

North Lawndale Employment Network



Program Methodologies

The mission of the North Lawndale Employment Network is to **improve the earnings potential** of North Lawndale residents through innovative employment initiatives that lead to **economic advancement** and an **improved quality of life**.

FORWARD

America has more of its people in prison than any other developed nation in the world — more than two million. The vast majority — 95 percent of the men and women in our prisons — will eventually return to the community. That means that every year more than 650,000 offenders are released from state and federal prisons and return to civilian life.

These men and women deserve a second chance. Their families deserve a second chance and their communities deserve a second chance. A second chance means an opportunity to turn a life around. A chance to break the grip of a drug habit. A chance to support a family, to pay taxes, and to be self-sufficient.

Today few of those who return to their communities are prepared for their release or receive any supportive services. When the prison door swings open, an ex-offender may receive a bus ticket and spending money for a day or two. Many leave prison to return to the same environment which saw them offend in the first place. But as they return they often face additional barriers to re-entry: serious physical and mental health problems, no place to stay, and lack of education or qualifications to hold a job. Two out of three will be re-arrested for new crimes within three years of release. Youthful offenders are even more likely to re-offend.

One third of all correction departments provide no services to released offenders, and most departments do not offer transitional programs, placing a heavy burden on families and communities. Considering the cost of incarceration (as much as \$40,000 per year per prisoner) and all the social and economic costs of crime to the community, it is just common sense to help ex-offenders successfully re-enter our communities and reduce recidivism.

Organizations like the North Lawndale Employment Network are essential to helping these formerly incarcerated persons to avoid recidivism and succeed in society. Securing employment is a key element to successful reintegration, and community-based organizations are proven to succeed in assisting people to find and keep jobs.

However, these community-based organizations cannot succeed on their own. While employment is tremendously important, there are multiple factors that affect a formerly incarcerated person's ability to succeed in society and in the workforce. These factors especially include lack of stable housing, mental health problems, and substance abuse. A remarkably high portion of the state prison population — more than 80 percent — report a history of drug and/or alcohol use, and 70 to 85 percent of state prisoners report that they need treatment.

This is why I introduced the Second Chance Act to Congress on March 20, 2007. The legislation, which was passed by the House on November 13 by an overwhelming 347-62 vote, has broad bipartisan support in the Senate.

The Second Chance Act will provide transitional assistance to assist ex-offenders in coping with the challenges of re-entry. It will reduce recidivism. It will help reunite families and protect communities.

It will enhance public safety and save taxpayer dollars. It is the humane thing to do. It is the responsible thing to do. It is the right thing to do.

The Second Chance Act is designed to help ensure the transition people make from prison or jail to the community is safe and successful. With a total annual authorization of \$165 million, this Act would provide:

- Demonstration grants to states for employment services, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programming, mentoring, victims services, and methods to improve release and revocation decisions using risk-assessment tools.
- Mentoring grants to nonprofit organizations for mentoring adult offenders or offering transitional services for reintegration into the community.
- Grants to improve the availability of drug treatment to offenders in prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities.
- Grants to states, local governments, and Indian tribes for family-based treatment programs for incarcerated parents of minor children.
- Guidance to the Bureau of Prisons for enhanced re-entry planning procedures by providing each inmate released with specific information on health, employment, personal finance, release requirements, and community resources.
- Authorization to the U.S. Justice Department's National Institute of Justice and Bureau of Justice Statistics to conduct re-entry-related research.
- A national resource center to collect and disseminate best practices and to provide training on and support for re-entry efforts.

I am convinced that any serious effort to facilitate the re-entry of men and women with criminal records to civil society must be prepared do two things. First, we must be prepared to help with drug treatment on demand for everyone who requests it. Second, we need to find work for ex-offenders. Programs won't supply jobs. After ex-offenders have undergone rehabilitation and received appropriate training, employers will have to open their hearts and put these men and women back in the workforce or they will surely and certainly end up back in prison.

Danny K. Davis
Congressman
Seventh District of Illinois



Congressman Davis with NLEN CEO Brenda Palms Barber at NLEN's annual Sweet Beginnings Tea on February 11, 2008.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Forward	i
Introduction	2
Building Beyond Program	5
Employment Programs for Formerly Incarcerated Persons	8
U-Turn Permitted Program	11
Transitional Jobs Program	17
Sweet Beginnings Social Enterprise	19
Workforce Coaching	22
Job Acquisition and Business Services	26
Financial Literacy Coaching	30
Afterword	33

INTRODUCTION

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. At the start of 2008, the American penal system held 2.3 million people. This means that in the United States today, one in 100 adults are behind bars. China takes second place, with 1.5 million people incarcerated, and Russia third, with 890,000 people in prison. We also incarcerate at a greater rate than any other country, even more than South Africa and Iran. Our incarceration rate is, for example, eight times the rate of Germany. Our prison populations are still rising — in 2007 the population grew by 1.6 percent, a reflection of the steady expansion of the American penal system over the last 30 years.

Incarceration figures become even more pronounced when focusing on particular populations: one in 54 men aged 18 or older, one in 36 Hispanic men 18 and older, and one in 15 African American men 18 and older are incarcerated. While one in 30 men aged 20 to 34 are incarcerated, one in nine African American men in that age group are incarcerated. The incarceration of a staggering 11 percent of African American men who are in their prime age for developing careers and raising families is disastrous for our densely populated African American communities.¹

The North Lawndale community on Chicago's West Side is one of these communities. It is in recovery from decades of economic disenfranchisement and neglect. The population of 25,000 is 94 percent African American, and 46 percent of households are female-headed. The unemployment rate is 26 percent, compared to only eight percent citywide. Under-employment is also high: 34 percent of the annual household incomes in the community are below \$10,000, 59 percent of households have an annual income of less than \$25,000, and the median household income is \$18,342. Forty-two percent of North Lawndale families are living in poverty. Only 61 percent of residents 25 years and older have high school diplomas or equivalency, compared to 72 percent citywide.² In 2000, more than half (57 percent) of North Lawndale residents were involved in the criminal justice system.³



U-Turn Permitted participants get to know each other early in the four-week program.

¹ Figures presented in the preceding two paragraphs are from "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008," The Pew Center on the States, February 2008.

² 2000 Census.

³ Lise McKean and Jody Raphael, *Drugs, Crime, and Consequences*, Center for Impact Research, October 2002.

In recent years, however, North Lawndale has become a promising neighborhood in transition with an emerging faith-based network, a thriving community newspaper, new housing complexes that include subsidized and market rate single-family homes, townhomes, and rental units, the community's first supermarket in 25 years, and the Homan Square Family Center, a state-of-the-art community and recreational facility. North Lawndale's workforce development and community empowerment initiatives are looked to as models for communities nationwide.

The North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) was founded in 1998 to serve the employment needs of the North Lawndale community. Our mission is to improve the earnings potential of the community through innovative employment initiatives that lead to economic advancement and an improved quality of life. NLEN has four strategic goals:

- To better meet the increasing and urgent need for employment of North Lawndale residents
- To provide solutions to unemployment for people with significant barriers to employment
- To incorporate green employment and workplace strategies into NLEN's workforce development model
- To serve as a catalyst for economic development in North Lawndale.

Although NLEN was initially founded to serve as an intermediary network organization, the limited capacity of the few organizations serving the employment needs of North Lawndale caused NLEN to shift its approach to direct service. NLEN's approach to addressing the extremely high rates of unemployment and underemployment in North Lawndale is to offer employment services to North Lawndale residents, many of whom are formerly incarcerated persons.

NLEN offers a coordinated set of programs and services to address the income and employment challenges of North Lawndale residents experiencing unemployment and underemployment. Building Beyond is a pre-employment program that helps at-risk young adults get on a career path early in life. U-Turn Permitted provides re-entry and employment services to formerly incarcerated persons. NLEN's transitional jobs program helps the hardest-to-employ formerly incarcerated persons and others with significant barriers to employment to gain the work history and basic job skills they need before they can secure a market job. NLEN's Resource Center provides any North Lawndale resident seeking employment access to job search resources and assistance. NLEN's financial coaching helps NLEN clients and others to make the most of whatever income they have. All NLEN program clients receive workforce coaching from a team of qualified experts.

Along with directly assisting formerly incarcerated persons to successfully re-enter society, we also need to think about the policies that help or hinder these efforts. The public policies that permit such high rates of incarceration in the African American community and that create nearly insurmountable barriers to successful re-entry after a sentence is served need drastic reforms.



Sweet Beginnings workers package and label Beeline honey.

As an established organization serving the frontline, NLEN is in a unique position to translate lessons learned from our services to the policy arena, where we have a rapport with city, county, state, and national policy makers, the media, and funders whose money influences policy reforms and program implementation.

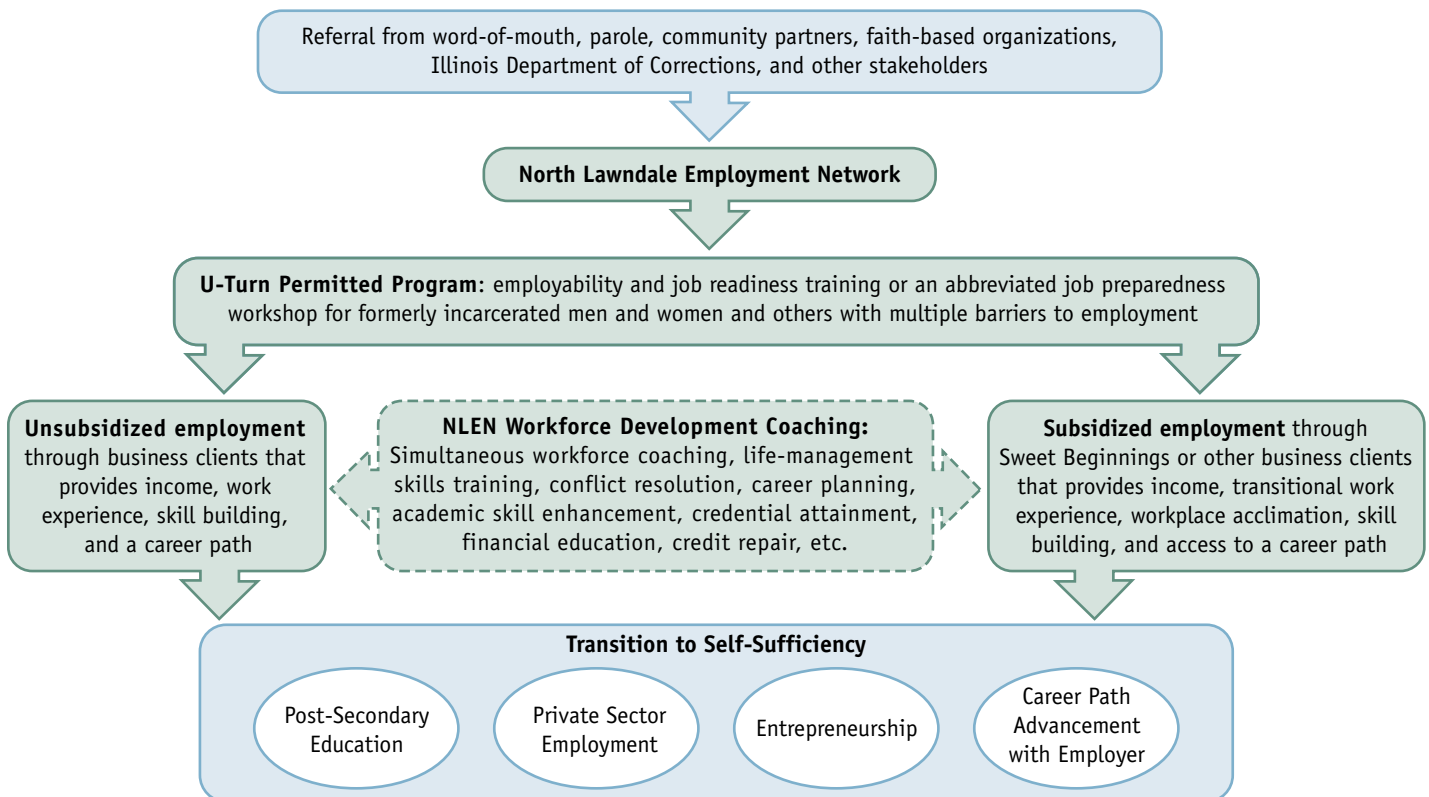
Over our eight years of operations we have seen great progress. These issues have gained the attention of Mayor Daley, who now employs a Special Assistant to the Mayor on Ex-Offender Initiatives, and Governor Blagojevich, who has assembled working groups on these issues. We have also seen government agencies develop policies that allow them to employ individuals with criminal records.

However, we still have much work ahead. With nearly 42,000 people released from Illinois State prisons every year, the need for re-entry services and policy reforms continues. Also, the hiring environment changed dramatically after 9/11, when most employers began conducting background checks for current employees and new hires for positions that never before required a "clean" record.

This manual is intended for several audiences:

- New NLEN staff members who need to better understand the philosophies, culture, and services of NLEN
- Practitioners in similar neighborhoods who can learn from NLEN's approach to serving low-income and formerly incarcerated individuals to better serve their own clients
- Funders and policymakers who are interested in a detailed explanation of the challenges faced by this population and NLEN's methodology for how best to address those challenges.

North Lawndale Employment Network Participant Flowchart



BUILDING BEYOND PROGRAM

While the North Lawndale Employment Network's primary focus is employment for adults, especially formerly incarcerated persons, helping people to address their employment problems as adults and after long incarcerations is only one piece of the puzzle. NLEN designed Building Beyond to help young people address their barriers to employment before these barriers become entrenched, and to provide at-risk youth with an alternative to criminal activity. This program assists young adults in developing the necessary life, workplace, and technical skills they need to advance socially, academically, and professionally.

Many Building Beyond participants have low incomes and are employed part-time in minimum wage jobs at places like McDonald's, Wal-Mart, or UPS. Others are unemployed with substantial barriers to employment, such as not having a high school credential, having basic skills deficiencies (testing under ninth grade level), receiving public assistance, and/or are homeless. Some also have a criminal background.

Participants enter the program because they want a job or a better job, and many also want a vocational skill. However, many lack an understanding of the working world and have little work ethic.

The goals of Building Beyond are to:

- Assist participants in defining personal, financial, and employment goals
- Assist participants in removing barriers to career development and personal growth through the provision of supportive services
- Assist participants in obtaining academic/vocational training to enhance their skills
- Improve the quality of life of all participants through gainful employment and economic advancement.

In the program, participants learn business etiquette, dressing for success, conflict management and resolution, time management, and interviewing techniques. A computer lab component helps participants learn how to prepare a cover letter and résumé, and how to conduct a job search on the Internet. Participants are also referred to vocational and academic programs to acquire specific skills to improve their employability.

Andre* spent most of his life as a ward of the State and bouncing from relative to relative. The frequent moves made it too difficult to keep up in school, so he only completed eighth grade. When he began the Building Beyond Young Adult Program he was homeless.

He had learned about NLEN in passing from someone he met at Inner Voice, a service center for the homeless, where he was taking a GED course. After 12 months of education and training through NLEN, he was employed, able to enroll as a full-time student at Chicago State University, and Microsoft Office certified. He is involved in advocacy around youth homelessness and went to Springfield, Illinois to help lobby for a \$2 million transitional jobs program for youth. While in Springfield, he met with two state representatives. He volunteers for Youth Futures and plans to become a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools.

*Not his real name.

Life coaching sessions focus on overcoming psychological and behavioral obstacles to obtaining employment and other achievements. The sessions also promote confidence and self-esteem, while developing a sense of accountability within each student. Students learn to see the connection between their choices and outcomes. Life coaching also involves setting individual goals, assessing where they are and why, and what they need to do to achieve those goals.

Students also participate in financial education workshops offered by NLEN staff to help them develop a general understanding of finances, and why it is important to have a financial plan and save money for the future. In these workshops, participants learn about budgeting, banking, savings, credit, and investing. After completing these workshops, most participants continue with one-on-one financial coaching to develop a personal financial plan. These activities help students to better manage their cash flow and plan for long-term goals, such as education, purchasing a car or home, or even starting a business.

Participants also receive supportive services to address problems that can affect their ability to get or retain employment. These supportive services include transportation funds, child care, clothing, and housing (immediate shelter and transitional housing). Most of these services are provided in collaboration with other service providers.

Upon completion of the program, Workforce Coaches help participants to further develop their goals, to research and identify vocational training opportunities, assist in job searches, and/or assist with referrals to supportive services. Once enrolled in vocational training, the Workforce Coach maintains monthly contact.

Many participants go on to participate in a specific training program that will forward their career goals. Training providers frequently assist participants with job placement after program completion. Other participants are able to find jobs through their own searches. They begin earning around \$9 per hour, but within a few months many are able to increase their income. With their new or increased income and new financial management skills, some are able to purchase a car or get their own apartment.

Participants “exit” the program when they have been employed 90 days or secured a new credential. This may take three months to a year or more. An NLEN Workforce Coach provides 12 months of follow-up after exit. Workforce Coaches track post-program outcomes for participants, such as gaining employment, retaining a job, newly acquired education and credentials, and earnings increases.



Building Beyond Program Manager Cleophus Lee works with a client.

Building Beyond Going Forward

While the essential goals and target population for Building Beyond remain the same, the North Lawndale Employment Network is redesigning the program to focus on specific skills training. Building Beyond historically has focused on pre-employment skills and connecting participants to outside vocational opportunities. Now, Building Beyond will train participants in a growing field and help to place those who complete the program in jobs.

Building Beyond: Green Pathways to Success is a new dimension that will train participants for green collar jobs. These are jobs that have a positive influence on the environment and provide workers with a family sustaining income or a pathway to it, including training and upward mobility and multiple entry points on the pathway. They are accessible for individuals with significant barriers to employment, but not limited to them. They include local jobs in alternative energy, alternative transportation, energy and water conservation and efficiency, green building, materials reuse, sustainable local food systems, and recycling, among others.

The focus of NLEN green collar jobs will be green roof installation and landscaping, green construction building (energy audits, water retrofits, etc.), and solar thermal and photovoltaic installation and maintenance. The Building Beyond training is eight weeks of classroom and hands-on instruction. The training includes basic communication skills, life and soft skills training, environmental literacy, OSHA Safety and HAZWOPR Training Certification, and basic vocational skills training and certifications relevant to green collar workforce opportunities.

EMPLOYMENT FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSONS

In North Lawndale, roughly 70 percent of the male population between 18 and 45, and 57 percent of the total population have been involved in the penal system.⁴ More than 90 percent of the formerly incarcerated persons who participate in NLEN programs are African American adults with Class 1 through 6 felony convictions.

There are approximately 45,000 individuals currently incarcerated in Illinois State prisons and another 35,000 on parole. About 42,000 inmates are released every year.⁵ Prison admission in Illinois increased 500 percent between 1970 and 2001. Ninety-eight percent of all inmates are released after having spent on average 21 months in correctional custody. However, one-third of prisoners returning to Chicago are reincarcerated within one year of release — a figure that rises dramatically after three years and is even higher for African Americans and Latinos.⁶

When participants arrive to the U-Turn Permitted program, they have spent between 30 months and 30 years or more imprisoned. Many have unresolved anger and insufficient conflict resolution skills, and are accustomed to the imposed structure of institutionalization.

⁴ 2003 report commissioned by North Lawndale Employment Network.

⁵ www.idoc.state.il.us.

⁶ *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*, Urban Institute, December 2004.

Richard* grew up in North Lawndale. The way he sees it, “My parents weren’t ready for me.” He struggled in school, unable to learn to read or write much. He dropped out by the sixth grade. He began stealing and joined a local gang, where he eventually became a top-ranking member.

In and out of prison since he was 17 years old for armed robbery, home invasion, criminal sexual assault, burglary, aggravated battery, and drug possession, at age 43 Richard had had enough. “I was good at gangbanging, but it kept me in and out of jail.” But during that time, “I always had this person inside that I felt like got lost. That really wanted something better...”

He tried to keep a straight job, but found it difficult. He lost at least one job after a background check. He was also using heroin. Several years later he spent five months in a residential drug treatment program. Soon after he happened upon on NLEN’s beekeeping program.

*Not his real name.

Most experience the same barriers as those experienced by formerly incarcerated persons trying to re-enter the job market nationally. For them, major barriers to employment are limited education and cognitive skills, limited work experience, and substance abuse and other mental health problems.⁷ These individuals, on average, read at the eighth grade level and have math skills at the seventh grade level (based on the TABE test); less than two-thirds have a high school diploma or GED. Very few have had any exposure to computer technology. Most have little traditional work experience, and 14 percent have never had a job. Of those who have worked, the average time since their last job is 30 months. Most are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.⁸

This population faces extensive barriers to employment and societal reintegration, and there are few jobs available for them. They are unable to secure a family-supporting legal income and the intangible benefits from work such as self-respect, self-sufficiency, and hope. Many have tried other programs and some have been out of prison and unsuccessfully searching for work for years. For them, NLEN is a “last chance” for successful re-entry.⁹

Many younger formerly incarcerated persons have not had time to be exposed to the labor market, while many of the older participants were incarcerated at a young age and only recently released. Those who have been incarcerated for long periods are not accustomed to having control over their own lives, even to the extent of deciding when to go to sleep or wake up. They need to learn basic life management skills and understand the power of their own decisions.

They also face deep cultural impediments to success in society and the workplace. To survive in street life and while incarcerated they developed habits that are contrary to those needed in the workplace. They are — at least initially — unable to work in teams, submit to workplace authority, or discuss problems

⁷ H. Holzer, S. Raphael and M. Stoll, 2003.
⁸ Based on NLEN client data.
⁹ Anecdotal information from U-Turn participants since April 2006.



Left: An NLEN client works on a job application.
Center: A Sweet Beginnings worker prepares to check on the health of a hive.
Right: A U-Turn Permitted client gains work experience doing volunteer work.

without conflict. In prison culture those behaviors are signs of weakness and can be extremely dangerous. They also have not had the opportunity to develop basic habits that employers assume to be present in all adults: an understanding of the importance of starting and leaving work on time, understanding consequences of actions, general planning skills, basic problem-solving, and seeking help when needed. These and other skills must be developed before these individuals can be employed and succeed in the workplace.

There have never been more institutionalized barriers to employment for the formerly incarcerated than exist now. Statutory prohibitions bar them from obtaining vocational licenses in more than 40 trades and professions. Formerly incarcerated men and women are routinely rejected as employment candidates as a matter of company policy by businesses large and small. Employer resistance comes from fear based on criminal stereotypes and moral judgments about law-breakers. More significantly, legal advisors and insurers advise or require businesses to conduct background checks and refuse to hire candidates with criminal backgrounds to avoid even a perceived threat of liability in personal injury and worker protection litigation. As a result, many people with criminal backgrounds find that they can identify no legitimate means of income.

People in need of employment assistance, especially formerly incarcerated persons, generally find NLEN through word-of-mouth.¹⁰ Most program participants seek out NLEN services because NLEN has been able to assist a friend or relative. Clients appreciate NLEN's unique community-based approach because the staff treats all clients with respect and have a strong record of helping them to get and keep jobs.

Some of the Many Professions Prohibited from Ex-Offenders

Animal Welfare Employee
Athletic Trainer
Barber
Boiler and Pressure Vessel Repairer
Boxing Professional
Clinical Professional Counselor
Cosmetologist
Professional Engineer
Farm Labor Contractor
Interior Designer
Land Surveyor
Landscape Architect
Marriage and Family Therapist
Nail Technician
Real Estate Agent or Broker
Roofing Contractor
Shorthand Reporter
Water Well Installation Contractor

-www.ides.state.il.us/ExOffenders

¹⁰This accounts for 85 percent of program intake.

U-TURN PERMITTED PROGRAM

U-Turn Permitted is an aggressive response to the overwhelming number of formerly incarcerated persons returning to the North Lawndale community. Without employment, these individuals have little chance of avoiding recidivism, re-entering society, or joining and supporting their families. Refined over time, U-Turn Permitted is designed to prepare formerly incarcerated persons to participate in the workforce through skills development and cognitive shifts. The training components focus on workplace acculturation, which involves real skills taken for granted by the mainstream population, but that this population lacks. The program approach is based on cognitive-behavioral therapy and uses experiential learning to help participants prepare for the workforce.

U-Turn Permitted was formed by members of the North Lawndale community, including people with sons and daughters returning from prison, social service providers who were unsure how to serve this “undesirable population,” church leaders, and other concerned citizens. For over 18 months, this diverse group of community members worked together to create a response to the growing issue of re-entry. Facilitated by NLEN, the group planned and designed NLEN’s community-based job readiness program for formerly incarcerated men and women, then named the Ex-offender Employment Service Network (EESN). In 2001, the Annie E. Casey Foundation awarded NLEN its first grant to support EESN.

One success of the planning process was that funding did not play a central role until program implementation. Planning participants were motivated by the desire to help provide an honest second chance for their loved ones. The community wanted a program that would treat these community members with respect and teach them how to be successful in securing and retaining a job. Through a community-driven process that informed NLEN’s basic methodology for the program, U-Turn Permitted established a set of values that still guides the program today. In 2003, NLEN renamed the program U-Turn Permitted to better reflect client transformation and reduce the negative stigma of and focus on past behavior.

Establishing the Learning Environment

1. Define and agree on Ground Rules.
2. Set expectations for participants and instructor.
3. All sign contract agreeing to abide by established Ground Rules and expectations.



U-Turn Permitted instructor Jose Wilson (center) guides clients through a classroom activity.

Eligibility

To participate in U-Turn Permitted, a potential participant must have a criminal record, cannot test positive for illegal drugs, and has to demonstrate a commitment to changing her or his life. To assess candidates' motivation, NLEN has them first attend an orientation session on a Friday, and then the following Monday return for intake and drug testing. At this time NLEN interviews the program applicants. Those who complete the first two sessions still have to arrive on time for the first day of the program and are only allowed two absences during the four-week program.

Program Design

Use of the cognitive-behavioral theory helps formerly incarcerated persons examine and change thinking that would lead them back to criminal behaviors. It helps participants to identify and eliminate ways of thinking that conflict with personal goals and replace them with thoughts that support and advance their expressed goals of job acquisition, job maintenance, and career advancement.¹¹

Experiential learning provides varied opportunities for participants to practice and evaluate new skills needed to obtain, keep, and advance on a job. Research and NLEN's anecdotal evidence shows that experience is an effective way to acquire job-related knowledge and skills.¹² In the program, participants are exposed to a variety of work, volunteer, certification, and educational experiences. Participants are presented a variety of work-related challenges, varying in levels of difficulty. They practice skills such as timeliness, following instructions, and working as a team. After practicing skills, participants discuss the completed activities. This approach allows individuals to seriously consider their job-related habits, their values, and the consequences of their behavior.

Learning Environment

Another important aspect to the approach of U-Turn Permitted is offering a safe and respectful environment with a minimal hierarchical structure. Formerly incarcerated persons report that they see themselves as social outcasts, disrespected, devalued, and insignificant. To most effectively work with individuals who feel this way, U-Turn facilitators must create alliances with participants and cannot be seen as another autocratic person telling them what to do. The facilitator has to be nonjudgmental, respect confidentiality, and gain the trust of participants. Participants have spent varying amounts of time in the highly controlled environment of a prison, with most decisions being made for them. The success of this program depends on reversing that mindset and not being an extension of that system.

To help create the classroom environment, the four-week course begins with a consensus exercise, where the class develops its own contract, called Ground Rules, which governs participant-to-participant and participant-to-instructor



U-Turn Permitted participants gain experience in team work with the “toxic waste” exercise.

¹¹ Re-entry Policy Council: reentrypolicy.org/Report/PartII/ChapterII-B/PolicyStatement14/ResearchHighlight14-3.

¹² e.g., Borman, Oppler, and Pulakos, 1993; McCall, Lomabardo, and Morrison, 1998; McCauly, Ruderman, Ohlott, and Morrow, 1994; Schmidt, Hunter, and Outerbridge, 1986; Tesluk and Jacobs, 1998.

interaction. The next step is to establish expectations, so that participants and the facilitator are clear from the beginning of the course about each person's roles and obligations. For example, all students are expected to participate, be respectful, and abide by the Ground Rules. The participants expect the facilitator to be on time, provide helpful job search information, be fair, and provide transportation cards. This accountability approach allows the class and facilitator to establish behavioral guidelines and reference them if anyone, including the facilitator, breaches the contract. The Ground Rules and expectations become a part of a contract, signed by participants and the facilitator.

The program also promotes an interactive learning environment through its use of mediated learning. This style focuses on both teacher learning from student and student learning from teacher. In a mediated learning experience, the teacher does not provide answers, rather, the students develop their own solutions to posed problems based on targeted questions. In this environment, the instructor is not an all-knowing authority figure, but a facilitator who encourages discussion, thought, and innovative ideas.

Program Content

U-Turn Permitted seeks to: 1) facilitate a change in the participant's thinking and behavior that leads to an earnest job search, job acquisition, and increased retention, 2) provide the most useful job acquisition skills for formerly incarcerated persons, including helping with a résumé and cover letter, 3) create a sense of esprit de corps among each U-Turn class, and 4) provide hope and motivation for participants to engage, re-engage, and persevere in the job acquisition, maintenance, and career advancement processes. Participants need to succeed in the workforce beyond simply securing a job. They also need to retain and excel in employment, so that over time they can advance to family sustaining employment.



U-Turn Permitted participants gain valuable job experience at the Chicago Food Depository.

Volunteering at the Food Depository

About three weeks into the program, all U-Turn Permitted participants spend a day volunteering at the Chicago Food Depository. This activity gives them the opportunity to practice a complex set of skills that they have been developing in the program. Broken into small teams, participants have to unload crates, open them, throw away spoiled items, sort types of food, sanitize the area, pack emergency food boxes, seal them, and organize the boxes for distribution. To do this, teams have to organize themselves, assign tasks, and coordinate their work for efficiency. This activity tests their stamina with several hours of uninterrupted work and gives the instructor an opportunity to assess the participants' attitude toward work by observing them on a job. It also provides participants with valuable information about their own abilities and feelings about work.

After the class and facilitator set ground rules and expectations, U-Turn begins with four days of anger management. During the remainder of the four weeks, the participants engage in specific exercises and discussions. Training is focused on issues related to successful adjustment to work environments and the maintenance of positive relations with co-workers and supervisors. Topics include:

- Work ethic: commitment to productivity, congeniality, initiative, responsibility in the workplace, and high standards of work quality in all aspects of every job assignment.
- Workplace acclimation: becoming accustomed to the routines of working life and assimilation of skills, attitudes, knowledge, and habits needed to navigate the interpersonal environment of the workplace.
- Conflict resolution: ability to resolve disagreements amicably in the workplace and in daily life.
- Time management: ability to systematically plan and organize to accomplish common tasks efficiently and productively, including adhering to time schedules related to appointments, task deadlines, and general punctuality.
- Communication: ability to convey and receive messages clearly, without distortion or embellishment at work and at home.
- Hierarchy in the workplace: understanding and acceptance of the stratification of roles, responsibilities, and authority on the job.
- Boundaries: understanding what personal information is appropriate to share in the workplace, including attention to workplace gossip and other non-standard sources of information on the job.



U-Turn Permitted participants engage in a classroom activity.



Reflections

All U-Turn Permitted activities are followed by a reflection session where participants think about how the lessons learned from the activity apply to 1) a job search, 2) keeping a job, and 3) advancing in a career. These discussions give participants the opportunity to tie everything they learn to their employment, which helps to keep the activities interesting and relevant.

Business Service Manager
Julian Macklin gives NLEN
clients job interview tips.

River Crossing

Participants learn valuable lessons and skills to use on the job through exercises that resemble games where they have to figure out how to accomplish tasks using team work, problem-solving, and strategizing.

In one classroom exercise, the River Crossing, all U-Turn participants have to cross a 15-foot “river” carrying a “magic” ball. However, each participant can only walk across once and everyone must carry ball to cross. As a group, participants have to figure out how to get the ball back to the next person without touching the river twice. Participants eventually figure out that the only way to complete the activity is for some people to carry others across, so they can walk back to give the ball to the next person. This means some must be willing to be carried and others must be able and willing to carry others.

Post-activity reflections reveal that the River Crossing activity helps participants relate to a work environment. Like at a job, people have different strengths and weaknesses, and to be an effective team member sometimes you have to work harder and other times you have to accept help from others.

Participants also practice:

- Self-directed job searches
- Building a successful support team for securing and retaining employment
- Building a personal network for securing employment
- Essential interviewing tactics
- Strategically completing job applications
- Developing a personalized 30-second “elevator speech”
- Job interviewing, in an exercise that describes the best interviewing tactics, answering common interview questions, and engaging actively in the interview dialogue
- Developing résumé worksheets and job profile documents
- Dressing and accessorizing appropriately
- Meeting prospective employers for the first time to optimize the first impression

Exercises used to develop these skills are all experiential, and include role playing; field trips to practice finding and following directions and arriving on time; and challenge activities where participants have to work as a team to solve a problem to practice communication, listening, asking for help, and taking on more or less responsibility than another team member depending on what is needed to meet the goal. Following each activity, the facilitator encourages the participants to engage in personal reflections on a sampling of behaviors at a debriefing that includes exploration of what happened and why, and how the experience applies to job acquisition, job maintenance, and career advancement.

Throughout the four-week course and after completion, participants also work one-on-one with a Workforce Coach, who reinforces lessons learned through the program, provides encouragement and assistance while clients engage in self-directed job searches, helps participants address their specific barriers to employment, and troubleshoots problems that arise on the job after securing employment. They also engage in financial literacy coaching so they can better manage their income once they secure employment.

Outcomes and Evaluation

By the end of the course:

- 80 percent of participants enter employment and the other 20 percent generate one to three legitimate job leads before program ends
- 100 percent of completers have a professional résumé and cover letter

Pre- and post-program surveys document changes in participant attitudes and behaviors. The facilitator also conducts one-on-one performance feedback meetings with each participant prior to the end of the program. During these meetings, the facilitator provides constructive feedback on behaviors that can prevent employment or cause them to be terminated, and praise for behaviors that can help them obtain a job and excel in the workplace. Participants complete an evaluation survey at the end of the program to gain feedback on the overall training and job preparation. Evaluations are only reviewed by the Director of Workforce Development. Following analysis, feedback is communicated to U-Turn Permitted facilitators.

In this authentic letter, a participant expresses her appreciation for NLEN Workforce Coach Tim Turner.

*Not her real name.

Dear Mr. Turner,

Let me say thank you. The lessons I learned in the U-Turn Program have helped me to get a job and keep it. Also, the program taught me more about myself.

I was given a job lead by Mr. Macklin. At first I thought the hard part was over, but it had just begun. I appreciated the lead, I just didn't know the hard work I had to do to keep that job.

First I was hired by a temporary agency to work as packer at a factory. When I went to work the first day I was terrified. I'm usually a very confident person but my first day I was pushed to a working level that I was not used to. I was under the impression that if you show up to work and do what is asked, you would get hired by the company. WRONG! A week before my 90 day probation was over I was informed by three managers that they did not plan on hiring me because I moved too slow.

At first my spirit was leaving me and I started to cry right in front of all my co-workers. I went home and told my Mom. She told me to quit and "show them." I started to think, "what about my bills?" I'm finally getting used to taking care of myself. I can't quit now. I had to make this job work for me. I went to work the next day with a mission, Find out the problem and fix it. I called Mr. Turner before making a move because he is my Life Coach, thank God. I prayed for guidance. Everything I learned from U-Turn came flooding in my mind. Mr. Scott taught me anger management and I used that first to control my emotions before speaking to my managers. I used what Jose taught me about focusing on my goals and staying committed to them no matter what. I used what Mr. Macklin taught me about using your connections and dropping names when you need that extra help.

The gentleman that hired me, I called him. I told him why they should keep me and the improvements that I would make. I also asked him about the procedures in training, He in turn spoke to managers and within a week I got so many compliments about my work and was offered a position with the company. I no longer live with being satisfied with just getting by. I want to succeed and that means I work harder than what is required. U-Turn taught me that.

Thank you for everything.
Jackie*

TRANSITIONAL JOBS PROGRAM

Transitional jobs is a rapidly developing strategy for helping formerly incarcerated persons and others with limited employment experience to successfully enter or return to the workplace. Transitional jobs are time-limited, subsidized jobs that combine real work, hourly pay, skill development, and support services to help participants overcome substantial barriers to employment. The transitional job is the first step toward permanent employment and economic opportunity. Nationally, the rate of attaining permanent employment after a transitional job is 50 to 70 percent.¹³

To expand on the very limited employment possibilities for NLEN clients, NLEN decided to engage in transitional jobs programming several years ago by creating its own social enterprise, Sweet Beginnings, LLC, which provides short-term subsidized employment to clients who need to build a work history and become accustomed to the workplace. These jobs are subsidized by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC).

More recently, NLEN expanded transitional jobs programming to include other employers through additional IDOC funding, and, even more recently, to also serve Chicago Housing Authority residents through funding provided by the Partnership for New Communities.

Program Description

Transitional jobs participants reach NLEN through the U-Turn Permitted program, their parole office at the West Side Spotlight Re-entry Center, or through the Chicago Housing Authority.

Those referred through parole are part of Community Connections, which is a voluntary program

How does a person with a criminal record explain this in a job interview?

1. Take full responsibility

“Mr. Wilson, all through life I’ve had to make decisions. Unfortunately, I’ve made some bad choices.”

2. Answer briefly about the case

For robbery, shoplifting, burglary, theft, or forgery: “I took something that didn’t belong to me.”

For unlawful use of a weapon: “Because of my lifestyle, I feared for my life and carried a concealed weapon.”

For murder: “I got involved in an altercation and someone got seriously hurt.”

For various drug crimes: “I got caught up in the drug trade.”

3. Show remorse and assure the interviewer it will not happen again

Participants are instructed to look the person in the eyes and say: “I apologize for what I’ve done, and I assure you, Mr. Wilson, it will never happen again.”

¹³ Transitional Jobs description from the National Transitional Jobs Network Web site, www.transitionaljobs.net.

initiated by parole agents to introduce parolees to resources in the community. Community Connection clients are on parole but under less supervision than other parolees and are further along in their re-entry process. These participants complete U-Turn Permitted before they are placed in a transitional job.

After participants complete employability training, the Workforce Coach works with the NLEN Business Services Department to find a placement for those who seem ready to work. Sweet Beginnings, described in the following section, is one business that employs these participants, but NLEN has secured transitional jobs with a number of other employers identified by the Business Services Department. The subsidy is negotiated individually with each employer and ranges from 25 percent to 50 percent of wages over an initial employment period of 30 to 90 days. Most employees who retain their placement for the transitional period are hired into unsubsidized positions. Coaching continues post-placement for at least a year, if not longer depending on the client's needs. NLEN also holds annual alumni meetings to stay in touch with former clients.

Tony* was quiet and seemed shy in the three-day course at the Spotlight Re-entry Center. But he took plenty of notes and was placed in a transitional job only two days after completing the training. When he completed the 30-day transitional period he used his new job-seeking skills and recent work experience to quickly find another job through a temp agency. After one month he accepted an offer to become a permanent employee at that company. Tony is still employed.

*Not his real name.

SWEET BEGINNINGS SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

The Sweet Beginnings, LLC social enterprise offers transitional jobs for formerly incarcerated men and women and others with significant barriers to employment. It is a Limited Liability Corporation and a wholly-owned subsidiary of NLEN that is guided by a triple bottom line mission. This mission is:

Social: To provide people facing significant barriers to employment — primarily those with histories of criminal convictions — with viable opportunities to establish a work history, learn productive work habits, and become productive members of society.

Economic: To contribute to the economic revitalization of the North Lawndale neighborhood through a social enterprise that is sustainable for the long-term and generates jobs.

Product: To produce and sell high-quality honey and honey-based personal care and relaxation products.

Sweet Beginnings was incorporated in November 2006 in the State of Illinois. However, NLEN formed and piloted Sweet Beginnings in the summer of 2004 as a transitional jobs program for formerly incarcerated persons with seed funding from the Illinois Department of Corrections. The program started as a business that produced and sold urban honey primarily through local farmers markets.



Sweet Beginnings workers calm the bees with smoke before checking on them.

Before joining Sweet Beginnings, Sheronda* had worked cashier jobs in fast food and retail. But the two years she spent working in a nursing home is where she found her calling. She says, “That’s my passion. I want to be a pediatric nurse, working with kids.” She knows that she will have to work hard to get there. With her GED, she can start a pre-nursing program at Malcolm X or Triton Community College and move on from there. She feels ready: “I want to be able to help people. I like a challenge.”

To get there, Sheronda is building her work history, gaining work experience, and earning a living. At Sweet Beginnings she tended bees, extracted honey from the hives, made Beeline products, and oversaw quality control in packaging. After working 90 days at Sweet Beginnings, Sheronda successfully transitioned to full-time employment at the North Lawndale Starbucks and looks forward to pursuing her long-term goals.

*Not her real name.

In 2006 Sweet Beginnings received the volunteer assistance of employees of the Boeing Company and the Chairperson of the Board of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream Company, all who worked closely with NLEN to develop a five-year business plan for Sweet Beginnings.

This process helped Sweet Beginnings to develop a new strategic direction, shifting focus to producing high quality, honey-based personal care and novelty products. The purpose of this major change was to ensure a sustainable business model by increasing the profit margin on products, becoming less dependent on the seasonality of honey production, and increasing the transferable skills that employees gain from the experience.

The City of Chicago's forward-thinking about re-entry and its significant investment in Sweet Beginnings has also helped to build a strong business foundation. In addition, Sweet Beginnings has received business planning and marketing assistance from the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Sweet Beginnings now also has its own Board of Managers.

Sweet Beginnings now grows local urban honey and develops and sells a product line featuring honey, including lip balm, body polisher, body cream, lotions, and shower gel, under the Beeline brand. Products are available online, at several Whole Foods Stores in Chicago, and at many boutiques. Sweet Beginnings continues to develop strategic product outlets.

Candidates for positions with Sweet Beginnings are referred through U-Turn Permitted or are Chicago Housing Authority clients who complete a modified version of U-Turn Permitted, called



Volunteer Faye Sinnott shows Sweet Beginnings employees how to track inventory.



Sweet Beginnings has 35 beehives in NLEN's backyard.

U-Turn² (U-Turn Squared), designed for people with significant barriers to employment but who do not have criminal records. Candidates complete an extensive peer interview and are assessed on their motivation to work before hired.

Sweet Beginnings workers start their jobs with an orientation day where they complete forms and review expectations. Workers clock in and out and follow a strict traditional work schedule. Job assignments include beekeeping, harvesting honey, making personal care products, packaging and shipping products, tracking inventory, filling orders, and direct sales at retail outlets and special events. Workers who do well can be promoted to positions such as Team Leader, Apiary Manager, or Quality Care Supervisor.

Workers report to the Sweet Beginnings general manager and are assessed at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals by the Team Leaders, Workforce Coach, and General Manager. Assessments include timeliness, work ethic, productivity, working well with peers, following instructions, and attendance. After 30 to 90 days most workers transition to market jobs with the assistance of NLEN Workforce Coaches.

Sweet Beginnings is both an earned income venture for NLEN and a nontraditional transitional jobs program that does not necessarily train participants for the same jobs they have in the program. Instead, it provides hard-to-employ individuals with transferable skills, including work ethic, work habits, experience in the workforce, and the work history that employers of entry-level workers often require. For example, Sweet Beginnings positions in production, handling, packaging, sales, customer service, shipping and receiving, and inventory transfer to market positions in manufacturing, food service, retail sales, and distribution. All of these industries have opportunities for advancement. At full capacity, this social enterprise will employ 100 people a year, transitioning them to other jobs after 30, 60, or 90 days of employment.

Sweet Beginnings has hired 86 men and women since its 2004 inception. To date, 90 percent of workers have transitioned to unsubsidized employment, and participants have a recidivism rate of less than four percent. In the first 10 months of fiscal year 2008, Beeline product revenue and wage subsidies neared \$200,000.



Sweet Beginnings workers set up for a product demonstration at a local Whole Foods Market.



Visit the Beeline Web site for more product information and online purchases.

www.beelinestore.com

WORKFORCE COACHING

Workforce Coaches monitor participants one-on-one as they make the transition into mainstream training and job placement, and intervene as problems arise. Through frequent contact with participants, their families, their trainers, and their employers, the Workforce Coach diagnoses obstacles to retention or advancement and supplements training or coordinates services as needed.

Workforce Coaches work with formerly incarcerated persons participating in U-Turn Permitted and the transitional jobs program, including those employed at Sweet Beginnings and elsewhere. It is important to note that self-motivation is key to participant success, and this is most evident during coaching. Those who have been mandated to attend a program, whether by parole or a family member, frequently are challenged by lack of motivation in addition to the other barriers they face. Those who have come to NLEN on their own ambition and have made a conscious decision to change their lives are more easily served and tend to have more successful outcomes.

Coaches also work with Building Beyond participants and North Lawndale residents who are not participating in an NLEN program, but dropped in to use NLEN's resources and need additional assistance. These clients may or may not have criminal backgrounds. Drop-in clients tend to be more advanced job seekers, with some work experience and knowledge of how to find a job. They tend to not be interested in participating in a program, but some want coaching assistance. Many of these clients experience low self-esteem, and need help with problems such as domestic violence, child support, housing, and/or substance abuse. Frequently they do not know how

to secure the assistance they need because they have been on public aid and become accustomed to being case-managed.

When Terrence* came to NLEN he was used to earning big money fast. Yet he had served hard time and was ready for a change. But like many others in his position, he felt he was "too good for minimum wage." The Workforce Coach had difficulty convincing him that the "small" money he'd earn in minimum wage was better than not earning anything. Eventually he agreed to take a part-time food service position and is still working there. Recently he began to consider going back to school, so eventually he can earn more than minimum wage.

*Not his real name.

Coaching Approach

Drop-in clients begin with an assessment to determine if they need the coaching and/or supportive services, such as assistance in securing additional public benefits, housing, food, clothing, day care, financial coaching, or education. The Coach will refer the client to other NLEN resources or outside agencies to address these issues. The Coach helps with the job search, using the Internet and setting up an e-mail account and a free voicemail box. The overall approach to this assistance is to help clients learn how to use these resources independently, so they can use them to secure a job with assistance now and independently in the future.

Workforce Coaches help participants to gain the life and job-seeking skills they need for securing, retaining, and advancing in employment. For those participating in U-Turn Permitted, the Coach initiates client contact once a week during program participation and until they secure employment. After securing employment, a participant is contacted twice a week the first week of employment, once a week during the next 30 days, and once a month thereafter. Most post-employment coaching is through phone contact, because participants are no longer on site.

The overall approach is to help participants learn to identify and address issues themselves. Workforce Coaches help participants with:

- Conceptualizing themselves as contributing members of society and understanding the benefits and challenges that go along with that. Coaches help them to honestly assess their lives, re-evaluate society's view of them, and to be realistic about how they fit into society.
- Gaining a realistic perspective on the job market and where they fit in it. Most participants expect a high-paying first job, even though they do not have the required skills. The Coach helps them understand the skills they need to earn \$15 or \$20 an hour, how to get those skills, and that they have to start with a minimum wage job. The Coach also helps them to understand that after a long stint of unemployment they are unlikely to enter the workforce with a job they enjoy. Instead, it is a time to rebuild their credibility as workers, and establish work histories and professional references. The Coach helps them to see first, second, and third jobs as stepping-stones in a longer process that can ultimately lead to steady, satisfactory employment.
- Figuring out what kind of job they can obtain by matching skills and identifying their interests. They can also help participants to understand how previous experience, including prison work assignments, translates into job skills.
- Preparing for a job interview by reinforcing lessons from the programs and helping them to address anxiety around having, for some, a first ever job interview.
- Providing financial assistance to help them to start their job, for things like transportation until their first paycheck, and purchase of a uniform or other needed work equipment.
- Resolving conflict on the job, especially around issues with supervisors.
- Helping them to understand the discipline and planning needed to maintain employment. For example, to plan ahead so they can get to work on time.
- Reinforcing lessons from the programs and discussing challenges on their jobs.



Workforce Coach Timothy Turner shows an NLEN client how to use the Internet to search for job openings and apply online.

NLEN uses the workforce coaching approach because participants need assistance before and after securing a job. NLEN has found that success with such a hard-to-employ population requires ongoing personal attention. The Workforce Coach maintains a regular schedule of contacts with participants transitioning to employment or training through their successful placement in employment and beyond. These contacts serve to assess the participant's adjustment to employment and to resolve issues before they lead to employment termination. Depending on the participant's status at the time of intervention, the Workforce Coach uses a variety of strategies to address whatever problem the client may face in retaining employment, maintaining domestic stability, staying sober, and refraining from criminal activity.

The coaching provides participants with additional opportunities for success and promotes an environment of empowerment. Contrary to a case management model where the case manager "solves" problems for the client, here the Coach helps participants to identify their challenges and to explore their own ideas about how to address them, with the Coach providing support and guidance. To be successful in the workplace, individuals need to be empowered, take responsibility for their own actions and their future, and be able to solve problems on their own. This model promotes those skills in participants.

NLEN Workforce Coaches observe immediate positive changes in participants after even relatively minor successes, when

After his incarceration, NLEN helped Garrett* get a job in manufacturing in a far suburb for only \$6.50 per hour, with uncomfortable working conditions. Unfortunately, with his drug-related conviction, Garrett had been unable to get work at the \$20 per hour he had been earning previous to his incarceration. He hated the travel time, the low pay, and the working conditions. Twice, the first time after about 30 days on this job, and then again after 75 days, he returned to NLEN talking about quitting and finding a job closer to home. Both times NLEN staff convinced him to stick it out because, after all, he was unlikely to find a better position and locally these entry-level jobs are highly competitive. Ten days later, he was delighted to report that he had been promoted and was earning \$14 per hour — an amount he felt was well worth the long commute. Three years later, Garrett is still employed with this company.

*Not his real name.



Financial Coach Colzette Hoy and Workforce Coach Elaine Austin work together to make sure NLEN clients receive the support they need.

the participants feel responsible for those achievements. When participants use résumés they have created, job prospects they have identified, and their newly acquired interviewing skills to secure a job, they gain empowerment and a boost to their morale, preparing them for more successful futures.

NLEN Business Service Manager Julian Macklin helped Keisha* to get a job driving a van for a transportation company. She was unhappy and complained frequently about the traffic. Eventually the company let her go. Since she hadn't liked that job, she looked for other kinds of work. But with only the driving experience on her résumé, she was unable to get other work and eventually applied for a driving job with another transportation company. Her new job was nearly identical to the one she complained about, yet having searched for a job on her own she could appreciate the value of the position. Keisha is still employed in the job she found on her own.

*Not her real name.

JOB ACQUISITION AND BUSINESS CLIENT SERVICES

NLEN encourages program participants to find their own jobs and provides a Resource Center with computers, job listings, a library, telephones, and other equipment. Programming and Workforce Coaches help them to develop strategies for developing independent personal networks for job acquisition, and practical job search and interviewing techniques. Developing self-directed job acquisition skills is important to the long-term employment of this population, as most will cycle in and out of jobs over an average of five years before they will become consistently employed. Therefore, they need the skills to find new employment when they leave or lose their first job. Also, anecdotal evidence suggests that people who secure employment on their own are more likely to retain the job than when they are placed with assistance.

Although the NLEN job search model emphasizes the growth of the client's ability to conduct self-directed job searches, NLEN also helps place clients who need assistance. Since they face so many barriers to employment, they frequently need this assistance, especially those with "difficult" criminal backgrounds — those who have been convicted of violent offenses.

NLEN's Business Services Department employs a Director of Business Services and a Business Service Manager to help connect NLEN clients to employment. The Department develops relationships with employers to help job seekers who lack their own personal networks to secure employment — those who need a way to connect to the job market. Since most people at all career levels find out about and get jobs through their personal networks, the NLEN Business Services Department replicates that personal network for people who are far removed from the labor market. Other approaches, such as developing linkages with other service providers for placements, have proven to be ineffective for NLEN clients.



Manager of Business Services Pamela Smith Thomas reviews interviewing techniques with an NLEN client.

Understanding the Market

To identify potential employers, the Business Services Department needs to understand the job market. The Department regularly gathers information from news, the U.S. Department of Labor, Illinois Department of Employment Security, Crain's Business Report, the Chicago Jobs Council, and the Chicago Reader. Job market information helps the Department determine what industries to target.

Businesses seek employees who have a vested interest in their

work and many will hire formerly incarcerated persons if they interview well. For example, manufacturing companies, the food service industry, some retail stores, packing and shipping companies, staffing companies, cold storage and other storage facilities, the transportation industry, and telecommunication companies will hire job seekers with criminal backgrounds. Other employers have explicit policies against hiring people with criminal backgrounds, including government, law enforcement, financial institutions, direct patient health care providers, and security companies.

Building Relations

The NLEN approach to building relations with employers focuses on marketing NLEN as a provider of a valuable business service, similar to a staffing agency that an employer might contract for a fee to provide qualified candidates. Potential employers can benefit from engaging with NLEN to select and screen employment candidates from the NLEN pool of clients, thus providing a selection of qualified, pre-screened and work-ready candidates. NLEN also assists with hiring incentives and other business incentives for employing low-income candidates.

To identify potential new employers, the NLEN Business Services Department identifies specific employers from information gathered from the White Pages, Yellow Pages, 411 Operator, Career Builder, Chicago Reader, Job Finder, and contact with peers, e-mails, Web searches, and other sources.

Business Services staff may start with a “cold call” to a business to gather basic information about an employer, including hiring needs and practices, type of work performed on the jobs, seasonal hiring, when and how they hire, employee turnover rates, job challenges, and wages. To help gain the employer’s interest, during this initial contact the Business Services staff person introduces the employer to NLEN’s services and tells the employer about possible hiring incentives, such as fidelity bonds, Work Opportunity Tax Credits, subsidized wages, and information about the workforce coaching that NLEN provides new hires. NLEN Business Services may follow up with periodic calls to determine if they have any openings.

Building a Relationship with an Employer

Able Electroplating, located in North Lawndale, is a company that uses special techniques to protectively coat metals. Its customers are located across the country. Able employees learn specialized skills and frequently advance within the company. NLEN Business Service Manager Julian Macklin met Able’s Human Resource Director at a casual event, where he took the opportunity to make his five minute elevator pitch about the benefits of hiring from NLEN, to see if he could begin a relationship with the company.

Macklin followed up with several phone calls to see if Able had any job openings that NLEN could fill. The HR Director was reluctant at first, since his company usually hired through a staffing company. However, the prospect of not having to pay the staffing company fees was appealing. When Able was faced with the need to staff a third shift, the company decided to try NLEN. The HR Director was impressed with how well these candidates interviewed and hired several. Most of the employees hired through NLEN are still working there and Able has since hired other NLEN clients.

The Business Services Department will help the employer to understand how NLEN can meet the employer's staffing needs, which means providing workers who are work-ready, dependable, and want to work. Business Services staff help the employer to understand how NLEN can save them time with recruiting these workers, thus saving them recruitment and turnover expenses.

The cold call may lead to a "warm lead" from employers previously contacted, which tells the Business Services Department that the company has job openings and is looking for qualified candidates. Warm leads may also be generated from other agencies and partners, and from clients who secure employment on their own. NLEN follows these leads because these employers have already successfully hired a client.

"Hot leads" are direct requests from a business's human resource department seeking an immediate hire. Most hot leads come from employers who have already hired an NLEN client who has remained employed at the company and exceeded company expectations. The window of opportunity is critical to getting them the right match for the right job.

Hot leads are the most successful because they are initiated by the employer to fill an immediate job opening. However, they are only generated through previous relationships. Each successful job placement reflects on NLEN and improves the likelihood that an employer will hire through NLEN again. NLEN's job seekers represent the organization and help to build those relationships. The job performance of new hires likewise affect an employer's interest in future hires.

All job opportunities are important to NLEN clients; however, not all employers offer the same kinds of opportunities. It is important for the Business Services Department to assess the employer to be able to make successful matches with candidates. Employers can be grouped into three categories:

- **Rapid attachment** employers offer little or no opportunity for advancement, no benefits, and temporary positions that sometimes become permanent. However, job seekers can use these jobs to fill an immediate need for an income, accumulate work experience, and build a work history.
- **Corporate** employers tend to be relatively unskilled retail or service jobs that offer some benefits and may have room for advancement within the company, such as Starbucks, Home Depot, and UPS.
- **High road** employers offer skilled positions that lead to careers, in areas such as logistics/transportation, carpentry, plumbing, construction, and technical jobs.

All three categories of employers are important to NLEN client success. Many clients simply need to build a work history and become accustomed to the workplace. These clients may enter and leave employment several times before stabilizing. They start with the "rapid attachment" employers and over several years become ready for career-path employment. NLEN clients are often on a five-year plan, meaning that after five years and a series of employment transitions, clients will settle into a career-path job that satisfies their own career interests.

Referral and Hiring Process

When a business decides to start the hiring process with NLEN, the Business Services Department will coordinate with the Workforce Coaches to determine if NLEN has clients qualified for the position, in terms of work readiness, availability, skills, and interests. The Business Services staff will schedule interview times and dates with the employer's hiring manager. Clients assessed as a good match for a particular position will arrive at the interview with a referral letter from NLEN. The goal is to meet the business's hiring needs with that first referral, because one successful referral opens the door to future referrals and an ongoing relationship. Alternatively, if an interview

goes poorly, the employer will not likely return to NLEN for future openings, believing that NLEN clients are not job-ready.

The day after the interview, Business Services staff contacts the hiring manager to inquire about the interview, to find out if the company made a job offer, and to assess how well the NLEN candidate interviewed. This is essential information that NLEN uses to continuously improve its approach to preparing job seekers for interviews. If the employer hires an NLEN candidate, Business Services staff will assist the company with securing fidelity bond insurance. NLEN also gives detailed information about the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. After an NLEN client is hired, Business Services staff periodically check in with the employer to determine if the employer requires additional assistance in retaining the employee or has new job openings.

Dual Customer

While NLEN's approach to building employer relationships and securing employment for clients has been successful, the most promising workforce development practices fully embrace the concept of a "dual customer." NLEN understands the importance of employer involvement in program planning and job training to ensure trainees receive the skills they need for available jobs. To this end, NLEN has launched the Community and Business Partnership Initiative to seek more in-depth involvement from local business that hire from among NLEN job seekers.

Examples of Employer Categories

Bedford Man manufactures office cabinets using a variety of complicated machinery. What makes this a **high road** company is its room for advancement due to cross training on different machinery, enabling employees to start with a relatively easy job and grow into more complex tasks and even management over time. Another high road quality is this company's emphasis on workplace safety. Employees are trained in the importance of using the right equipment for each job, the use of safety equipment such as goggles and gloves, and lifting techniques.

Ikon provides copying services for many major companies across the country. With a solid business base in the Chicago area, Ikon has many job openings. This is a **corporate employer** because all local hiring has to go through a central office and standardized procedures. The hiring process can be lengthy and all candidates must meet minimum qualifications. However, these are stable jobs with benefits and periodic pay raises.

Harris Ice Company provides seasonal minimum wage jobs in day labor and temporary positions. As a **rapid attachment** employer, this company provides people the opportunity to earn some money and build a work history.

FINANCIAL LITERACY COACHING

NLEN provides financial workshops and one-on-one financial literacy coaching to program participants and other unemployed and underemployed North Lawndale residents. As the first Center for Working Families (CWF) designated in Chicago by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), NLEN has been able to integrate financial education into its employment programs. The CWF helps families to increase their earnings and income, reduce their financial transaction costs, and build wealth for themselves and their communities. To do this, CWF brings together three core services: employment and career advancement services, access to income enhancements and work supports, and financial and wealth-building services.¹⁴

Through experience, NLEN has learned that securing a job is only one part of becoming financially and socially stable. Many NLEN participants, never having had steady employment, have not developed money management skills or know how to access financial supports, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, that may enhance their income.

The most prevalent problem facing these individuals — working or not — is not having enough income to cover all their expenses. Without sufficient income, each month they have to decide which bills to pay — light or gas bills, food or medicine, rent, credit card bills, and so on. Frequently these clients have been ignoring bills because they cannot pay them. However, this causes late fees and other financial penalties to accrue, worsening their financial situations. Because of poor credit history, many do not think they are qualified for a bank account or do not know how to maintain one, and therefore often use high-fee services such as check cashing stores. When they need money quickly to address urgent needs, they turn to high cost payday loans or loans on their tax returns.

Formerly incarcerated persons, in particular, also may face debt from back child support, unpaid driving tickets, or taxes. Their situation is worsened by not having drivers' licenses or other



Financial Coach Colzette Hoy (right) helps an NLEN client budget her income.

¹⁴ See www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/FamilyEconomicSuccess/CentersforWorkingFamilies.aspx for more information about CWFs.

identification to use to get a bank account, secure employment, and begin payment plans. Furthermore, their estrangement from mainstream banking and other financial tools, combined with financial habits developed in the fast-money culture of the streets, makes them even more vulnerable to money crises resulting from even small financial challenges.

Like most people, financial coaching clients are reticent about discussing their finances and frequently find it difficult to get started. Once they get started, financial behaviors that have developed over a long period of time can still be difficult to change.

Coaching Program

In addition to serving walk-in clients and those referred from Building Beyond, the U-Turn Permitted program, and the Spotlight Re-entry Center, the Financial Coach conducts weekly outreach with other local organizations, such as the Homan Square Community Center, Carole Robertson Center for Learning, Manley High School, Better Boys Foundation, Family Focus, Lawndale Christian Health Centers, and North Lawndale College Prep. The Coach also distributes flyers at community meetings and events.

The Coach offers 10 financial workshops a year on site at these and other organizations, and about 12 a year at NLEN. Financial workshops address a group of about 10 people at one time and cover budgeting, saving, and credit counseling. Frequently, workshop participants continue with one-on-one coaching.

One-on-one financial coaching includes a financial assessment, assessment of available work supports, goal setting, budgeting, and, in some cases, credit repair. The sessions begin with the Coach and the client reviewing the client's bills, income, tax returns, and credit report. The clients prepare a written monthly budget of their current expenses to identify where they are spending the most and to see areas where they can reduce costs.

After the initial assessment, clients write down major purchases they want to make in the near future or any major debts that they want to pay off. The Coach works with the client to outline short-term (within one year),

Leon* sought the help of the Financial Coach when the IRS sent him a letter explaining how much he owed in interest and penalties for filing late (he had been incarcerated when his taxes were due). He set goals, completed a budget, and negotiated a payment plan with the IRS. He opened a checking account and has since begun working toward his long-term goal of saving for retirement.

*Not his real name.



The NLEN Financial Coach works one-on-one with NLEN clients as needed.

mid-term (one to five years), and long-term (five or more years) professional, educational, and financial goals.

They develop a new budget that includes changes in spending that plans for meeting the goals outlined in the goal-setting session, whether it is saving for an immediate purchase, planning for additional education, or a long-term plan to become a homeowner.

The Financial Coach helps them to get a bank account so they can spend less on money orders and other fees. A number of banks offer free checking accounts and some offer accounts to people who have previously overdrawn if they will complete a two-hour banking class. The Coach also helps determine if they qualify for work supports, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, and helps those who do qualify to access them.

The Coach helps clients to begin to save, even in very small amounts. The Coach first focuses on helping them to develop an "emergency" account so unanticipated expenses, such as a car repair or doctor's bill, do not send them further into debt.

To address debt, the Coach helps the client to read and understand their credit report and helps them to dispute items on the report. Debt may be from child support, the IRS, credit cards, overdrawn bank accounts, etc. Often the debt includes fees and penalties levied because the client has not been paying on the debt. The Coach will work with the client and the debtor to develop a payment plan that fits the client's budget so he or she does not get behind again. Sometimes the debtor is willing to waive penalties once regular payments are being made. In cases where the client cannot afford to make any payments at all, the Coach will help write a letter to explain the client's financial situation and that he will make payments when possible. This can reduce penalties and delay processing to a collections agency.

Clients see the Financial Coach three or more times over three to six months. The extent to which the Coach is able to resolve major financial issues depends on the client's income and ability to follow a new budget. NLEN has found that even the lowest-income individuals are able to improve their financial situations over time; however, changing spending habits requires lifestyle changes and is a slow process. The Coach meets with all NLEN program participants at least twice, and sees a total of about 150 additional clients a year. The Coach contacts participants individually three to six months after the coaching to see how they are progressing with their goals.

AFTERWORD

The set of programs described in this document were designed over several years by workforce development professionals serving the residents of North Lawndale. We have developed and refined these programs based on what we have learned from serving a neighborhood that suffers from the effects of high rates of unemployment and, specifically, the impact of our nation's over-incarceration of African Americans.

Our daily work with formerly incarcerated men and women and their families, along with other people with significant barriers to employment, has helped us to refine our programming to best serve this population, which is hardly unique to our North Lawndale neighborhood.

These programs, together, are intended to offer some of the hardest-to-place individuals a comprehensive set of services to prepare them for the workforce, give them work experience, place them in steady jobs, help them to keep those jobs and advance in the workforce, and teach them how to properly exit a job. Meanwhile, coaching and financial literacy services help them to better plan for their futures and to make the most of their earnings.

We offer this summary of our approach to share our wealth of experience serving this population with other organizations that work with formerly incarcerated persons, set policies that affect them, and fund programs that serve them.

At NLEN, we believe that our experience demonstrates the need for a new way to think about scale. The small neighborhood organizations — like NLEN — do not have the capacity to serve vast numbers of those in need of our services. However, if we could nurture the development of many small organizations using similar methods we can reach the necessary scale to address the overall problem of re-entry while maintaining the characteristics that make our approach successful.

Community-based organizations are able to meet the specific needs of people in the neighborhoods. While we know formerly incarcerated persons fare better after release if they do not return to the communities where they offended, we also know that most of them do return to these communities.¹⁵ This means that we have to be prepared to serve them in those neighborhoods. The need for community-based organizations that serve formerly incarcerated persons is especially great in those communities where they concentrate — in Chicago these are North Lawndale, Austin, East Garfield Park, Auburn Gresham, Humboldt Park, Roseland, and West Englewood.¹⁶

Smaller organizations can provide the individual attention that people who have been institutionalized value. They respond to the personal connections and being treated as individuals, and do not want to be lost in the maze of a large provider. This individual attention

¹⁵ According to Nancy G. LaVigne, et al, *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*, The Urban Institute, December 2004, 55 percent return to the communities where they lived before incarceration.

¹⁶ Nancy G. LaVigne, et al, *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*, The Urban Institute, December 2004.

fosters the long-term relationships these individuals need to succeed, so they can return for help when they have trouble in a new job, when they lose a job, or when they are ready to advance into a better job. Neighborhoods are also made up of informal networks that provide support systems that are important to changing life habits and help to hold formerly incarcerated persons accountable for their actions in a respectful and accepting way.



Organizations — even large ones — that are already involved in workforce development can also benefit from this model. Understanding that this population has specific issues that are different from other job seekers is vital to success. Organizational leadership that is committed to serving this population, staff training, and not accepting typical biases about this population is essential. Staff members need to be prepared to understand and work with this population case by case. After all, like any other population group, formerly incarcerated persons are individuals with varying needs. Solutions to successful re-integration must be developed for each individual.

Brenda Palms Barber

Chief Executive Officer
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Sweet Beginnings, LLC

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I would also like to thank the NLEN staff for drawing on their program experience to guide the development of our programs over the last nine years. I also thank them for their thoughtful reflection on their daily work and how that translates into our program methods and policies.

The guidance of the NLEN Board of Directors has been essential to all the work we do at NLEN, in particular, the advice of our program design committee on the development of this report. In our efforts to move from good to great, this report will ensure we capture and institutionalize our work culture, approaches, principles, and the beliefs that drive our work.

I want to also thank the Illinois Department of Corrections and the City of Chicago Mayor's Office of Workforce Development for believing in our work. Most importantly, I thank the North Lawndale community for supporting our efforts, and all the job seekers who are working so hard to improve their earnings potential and quality of life for themselves, their families, and their community.

Brenda Palms Barber



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