individual participations and not necessarily individual people. In this report, we present demographic information on age, ethnicity, race, and sex. Most participants are under **40 years of age** and **male**. About **13%** of the participants served in the second year of Grant Cycle Three identified as Hispanic or Latinx.

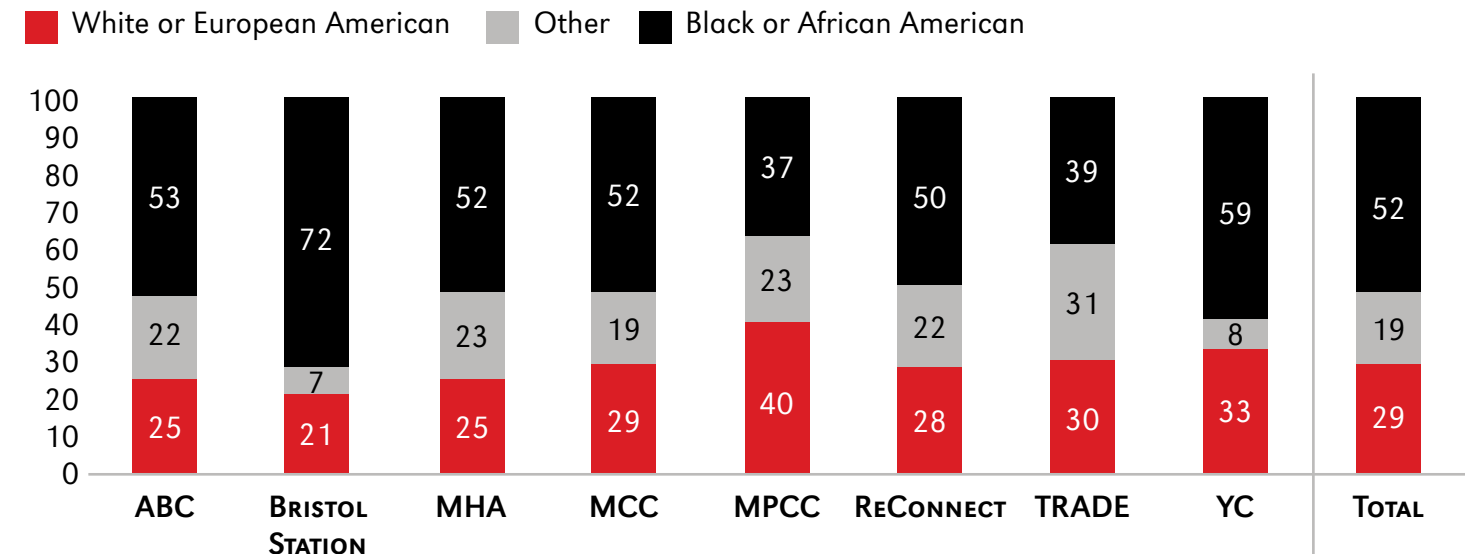
AGE BY PROGRAM (%)



SEX BY PROGRAM

Female (%)	Program	Male (%)
27%	ABC	73%
7%	BRISTOL STATION	93%
29%	MHA	71%
15%	MCC	85%
1%	MPCC	99%
5%	ReCONNECT	95%
14%	TRADE	86%
100%	YC	0%
16%	TOTAL	84%

RACE BY PROGRAM (%)



PARTICIPANT SURVEY DATA

After completing VLS programming, participants are asked to provide feedback on a VLS participant survey. The surveys ask respondents about motivation to participate, anticipated reentry challenges, and overall program satisfaction. Out of the 1,225 surveys that were completed in Grant Cycle Three, **84%** were completed in facilities while **16%** were completed in community settings.

Although **84%** of participants are dealing with three or more anticipated challenges in reentry, most are satisfied with the VLS programming they received (**93%**). Another notable benefit of VLS programming is that the majority of survey respondents report confidence in their abilities after select program offering completions (**85%**).

WHAT MOTIVATES VLS PARTICIPATION?



61%
Needed new
life skills



13%
Needed
financial
assistance

63%
Needed new
job skills



16%
Recommendation
from former
participant

13%
Substance
abuse recovery
assistance



17%
Wanted to improve
mental health



9%
Wanted to
make new
friends

WHAT CHALLENGES DO VLS PARTICIPANTS STILL ANTICIPATE AFTER PROGRAM COMPLETION?



36%
history of
substance use



17%
lack of job or
life skills



32%
lack of support from
family or friends



14%
lack of computer or
technical skills



27%
housing



8%
disability



26%
mental health
services



4%
childcare

SURVEY SAYS: WHAT PARTICIPANTS LIKE MOST ABOUT VLS PROGRAMS



"I liked the fact that the **facilitators have lived our lives** and been where we are. They get it."

"It's getting me a step closer to my **Associates Degree.**"

"It was encouraging!"

"The chance to start my life over."

"The unconditional support and always feeling someone really cares about me."

"It opened my mind up to the possibilities and to not limit myself to make my mess my message."

"It helped me get a **job** and on my feet."

"Learning what to be careful of when working in a dangerous area."

"Amount of support and resources gave me **hope** and **confidence** in becoming part of society."

"The instructor, his knowledge, and passion about teaching and class material."

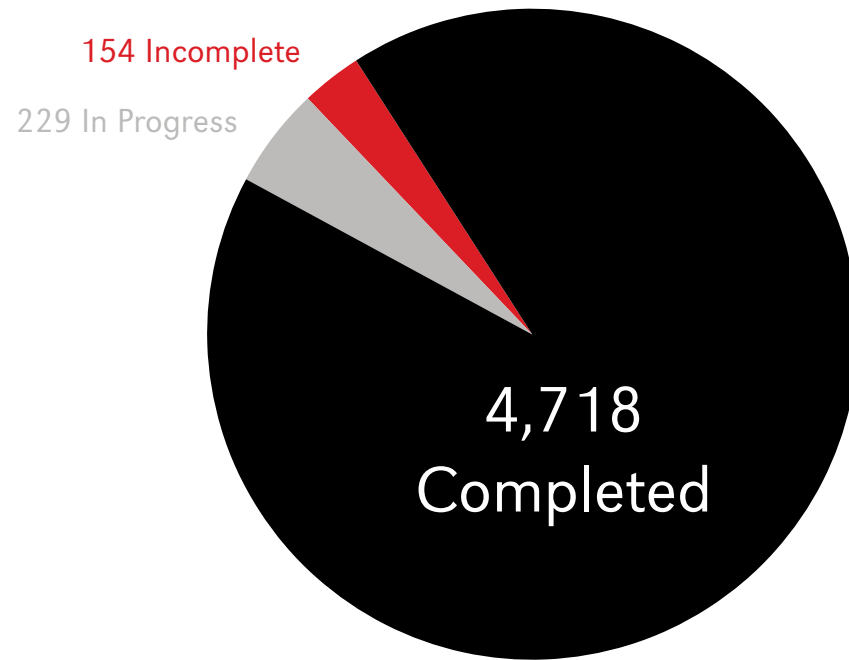
"It gave me structure I needed to stay clean and sober, and gave me accountability. It helped me work on setting **boundaries** and **healthy relationships.**"

"The staff treats everyone with the same **respect.**"

"The attention, patience, caring, the open mind-ness of each and every staff member.
Thank you all so very much. Thank you."

VLS PROGRAM OFFERINGS

Program offering participations for year two of Grant Cycle Three are presented below. NDCS can recommend participants take programming and participants can volunteer to take program offerings they think will be beneficial to them. Many participants are involved in multiple program offerings within each program. Some participants only take one program offering, while others participate in multiple class offerings either back-to-back or simultaneously to complete the program. Programs offered have changed throughout the grant cycles to address participant needs.



ABC PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	IN PROGRESS	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
APPLIED CONSTRUCTION MATH	0	20	0	20
CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY 1	11	12	0	23
CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY 2	0	23	0	23
CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY 3	0	10	0	10
CORE	48	53	5	106
ELECTRICAL 1	0	5	0	5
ELECTRICAL 2	0	2	0	2
HVAC 1	0	1	0	1
HVAC 3	0	1	0	1
OSHA 10 HOUR CONSTRUCTION	165	0	0	165
OSHA 10 HOUR GENERAL INDUSTRY	139	0	0	139
OSHA 30 HOUR CONSTRUCTION	6	0	0	6
PLUMBING 1	0	2	0	2
PLUMBING 2	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	369	130	5	504

BRISTOL STATION PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	IN PROGRESS	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
ANGER MANAGEMENT	3	0	0	3
CONFLICT RESOLUTION	36	5	1	42
DRESS FOR SUCCESS	35	3	1	39
EMPLOYMENT READINESS	40	0	0	40
FAMILY REUNIFICATION	14	0	0	14
INTERVIEWING SKILLS	35	3	1	39
JOB COACHING	36	3	1	40
MONEY MANAGEMENT	4	0	0	4
MRT	5	0	0	5
RELAPSE PREVENTION GROUP	13	0	0	13
RESIDENTIAL REENTRY	67	3	0	70
TRANSITIONAL SKILLS	24	0	0	24
TRANSPORTATION INDEPENDENCE	11	0	0	11
TOTAL	323	17	4	344

RECONNECT PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	IN PROGRESS	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
FINAL NUMBER	111	0	0	111
GPS (SELF-PACED)	28	0	0	28
KEYS 1	72	1	0	73
KEYS 2	1	1	0	2
ORIENTATION	7	0	0	7
OTHER SERVICES	2	0	0	2
PASS IT ON	15	0	0	15
POST-RELEASE REENTRY SUPPORT	68	0	1	69
PRE-RELEASE REENTRY SUPPORT	324	0	1	325
READY FOR WORK	57	0	0	57
RIGHT START	57	0	2	59
SUCCESS PREP	122	0	3	125
SUCCESS PREP-BLOOM	6	0	3	9
TOTAL	870	2	10	882

MCC PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	IN PROGRESS	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
3 MCC CORE COURSES	86	5	10	101
ASSOCIATE DEGREE	2	16	16	34
CAREER CERTIFICATION	6	3	27	36
CDL	17	0	0	17
EMPLOYMENT READINESS	269	0	4	273
FORKLIFT CERTIFICATION	29	0	0	29
FOUNDATION CLASSES	35	0	0	35
GED	1	4	9	14
INITIAL COMMUNICATION	152	0	0	152
JOB READINESS	9	0	0	9
LONG-TERM RELIEF GROUP	84	0	0	84
MCC CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION	5	0	0	5
MCC CREDIT COURSE	179	2	1	182
NATIONAL CAREER READINESS CERTIFICATE	22	0	0	22
NATIONAL CERTIFICATION	5	3	2	10
NON-CREDIT WORKSHOP	111	0	0	111
ORIENTATION	715	0	0	715
OSHA	1	0	0	1
OTHER SERVICES	198	0	0	198
TOTAL	1,926	33	69	2,028

MHA PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	IN PROGRESS	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
BENEFITS	4	2	1	7
HONU	57	0	0	57
HOPE	169	29	2	200
OTHER SERVICES	55	9	0	64
PEER PREVENTION GROUP	250	4	0	254
REAL	81	2	0	83
RENT WISE	7	0	0	7
WRAP	133	0	1	134
TOTAL	756	46	4	806

MPCC PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
CDL PREPARATORY	15	4	19
FORKLIFT OPERATOR	65	0	65
HEARTSAVER CPR/FIRST AID	37	0	37
OSHA FOCUS 4 HAZARDS	55	0	55
TOTAL	172	4	176

TRADE PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	INCOMPLETE	TOTAL
CORE CLASSES	64	12	76
CORE CLASSES - IN FACILITY	50	11	61
FORKLIFT & WAREHOUSE OPERATIONS MODULE	41	8	49
LIFE SKILLS	7	8	15
OFFICE PROFESSIONAL MODULE	15	1	16
OTHER SERVICES	2	0	2
RESIDENTIAL CONSTRUCTION & BUILDING MAINTENANCE MODULE	26	4	30
WELDING MODULE	29	14	43
TOTAL	234	58	292

YORK COLLEGE PROGRAM OFFERINGS IN YEAR TWO GC3

	COMPLETED	TOTAL
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	21	21
CRITICAL THINKING	12	12
ETHICAL INQUIRY	1	1
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	11	11
SPIRITUAL FORMATION	23	23
TOTAL	68	68

VLS PROGRAMMING ON EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

Although there are several positive outcomes that may result from the VLS program initiative, increasing meaningful employment among the formerly incarcerated was one of the primary goals of the initiative. Qualitative interview data collected in Grant Cycle Three indicates that many participants have found meaningful work they enjoy, and some participants want to find additional ways they can give back to their community even in volunteer capacities. Using quantitative data, the evaluation team has also found employment benefits for individuals who participate in VLS programming.

The UNO evaluation team selected all release data from 2018⁷, and merged both Quick Base participation⁸ and Department of Labor⁹ (DOL) data to social security numbers to examine employment outcomes. Select descriptive statistics, chi square and regression results are presented below to demonstrate the observed employment benefits in participating in VLS programming. VLS participants are not randomly assigned programming, therefore these results cannot be used to imply causation. It is also important to keep in mind that the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 reduced employment opportunities for many in the food service and hospitality sectors where formerly incarcerated persons often work.

WERE VLS PARTICIPANTS MORE LIKELY TO BE EMPLOYED POST RELEASE IN 2019?

YES



62% of VLS participants were employed in 2019

47% employment for non-VLS in 2019

DO EMPLOYED VLS PARTICIPANTS EARN MORE THAN THE POVERTY THRESHOLD FOR A FAMILY OF ONE ON AVERAGE?

YES



They earned **\$14,067** on average in 2019

They earned **\$14,957** on average in 2020

WERE VLS PARTICIPANTS MORE LIKELY TO BE EMPLOYED POST RELEASE IN 2020?

YES



52% of VLS participants were employed in 2020

40% employment for non-VLS in 2020

DO VLS PARTICIPANTS HAVE HIGHER YEARLY INCOMES ON AVERAGE?

YES



\$1,574 more in 2019

\$1,312 more in 2020

⁷ The most recent release was selected in cases where people were released from a facility more than once bringing the total cases from 2,786 to 2,734. There were 95 data that did not have an SSN in the NDCS or Quick Base data file which were deleted bringing the master data set down to n=2,639.

⁸ All participation data for 1,145 unique participants who ended programming prior to 2020 were successfully merged onto the SSN's in the master data set (43%). Individuals in the master data set who did not match with VLS data were given a zero for VLS program participations, program offerings, and total days participating in program participations.

⁹ There were 1,395 employment data from 2019 (53%) and 1,176 employment data from 2020 (45%) that merged onto the SSN's in the master data set.

VLS QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The Nebraska Center for Justice Research (NCJR) conducts ongoing outcome and process evaluations on VLS. During grant cycle three, the evaluation team conducted a qualitative interview study as part of the process evaluation for VLS. The goals of the study were to understand which aspects of programming were particularly helpful and to inform program administrators on aspects of the program that had room for improvement. Participants interviewed had received a mix of programming from a variety of VLS service providers, both inside and outside state prisons – a continuum of care model.

“They’ll get you a really decent paying job, so you could actually make something of yourself.”
WAYNE, 43

The thematic analysis revealed that participants greatly appreciated services and programming both inside and outside facilities. Participants conveyed that VLS encouraged and facilitated developmental growth regarding cognitive, interpersonal, emotional, and moral psychological lines. While not all the participants acknowledged or demonstrated they had personally grown on all these psychological lines, they all conveyed that programming considerably increased their abilities to find, obtain, and maintain employment. Finally, participants revealed – sometimes in detail and sometimes broadly – forms of resiliency needed to overcome reentry challenges.

MAIN CATEGORIES	THEMES	FREQUENCY (N=21)	PERCENT
BACKGROUND OF INCARCERATED PERSONS	Trauma or abuse	12	57%
	Initiated young onset	17	81%
	Struggled with substance use	14	67%
	Navigating health issues/disability	13	62%
PREPARING FOR REENTRY	Ready for something better	19	90%
	Personal development	20	95%
REINTEGRATION	Selective social networks	12	57%
	Importance of social support	20	95%
	Gaining employment	17	81%
	Housing struggle & assistance	17	81%
FUTURE ENDEAVORS	Resiliency & optimism	20	95%
	Improvement recommendations	19	90%

Participants appreciated staff that guided and advised them on their journeys in significant ways. Many of the older participants indicated their intentions to dedicate time to help others in the way staff helped them. Struggles along the way to successful reentry were considerable, including avoiding past relationships and peer groups, avoiding substance and alcohol use, obtaining safe and affordable housing, gaining access to mental health services, affording prescription drugs, controlling aggression, successfully parenting and/or reconnecting with their children, and obtaining and holding employment. Participants further provided recommendations that could improve reentry in Nebraska, including offering more education opportunities, general technology education and coinciding experiential learning, and computer courses.

“Start building your life that you’re afraid to lose. Get nice things. Get a nice apartment. Soon, I’ll find that nice relationship, something I’ll be afraid to lose.”
GEORGE, 52

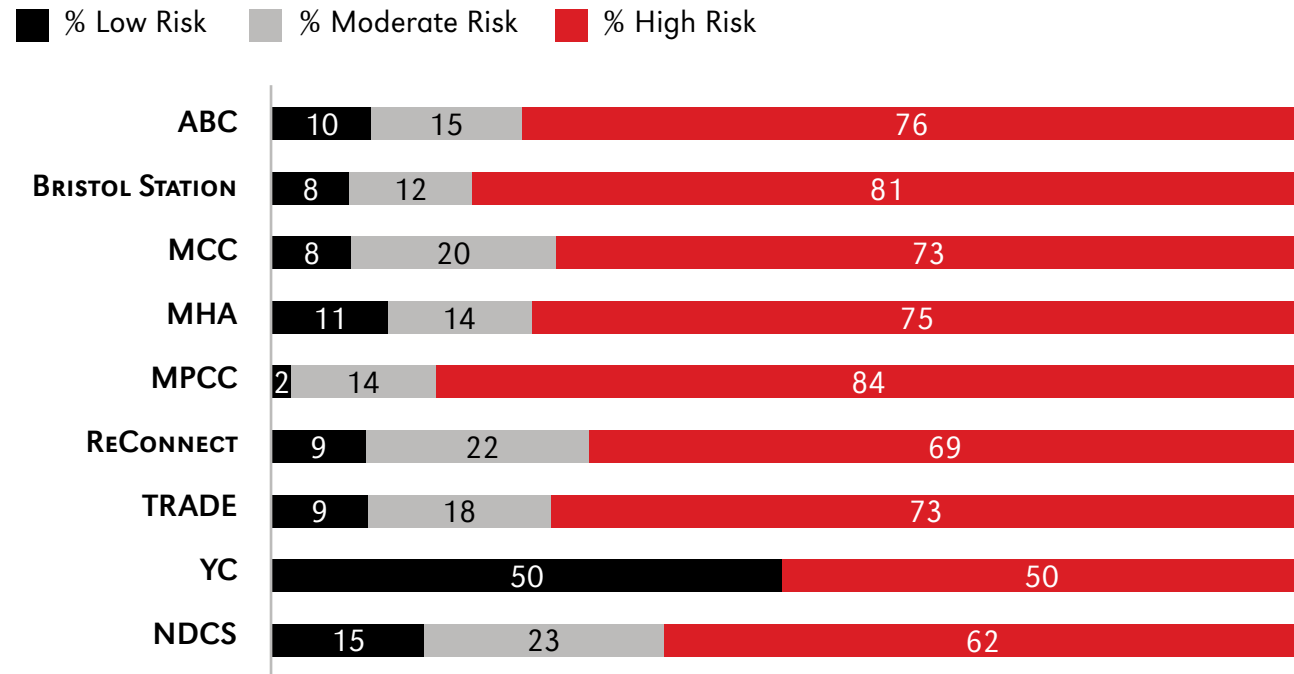
The overall take-away when analyzing participants’ life histories and contextualizing with criminological theory and other evaluation observations is that the mere participation in and completion of tasks previously unimaginable can provide participants with the motivation to improve themselves. Further, seeing others accomplish milestones inspired many participants to push that much harder to become crime-free. This may lend merit to the completion of vocational programming, in that it may improve one’s chances for employment, but rather the sense of agency that leads to further cognitive, interpersonal, and moral development.

“I learned several life skills and boundaries and what are acquaintances, and what an actual friend is.”
ZANDER, 32

“I really liked that about the program, more than anything. They didn’t just abandon you.”
DEREK, 40

RISK & NEEDS ACROSS PROGRAM PROVIDERS

NDCS assesses risk and needs of incarcerated individuals. Individuals are classified as low, moderate, or high for an overall risk to reoffend as well as individual domain needs: alcohol/drug use, employment, friends, attitudes/behaviors, residential, family, aggression, mental health, and education. Prior research on evidence-based practices suggests those that are high risk are more likely to benefit from program interventions.^{10,11} Further, addressing more high risk individuals improves the cost-effectiveness of corrections.¹² The risk level distributions across program providers for participants served through the end of grant cycle three are presented below. Most VLS program providers are serving higher risk populations relative to the NDCS general population.



84% of the incarcerated population in NE have moderate to high residential needs



31% of the incarcerated population in NE have moderate to high educational needs



51% of the incarcerated population in NE have moderate to high employment needs



71% of the incarcerated population in NE have moderate to high family needs



¹⁰ Latessa, E. (2011). Why the risk and needs principles are relevant to correctional programs (even employment programs). *Criminology & Public Policy*, 10, 973-977.

¹¹ Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2010). *The psychology of criminal conduct*. Routledge.

¹² Latessa E.J. (2012). *Designing more effective correctional programs using evidence based practices*. Tokyo, Japan: United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI). Resource Material Series No. 88; 151st International Training Course visiting experts' papers.

VLS PROGRAMMING ON RECIDIVISM OUTCOMES

An outcome of interest that is commonly associated with programs that provide reentry services is recidivism. Recidivism is a general term for when an individual commits another crime or is returned to the criminal justice system, and it is frequently measured as a return to prison in reentry work within a given time-period, such as three years. To examine recidivism among VLS participants, the evaluation team obtained institutional data from NDCS, including releases, readmissions, and community risk level data. It was determined that recidivism was best defined with this data as 'readmission to an NDCS facility'. The population for this examination included all individuals who were released from a facility between July 1, 2016 and January 1, 2020 (n=8,759 individuals). Approximately 33% of the population participated in at least one VLS program during this time.

Since participation in VLS is voluntary and practitioners serving VLS generally provide needs-based services, an experimental design to study VLS's effects on recidivism rates was not feasible. Therefore, we conducted a quasi-experimental retrospective observational study to examine how programming affected returns to prison due to a new crime or revocation of parole. About 22% of participants who took VLS programming recidivated within three years of release. Those who did not take VLS programming were found to recidivate at similar rates. These findings are in line with many prior evaluations on local or national levels regarding programming that focus on employment outcomes and utilize individualized case management as the primary intervention.^{13,14,15,16}

While some reentry experts focus on identifying which interventions and practices are significantly associated with reductions in recidivism, others are moving away from using recidivism as a measure of success because it focuses on the population's 'failures' rather than its successes.¹⁷ With that in mind, we would like to point out that about 78% of people who participate in NDCS's VLS program remain out of prison for at least three years post release. Measures of health, healthy relationships, sobriety, employment, and hope and motivation have been proposed as alternatives to measure success among reentry populations. Others are presented throughout this report, and the evaluation team continues to expand reentry measures.

¹³ D'Amico, R., & Kim, H. (2018). *Evaluation of seven Second Chance Act Adult Demonstration Programs: Impact findings at 30 months*. Social Policy Research Associates.

¹⁴ Lindquist, C., Lattimore, P. Willison, J. B., Steffey, D., Herman Stahl, M., Scaggs, S., & Eisenstat, J. (2018). *Cross-site evaluation of the Bureau of Justice Assistance FY 2011 Second Chance Act Adult Offender Reentry Demonstration Projects: Final report*. RTI International & Urban Institute.

¹⁵ 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.



¹⁶ Prendergast, M. L. (2011). Issues defining and applying evidence-based practices criteria for treatment of criminal-justice involved clients. *Journal of Psychiatric Drugs*, 43(Sup.1), 10-18.

¹⁷ Butts, J. A., & Schiraldi, V. (2018). *Recidivism reconsidered: Preserving the community justice mission of community corrections*. Cambridge, MA: Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, Kennedy School. Harvard University.

ABC PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

ABC provides participants with opportunities to succeed using the merit shop philosophy. They deliver pre-employment training, trade specific apprenticeship training, and work-based education courses with learning objectives tailored to participants with career goals in the construction industry. ABC's services will ease reentry transition most for individuals reentering the community with employment needs. Service delivery is in facilities and communities across the state.

To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 20, 2018 at ABC in Lincoln, and included NCJR researchers, ABC administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. ABC identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Performance measures and results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are listed below.

GOALS 	RESULTS 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 110 participants per quarter will complete OSHA trainings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 78 participants completed OSHA trainings.¹⁸
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After OSHA, 80% will “agree” or “strongly agree” that “I would recommend this program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 94.9% of participants served would recommend to others. (136 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After OSHA 10-hour General Industry, 80% will earn 80 or above. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 100% of OSHA 10-hour General Industry participants passed! (139 participants)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most participants (75%) will be report confidence in their abilities after program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 94.4% reported confidence in their abilities. (142 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most released participants will be employed within a year of program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 64.2% were employed in 2019; 56.7% were employed in 2020.

¹⁸ The average number of participants served per quarter lower than projected because of NDCS facilities being shut down for a portion of the year to protect staff and participants from Covid-19 exposure.

BRISTOL STATION PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

Bristol Station provides participants an environment, interventions, and case management aimed to accelerate psychological and social development related to behavior and thinking. They adhere to the Risk Need Responsivity model of correctional services and utilize a validated and prominent actuarial assessment to direct case management. By utilizing cognitive behavioral techniques and supervision, participants are pushed to reconfigure their perceptions, interpretations, and responses to stimuli. Developing these skills will help individuals with mental health concerns better adapt to the challenges in the reentry transition.

To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 18, 2018 at Bristol Station and included NCJR researchers, Bristol Station staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. Bristol Station identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Performance measures and results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are listed below.

GOALS 	RESULTS 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of completers will increase their QOLI¹⁹ score. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 92.5% increased their QOLI score.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of participants will “agree” or “strongly agree” that “I would recommend this program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 92.5% of participants served would recommend to others. (67 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of completers will reduce their ORAS²⁰ risk score. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 90% reduced their overall ORAS risk score.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85% of participants who successfully complete the program will be employed at completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 93.2% of participants were employed at in 2019; 82.9% were employed in 2020.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average pro-criminal attitudes and behaviors ORAS scores will decrease. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Average Intake Score: 2.8; Release Score: 2.4.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most program completers will report being satisfied with work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 85% reported confidence in their abilities. (40 QOLI assessments)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of participants will report confidence in work abilities and social support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 92.5% reported confidence in their abilities. (67 survey responses)


¹⁹ QOLI refers to the Quality-of-Life Inventory. Increased scores indicate improvement.

²⁰ ORAS refers to the Ohio Risk Assessment System. Decreased scores indicate improvement.

MCC PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

MCC 180 Re-entry Assistance Program (180 RAP) delivers student-centered education and cognitive-based interventions through case management to participants. Participants are provided work readiness and life skills training, direct services, and transitional support. In close collaboration with Nebraska Probation, 180 RAP helps these populations reduce personal barriers and successfully transition into a viable career pathway and the workforce.



To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a meeting on June 25, 2018 at MCC and included NCJR researchers, MCC administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. MCC first described their services, population served, and agency goals. MCC then identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Performance measures and results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are listed below.

GOALS	RESULTS
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 300 participants will be served by MCC each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 304 participants are being served by MCC each quarter.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85% of participants will “agree” or “strongly agree” that “I would recommend this program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 93.8% of participants would recommend others. (448 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quarterly, participants in institutions will maintain an average 3.0 GPA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ VLS students maintained a 3.75 cumulative GPA.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 80 participants will be served by the job center each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, 378 participants were served by the job center each quarter.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most participants served by the job center will find employment each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, 82% of job center participants found employment each quarter.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most participants will report confidence in their abilities upon program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 81.5% of participants report confidence in their abilities. (455 survey responses)

MHA PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

MHA provides participants reentry case management focused on wellness and recovery. By providing intentional peer support, offering informed choice, promoting wellness, and encouraging hope, participants can increase their employment prospects and capacities to integrate into pro-social networks including family and various community organizations. These program offerings are particularly helpful for individuals with mental health needs as they transition back into the community.



To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 21, 2018 at MHA and included NCJR researchers, MHA administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. MHA identified expected accomplishments in the upcoming grant cycle and their expected long-term impact on clients and the community. Results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are listed below.

GOALS	RESULTS
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 75 participants will be served by MHA each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, 191 individuals per quarter in year two.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of those served “agree” or “strongly agree” that they “would recommend the program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 95% of participants served would recommend others in GC3. (141 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of MHA HOPE participants will be employed within a year of successful program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 80% of individuals who successfully completed the HOPE program were employed within a year of successful program completion.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of MHA participants will show increases in overall Quality of Life (QoL) scores. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 95% increased; 1% same; 4% decreased.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85% of MHA participants will show increases in QoL “self-worth/purpose”, pre to post. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 35% increased; 56% same; 9% decreased.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 80% of participants will report being socially supported at least half of the time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 78.8% reported feeling socially supported at least half of the time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most participants will be employed within a year post release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 66.2% were employed in 2019; 50.5% were employed in 2020.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WRAP participants will have fewer misconducts than the average population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, WRAP participants had 3 misconducts in 2018; the general NDCS population had 5.5 misconducts in 2018.

MPCC PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

MPCC provides short, employment-focused training courses to participants at the Work Ethic Camp in McCook. These programs are manageable for the short incarcerations of individuals residing at the Work Ethic Camp. Completers earn certificates of completion.

To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 27, 2018 at Cornhusker State Industries and included NCJR researchers, MPCC administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. MPCC identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Results for the first year are below.



GOALS	RESULTS
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 50 participants will complete certificate programs each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 43 participants completed certificate programs each quarter²¹.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of those served “agree” or “strongly agree” that they “would recommend the program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 97.5% of participants would recommend program to others in GC3. (201 surveys responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85% of participants will report confidence in their abilities upon program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 87.8% of participants reported confidence in their abilities upon completion in GC3.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 50% of participants will take more than one program offering. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 78.6% of participants took more than one program offering.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 45% of participants will obtain employment within a year post release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 29.4% were employed in 2019; 52.9% were employed in 2020.

²¹ This is likely lower than projected because of MPCC and NDCS stopping programming for a portion of the year to protect staff and participants from Covid-19 exposure.

RECONNECT PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

ReConnect, Inc. provides participants tools needed to transform their lives and the communities in which they live. ReConnect delivers services that help clients maximize their potential and overcome barriers that interfere with their ability to reach their full potential. Programs focus on re-entry support and services, job readiness and life skills, educational tutoring, and family mediation. ReConnect, Inc. also developed self-paced correspondence courses during the pandemic shut down to provide support and services to incarcerated persons during quarantine lockdowns in the facilities (Keys 1 & 2, and GPS). These courses helped them reach their quantified served goals.



To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 15, 2018 at ReConnect and included NCJR researchers, ReConnect administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. ReConnect identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are below.

GOALS	RESULTS
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 40-45 participants will be served per month in the facilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, 73 individuals were served each month in the facilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, ten participants will be served per month in the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, 26 individuals were served each month in the community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of those served “agree” or “strongly agree” that they “would recommend the program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 94.1% of participants would recommend the program to others in GC3. (169 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four Toolbox Credential Programs will be offered per year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Toolbox credential programs were offered but canceled because of COVID safety concerns.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of participants completing an initial and follow-up Self Sufficiency Matrix Assessment will show improvement in at least three categories. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 80% of participants improved in at least three categories.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most released participants will obtain employment within a year post release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 55.8% were employed in 2019; 44.6% were employed in 2020.

TRADE PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

TRADE is a program operated by the Center for People in Need (CFPIN) in Lincoln. Its mission is to provide comprehensive services and opportunities to support low-income, high needs families and individuals as they strive to lift themselves out of poverty and achieve economic self-sufficiency. TRADE case managers assess need and assign programming in line with needs and participant preference to improve reentry transitions back into the community.

To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 26, 2018 at CFPIN, and included NCJR researchers, TRADE administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. TRADE identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are listed below.



<h2>GOALS</h2> 	<h2>RESULTS</h2> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 20 participants will be served in facilities each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On average, 42 participants were served each quarter in facilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, 16 participants will be served in the community each quarter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ On average, nine participants were served each quarter in the community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 85% of participants will “agree” or “strongly agree” that “I would recommend this program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 100% of participants would recommend this program to others in GC3. (26 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 75% of participants will report confidence in their abilities upon program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 76.9% of participants reported feeling confident in their abilities upon program completion.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most released participants will obtain employment within a year post release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 57.1% were employed in 2019; 52.4% were employed in 2020.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most released participants will obtain a salary above the poverty line within a year post release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 49.9% were above the poverty line in 2019; 57.1% were above the poverty line in 2020.

²² This is likely lower than projected as a result of TRADE and NDCS stopping programming for a portion of the year to protect staff and participants from COVID-19 exposure.

YORK COLLEGE PROGRAM MEASURE RESULTS

The mission of YC is to transform lives through Christ-centered education and to equip students for lifelong service to God, family, and society. The overarching goal of YC is to educate program participants to prepare them for gainful employment to which they are well-suited upon their release from NCCW, thus increasing their chances for successful reintegration into their communities.

To assess program fidelity and the results of programming, measures were developed during a site visit on June 19, 2018, and included NCJR researchers, York College administration and staff, and NDCS VLS administrators. York identified what they expected to accomplish in the upcoming grant cycle and what they expect their long-term impact to be on clients and community. Results for the second year of Grant Cycle Three are listed below.

<h2>GOALS</h2> 	<h2>RESULTS</h2> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For each trimester, YC students in NCCW will exhibit an average GPA similar or greater than comparable York College students on main campus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ VLS NCCW participants average GPA=3.90 (YC average=3.21)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For each trimester, YC students in NCCW will have student evaluation mean scores for “recommending course to others” that is similar or greater than York College Students on main campus. (0=“strongly disagree”, 4=“strongly agree”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ VLS NCCW participants average response: 3.6 “agree”/ “strongly agree” (YC average=3.45)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of participants will “agree” or “strongly agree” that “I would recommend this program to others.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 100% of participants would recommend this program to others in GC3. (12 survey responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% of participants will report confidence in their abilities upon program completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 100% of participants reported feeling confident in their abilities upon program completion.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 90% of participants will earn an AA degree. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 100% of participants earned an AA degree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 50% of participants will be employed within a year post release. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 100% of participants found employment within a year post release.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recidivism rates will be lower for YC participants relative to average population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 0% of YC participants have recidivated since release. (two participants)

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Since VLS was created in 2014, thousands of individuals have received vocational and life skills programming in Nebraska. These programs assist with housing searches/referrals, identification cards, and job searches. Some provide soft skills, hard skills, and technological skills required for occupational success, while others assist in mental health referrals/treatment, substance abuse counseling/treatment, cognitive restructuring/training, and additional services designed to ensure a successful reintegration after incarceration or probation. The many ways these efforts are benefitting these individuals, their families, and our state at large continue to be evaluated and celebrated. This discussion will highlight the present strengths of the VLS program and conclude with recommendations to improve the delivery of reentry services.

Although it was not an intended outcome of interest, one of the most apparent strengths of the VLS program over the past year was the collective ability of program providers and NDCS staff to overcome challenges presented by COVID-19. Access to facilities would change without much notice to keep staff and participants safe from exposure, and this required program staff to change plans and create alternatives to reach and support the population. Grantees developed correspondence courses, learned how to teach through virtual options, and even put together supportive video recordings to be displayed on facility televisions. Program staff also encouraged and supported their coworkers and community partners through social isolation and grief. Despite these challenges, programs met most of their performance measures and outcome measures goals and many programs served the highest quantity of participants since the VLS program began. No doubt, participants who found employment in the pandemic challenged economy appreciated the years of experience VLS program staff had.

Another strength of VLS programming discovered during this past year is that grantee programs are serving large proportions of high-risk individuals which is consistent with best practices in reentry. High risk individuals have the most to gain from programming but are also the most likely to recidivate. While VLS administrators consider keeping participants out of prison important, the focus on successful transition to the community, including addressing practical barriers, reunification with loved-ones, referrals to self-care services, and collaboration with work training programs and employers remains the priority. Criminal behavior is also multidimensional in seriousness, type, and frequency of offense which continues to challenge evaluators and researchers examining traditional reentry outcomes²³.

There are many reasons why individuals report participating in VLS programming, but one of the main reasons is to improve their chances of finding employment post release. The employment analysis of this report indicated that VLS participants are more likely to find employment and make significantly more money when they do. Unfortunately, formerly incarcerated persons on average earn just over the poverty threshold with or without VLS programming. Some VLS grantees have expressed concern that formerly incarcerated persons are being paid less for entry level work relative to individuals without criminal backgrounds, but the evaluation team has yet to examine the extent of such disparities.

Given all the strengths of VLS mentioned above, it is evident why VLS program participants are highly satisfied with the programs they receive. High levels of participant satisfaction are evident both in survey data (n=1,225) and the qualitative interviews (n=21) collected in Grant Cycle Three. Part of why participants enjoy their programming so much, is because several grantee staff have a lived experience with incarceration,

²³ Lattimore, P. K. (2020). Considering reentry program evaluation: Thoughts from SVORI (and other) evaluations. In B. Orrell (Ed.). *Rethinking reentry*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

criminal records, or mental health concerns which helps participants see living examples of success and envision more positive possibilities for themselves. The grantee staff with lived experience also add valuable contributions to improving the delivery of services and the interpretation of VLS evaluation findings.

The primary recommendation from the evaluation team to improve VLS reentry services is to consistently match participant needs to service interventions across providers at the program offering level. At the present time, NDCS case managers administer a risk and needs assessment to inform programming recommendations that address individual needs. Some of these needs might be addressed by in-facility non-clinical programming prior to release. Moving forward, NDCS plans to task the NDCS reentry team with reassessing individuals six months prior to release to improve calibration of programming recommendations, as an individual's needs may have changed over time naturally or due to in-facility programming that targeted those needs. Further, the evaluation team seeks to assist NDCS to develop a matrix of services by a singular or grouping of needs identified by the reassessment. This matrix will assist the NDCS reentry team and VLS program staff to work together to match VLS program offerings with an individual's needs. Motivational techniques will play a critical role in successfully implementing this process, as individuals may not be motivated to work on the areas of themselves that need improvement, such as substance use needs.²⁴ Additional motivational technique trainings will be offered to NDCS reentry and VLS program staff in Grant Cycle Four. The evaluation team and the NDCS administrators are looking forward implementing these practices.

EXAMPLE OF SERVICE-MATCHING MATRIX – WEST

NEED	PROGRAM
High Need in Residential	Refer to Honu...
High Need in Employment	Refer to ABC Core or TRADE Core or ...

To conclude, the VLS program is easing the reentry transition for individuals in the state of Nebraska by encouraging and supporting participants, addressing tangible needs that are too often barriers to successful reentry, and assisting individuals in finding meaningful employment. Program staff with lived experience inspire others to improve themselves by their mere existence and are often advocates in ensuring formerly incarcerated persons are treated fairly in the labor market. The annual report results presented here should be encouraging to stakeholders, as the program initiative continues to improve implementation daily and individuals are defeating the odds and growing through participating in VLS programming.

²⁴ Latessa, E. (2020). Triaging Services for Individuals Returning from Prison. In B. Orrell (Ed.). *Rethinking reentry*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

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