

Unlocking Post-Prison Workforce Potential

Second chances and redemption are instrumental to the national ethos—instilled in the American dream and our way of life. But a significant part of the population has too often been left out or not given the same opportunities: people serving or who have completed prison sentences.

Despite improvements in some areas over the last two decades, the United States still has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, and the problems don't stop there. Here are some sobering statistics:

- More than 1.6 million Americans are currently incarcerated (The World Prison Brief)
- There are 505 inmates for every 100,000 citizens in the U.S. (Statista Research)
- Nearly half (44%) of former inmates are rearrested within the first year of their release; and 68% are rearrested within three years (U.S. Department of Justice)

The high recidivism is attributed in part to economic barriers stemming from a lack of educational access, as well as stereotyping people with criminal records. These factors can make it virtually impossible for previously imprisoned citizens, especially those who are minorities, to find gainful employment. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI), the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is nearly five times higher (27%) than it is among the overall U.S. population—and it is worse than the peak overall rate during the Great Depression.

Meanwhile, U.S. manufacturing continues to be plagued by labor shortages and a widening skills gap. According to Deloitte, 2.1 million manufacturing jobs are expected to be unfilled by 2030.

Teaming Up on Hard Knock Opportunities

While serving their sentences, it's clearly beneficial for incarcerated men and women—as well as society at large—to have access to vital resources that can help them succeed and become rehabilitated as free, educated and contributing members of the workforce upon release.

Until recently, such grandiose plans have been difficult to achieve. But, thanks to some innovative partnerships involving registered apprenticeship programs (RAPs), the tide is turning. RAPs are a proven way to build a workforce with

a quality education and the skills necessary to fill manufacturing jobs. In 2021, the U.S. Department of Labor granted more than \$130 million to develop, modernize and diversify RAPs in 15 states.

Last year, staffing specialist Hamilton-Ryker Solutions received a State Apprenticeship Expansion, Equity and Inclusion (SAEEI) grant in Kansas to coordinate several groups dedicated to helping underutilized individuals and expanding the U.S. manufacturing workforce.



Material Handler Coordinator, Industrial Manufacturing Maintenance Technician and Maintenance Technician are one-year programs, while the Welding RAP is two years. Apprentice David Jurado is shown here. (All photos provided by KMW)

“Because apprenticeships are very collaborative between government, employers, workforce boards, education and community resources, it is our job as an apprenticeship intermediary to bring all these parties together to launch and manage these programs,” explained

Shari Franey, chief operating officer at Hamilton-Ryker. The company, she added, saw this as an opportunity to engage an underutilized yet eager segment of the population—incarcerated individuals.

Founded in 1971, Nashville-based Hamilton-Ryker manages some 3,500 apprenticeships nationwide through its TalentGro workforce development division. In Kansas, Hamilton-Ryker is partnering with Tooling U-SME, Viapath Technologies, KMW Ltd. and the Hutchinson Correctional Facility, which has offered RAPs to residents of its minimum-security unit since October 2022.



Apprentice Erin Boykin has already completed the year-long Tooling U-SME related technical instruction. He is now focused on completing the required on-the-job training.

In the first six months, 17 residents have entered the one-year Material Handler Coordinator, Industrial Manufacturing Maintenance Technician and Maintenance Technician programs, as well as a two-year Welding program. Apprenticeships in Dock Working and Metal Fabrication have also been approved.

Training for Success

Despite the population's higher unemployment rate, formerly incarcerated people want to work. In fact, 93% of these

individuals between 25- and 44-years-old are either employed or actively looking for work, compared with 84% of the general population in the same age group, PPI reported.

Making adult basic education, high school/GED, post-secondary education and/or vocational-training programs available to incarcerated people reduces recidivism. Formerly incarcerated people who participated in these programs were 30% more likely to be employed soon after being released, according to research by Rand Corp.

"We're preparing individuals, when they are coming out of these facilities, to be able to have a job where they can be fully employed and have something that they're looking forward to," Franey said. "They have a skillset, they have income... And, as we know, the risk of recidivism substantially lowers when they have all of those different elements within their life."

The program includes a mix of classroom-style training called related-technical instruction (RTI)—provided by Tooling U-SME—and on-the-job training/learning (OTJ/OTL). Tooling U-SME's Apprenticeship Frameworks support nationally recognized Department of Labor apprenticeship programs and are easily incorporated into existing programs or used as a foundation for new apprenticeship programs.

The online RTI courses are accessed by Hutchinson resident apprentices on Viapath tablets. Viapath works with nearly 2,000 facilities with its technologies deployed in 30 state DOC contracts in more than 640 counties.

"The Kansas Department of Corrections was already in contract with Viapath to provide tablets to our resident population, really mostly as entertainment," said Misti Kroeker, deputy warden of Hutchinson Correctional Facility. "I think one of the reasons why this moved so easily and so quickly is we already had the avenue to deliver the educational format in place."

RAP participants are assigned a Viapath tablet to use during evenings and weekends. Two residents have already finished their course work, despite having just started in October 2022. Now, all that's left is to continue their OTJ with the agricultural manufacturer.

Learn, Work, Earn, Live

KMW manufactures front-end and backhoe loaders for leading tractor brands. The 57-year-old firm employs about 200 people, depending on market needs and seasonality, at its plants in Sterling, Great Bend and Lyons, Kan.

“We just seem to keep adding customers... (and are) in a big growth phase,” Thomas said, noting it’s a “good problem” to have. But hiring qualified workers during such growth spurts can be challenging.

“You know, we’ll do good for a while, the labor force stays strong and then the turnover starts and we’re back to scrambling again,” Thomas lamented. “That’s one of the reasons that I got involved with the private industry resource through the Kansas Department of Corrections.”

Through industry partners, correctional facility residents are able to work for local businesses while incarcerated. KMW had already hired 45 Hutchinson residents before Thomas learned about RAPs last year, she said. Some of those employees subsequently took RAP courses themselves to help broaden their skills. One participant stayed with the company after being released, and has been promoted to a supervisory role while finishing his apprenticeship.

“Obviously, I know some of them want to go back to wherever they came from,” Thomas said. “But then there are several that have said, ‘You know what, this is a great opportunity and it’s a great company to work for. We like it here and we don’t want to go back (to previous homes).’”

During OTJ, resident apprentices work up to 40 hours a week on the shop floor and receive hands-on training from a KMW mentor. This provides them the skills and knowledge necessary to be proficient in a targeted occupation. OTJ lasts a year for competency-based occupations, or 2,000 hours for time-based occupations. To keep pace with improving skill levels, KMW conducts performance reviews and wage increases every six months.

“That’s an even bigger incentive for them,” Thomas said. “They’re getting (raises) on top of what they would normally get for a performance review.”

The program has been a success for everyone involved. The 20 available spaces were filled in less than two months after the program was announced, and many more residents have signed up to be on the wait list, Kroeker noted.

“The residents were almost ecstatic that we enabled them to get into this program, because so many of them are looking at it as a way to earn a certification in a field that they can use once they are released,” Thomas said. “(It) gives them a better opportunity for supporting themselves and their families and having a better chance of getting a better paying job.”

Workforce development is an investment in a company’s future as skilled workers become harder to find and organizations place a greater emphasis on training and retaining current employees. “(Apprentices) are investing in themselves and doing the learning, and the organization is investing in them as well by providing the on-the-job training, and many organizations are now turning to registered apprenticeships as a way of improving productivity, improving quality of work,” Franey said.



Private industry residents in the apprenticeship program work full time on site, and complete related technical instruction (RTI) after work or on the weekends on tablets provided by Viapath. Apprentice Isaac Rodriguez is shown here.

For Brandon Ruiz, Hutchinson’s facility administrator, the greatest benefit is in the impact on the people who are being positioned through RAPs to have successful careers.

“We’ve worked in an era where these guys didn’t have these opportunities, and they were leaving with the \$60 they had in their books. And they’re back in a month because they went out, after 10 years incarcerated, and they didn’t have family to go to and they didn’t have any skillsets,” Ruiz said. “I think [RAPs] just benefit them and benefit the community as a whole. ... It’s a great opportunity for anybody that wants to jump on board.” ➔