



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

# Nebraska Vocational and Life Skills Initiative

## Client Perceptions of Program Services and Ability to Reintegrate: A Qualitative Analysis of Grant Cycle 1 Participant Interviews



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Omaha

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CLIENT PERCEPTIONS OF PROGRAM SERVICES AND ABILITY TO REINTEGRATE:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF GRANT CYCLE 1 PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a detailed analysis of client perceptions of services they received as part of the Vocational and Life Skills (VLS) first grant cycle. Approximately 2500 participants received services as part of the first grant cycle of the Life Skills Program created in 2014 by Nebraska Legislative Bill 907. VLS programming focused on reentry of individuals currently incarcerated, recently released from one of the ten Nebraska correctional facilities, or clients supervised in the community via probation or parole. VLS services included a range of job readiness, educational, and career trainings as well as and a number of mental health, therapeutic and substance treatment programs. In the first grant cycle, services were provided by eight organizations: Center for People in Need, Goodwill Industries, Mental Health Association of Nebraska, Metropolitan Community College, Prairie Gold Homes, Released and Restored, Inc., ResCare Workforce Services, and Western Alternative Corrections.

As part of the evaluation of the VLS program, 27 clients were interviewed in 2016 to ascertain their general perceptions of the programming, assess changes in behavioral and life skills, and describe their general reentry experience. The interviewed participants included clients from each of the eight program sites and a mix of those preparing for release from a correction facility, under parole or other community supervision at the time of the interview, or those recently released from supervision after completing all required supervision conditions. This extensive qualitative data offers detailed information of client experiences and adds additional context to survey data previously collected on VLS Cycle 1 participants.

Analysis of interview data indicates that the majority of those receiving services found the programs beneficial for their reentry process. Important positive themes identified in the data included the merits of expressive and instrumental social supports by program staff, the value of job skills and educational trainings, and behavioral shifts and life course changes. Clients also presented a number of concerns that could negatively influence reentry outcomes. More than half of all participants believed that they faced blocked opportunities associated with their criminal past and 66% reported not feeling connected to a community. One participant described feeling like a “ghost” in the community.

## BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, the number of inmates released from state and federal prisons sparked interest in prisoner reentry as an expanding policy concern (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). The primary focus of incarceration remains incapacitation and retribution, yet the vast majority of criminal offenders will return to the community. Thus, an important part of the reentry process—transition into society—remains a challenge for ex-offenders and correctional policy makers. Concerns about factors influencing reentry success has resulted in growing interest among scholars in identifying factors that influence reoffending among those released from prison (Hochstetler, DeLisi, & Pratt, 2010; Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2014; Mears, Cochran, Siennick, & Bales, 2012). Individuals released from prison often have insufficient job skills, lack education, encounter restricted and/or limited housing, and may face community stigma (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014; Seiter, & Kadela, 2003). Additionally, those reentering the community may lack social support networks that limit ability to connect to prosocial elements of society (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014).

## BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL REENTRY

Poor education and limited job skills are noteworthy barriers to successful community reentry for a number of offenders returning from prison (Denney, Tewksbury & Jones, 2014). While the percentage of prisoners with a high school diploma or equivalent is slowly increasing, many still struggle with math and literacy skills, and these poor educational abilities contribute to employment insecurity (Denney, Tewksbury & Jones, 2014). The ability to obtain and maintain employment appears to be an essential factor in successful reentry and a significant

body of literature indicates that employment offers many positive benefits for those returning to the community (Northcutt Bohmert, Hood & Meckes, 2017). Some research suggests that long-term employment and supportive services significantly reduce the risk of reoffending (Graffam, Shinkfield & Lavelle, 2014). However, considerable employment barriers remain for reentering felons, most notably stigma from employers, as well as the legal and professional restrictions from more than 800 occupations (Denney, Tewksbury & Jones, 2014).

Housing is frequently identified in the reentry literature as a significant barrier for those exiting prison. Offenders often lack resources to secure appropriate housing and frequently are relegated to high poverty neighborhoods, costly urban centers, or in high-risk, crime-ridden areas of the community. Furthermore, most felons are ineligible for federal and/or state funded public housing and the cost associated with private sector housing may limit access to many community housing options (Lutze, Rosky & Hamilton, 2014). Poor credit and criminal records may also negatively impact those returning to even familiar communities and further limit housing options for many reentry clients (Denney, Tewksbury & Jones, 2014). Consequently, housing constraints increase risk of homelessness and recidivism among reentry populations (Lutze, Rosky & Hamilton, 2014) and housing remains an important focal point of reentry research.

## **SOCIAL SUPPORT/LACK OF SUPPORT**

The obligation to provide social support to at-risk ex-prisoners reentering the community following incarceration appears a critical and emergent area of reentry research and connects to emergent theory in criminology. Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven (2002) describe

social supports to include “the delivery (or perceived delivery) of assistance from communities, social networks, and confiding partners in meeting the instrumental and expressive needs of individuals” (p. 20). **Expressive** social supports include sources of emotional support and confirmation of an individual’s importance and worth. **Instrumental** social support includes a wide range of items from material needs and financial backing, to informal guidance and connection to pro-social networks within society. Both expressive and instrumental forms of support can originate from more informal sources like friends and family or larger social structures like formal networks and social institutions (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002, p. 20).

Social supports can also be erratic or consistent in nature. The delivery of erratic support “means that an individual cannot depend on receiving assistance from others or from social institutions” (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002, p. 25). Social support remains an important, although understudied, aspect of the reentry process. While much effort focuses on assistance with housing, education, and transportation—expressive social support remains a significant deficiency during reentry. Discussing this concern, Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones (2014) write, “...the lack of a strong social support system was the most frequently mentioned need absent in reentry programs. Specifically, even after having the basic needs provided for them, individuals still reported that they needed social support” (p. 50).

## METHODOLOGY

This research stems from the analysis of 27 one-on-one interviews with participants in all eight Vocational and Life Skills Programming in grant cycle 1. Programs offered various services that focused on either vocational or life skills and in some cases both types of service. Vocational skills focus on delivering training, education, and/or certification designed to increase participants' abilities to gain employment. The services classified as life skills programming included residential services, mentorship, and preparation/training for successful transition into the community. In total, 26 full interviews and 1 partial interview were completed in the spring of 2016 by the Research Coordinator at the Nebraska Center for Justice Research. Figure 1 displays the frequency of interviews by cycle 1 program providers. The interviews were equally distributed across the programs with at least three interviewees from each program and no program providing more than four interview participants. This distribution allowed for the collection of client perceptions of both life skills and vocational programs and permitted analysis across various program components.

**FIGURE 1. VLS CYCLE 1 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS BY PROGRAM**

<b>Bristol Station</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Center for People in Need</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Goodwill Industries</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mental Health Association</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Metropolitan Community College</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Prairie Gold Homes</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Released and Restored</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ResCare Workforce Services</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>

Participants in the interviews were identified by program staff and were asked to include a diverse sample of program participants. Interviews took place in the spring of 2016 and were on site at the programs. The interviewer went over a consent form with each participant before the interviews began and were informed of the purpose of the interview and that their participation was voluntary. Interviews lasted from around 15 minutes to up to a few hours for some individuals. All interviews were recorded and followed a semi-structured protocol that had established questions, but also allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences.

The interview protocol included devoted sections to an individual's pre-program background, program experience and satisfaction, attitudinal and behavioral changes, and demographic information. Participants were also asked questions on identified reentry barriers drawn from the appropriate literature, including questions about the ability to secure housing, the ability to obtain access to healthcare, mental health, and/or substance abuse treatment, and the potential for social supports or protective factors from family, friends and the community. Appendix A includes a copy of the interview protocol. Transcribed interviews and verbal recordings were provided to the primary research analyst and the text were examined using both deductive and inductive qualitative coding techniques.<sup>1</sup>

Deductive coding explored client responses for specific questions on housing, jobs skills, education needs, and specific aspects of the programs. The inductive coding searched for

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<sup>1</sup> Some minor modifications were made to quotes included in this report to improve flow and readability. This involved the removal of some verbal ticks (um, like, yeah, you know, etc) and the addition of punctuation that separated run-on statements. Coding files retained the original transcribed and verbatim language.

identifiable patterns observed in client's responses that became more apparent after an initial reading of transcribed data. While some of the inductive themes relate to barriers and successful reintegration markers identified in aspects in the reentry research, these themes were not identified in pre-analysis coding in the same manner as the deductive themes. During data coding, specific themes were selected and maintained in individual word files verbatim and the first wave of analysis includes identification of specific patterns related to behavioral and life style changes, the importance of job training, educational goals and attainment, life course changes and life narratives, the importance of social support, client concerns related to blocked opportunities, and lack of community engagement. Once all deductive and inductive themes and concepts were identified, all transcripts and quotes were reread to ensure accuracy of relevant content.

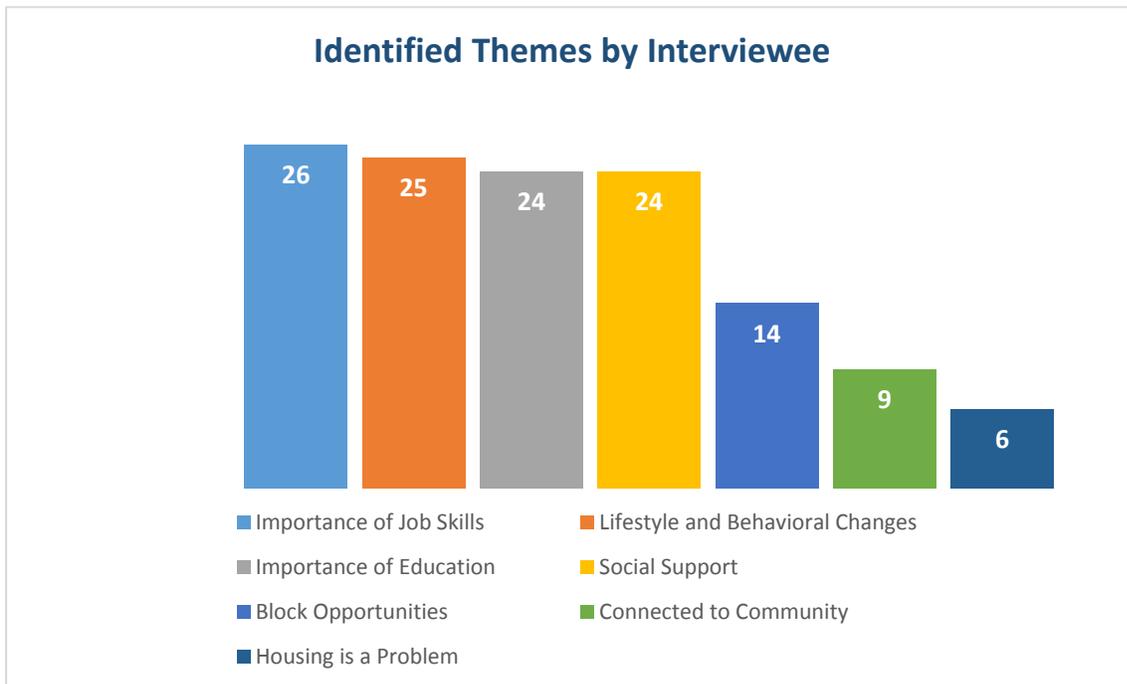
Table 1 displays characteristics of interview participants. The average age of evaluation participant was 36 years and the majority of participants were parents with an average of 1.7 children per interviewee. More than 60% of participants report being single at the time of interview and the vast majority indicated they were white/Caucasian (70%). While some research indicates educational level as a significant barrier to reentry, 92% of the current sample obtained a high school diploma or equivalent. Thirty-seven percent of the sample completed some college but only one participant reported holding a college degree. In regards to supervision status, 25.9% of the sample were enrolled in a pre-release program or were participating in the program as part of work-release. The remaining participants were evenly split at 37% each between post-supervision and parole/probation supervision in the community.

<b>Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Participants</b>		
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	2	7.4
Single	18	66.7
Divorced	5	18.5
Other/Unknown	1	3.7
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	19	70.4
African American	3	11.1
Native American	1	3.7
Other/More than one race	3	11.1
Missing or Unknown	1	3.7
<b>Education Level</b>		
High School/GED	15	55.6
Some College	10	37.0
College Degree	1	3.7
Missing/Unknown	1	3.7
<b>Supervision Status</b>		
Pre-release	7	25.9
Parole or Probation	10	37.0
Post Supervision	10	37.0

## KEY FINDINGS

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the themes identified in the VLS interview response data. Not unanticipated—given the VLS programing and interview protocol—several of the themes on the importance of job skills, education and life skills and behavioral changes were observed in the vast majority of interviewees. Additionally, 24 interview subjects also identified elements of expressive or instrumental social support while providing feedback on VLS programming. The two primary barriers identified in the analysis related to clients’ lack of connections or integration. The majority of individuals did not feel connected to the wider community and most believed their opportunities remained blocked because of their status as felons. For this report, data and analysis are provided for the themes of job skills and employment, social supports, and blocked opportunities/lack of community engagement.

**FIGURE 2. IDENTIFIED THEMES IN INTERVIEW DATA**



## JOB SKILLS, EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING

The importance of valuable job skills and education were specific targets of VLS programming and an identified reentry barrier in the literature. More than 96% of the interviewees indicated job skills and preparation as an imperative part of a successful life transition. Simply speaking, the importance of job skills is straightforward as it relates to economic survival; however, a number of participants placed a strong significance on meaningful participation in career-focused labor. Consider the following statement from an interviewee at Bristol Station:

This is a job that I want to take into my future. I want to retire with and none of this would have been possible if it wasn't for these guys. I want to stress that so much because you know I just wouldn't have been able to do it on my own. Who knows where I would have been if it wasn't for this opportunity? I really do mean that.

Another participant at the same site referenced the link between job training and the future, stating:

It's a promising wage in the future. Things like that—it's going to be a career that can provide me with a comfortable life and it's...I don't know it just sounds like fun." A participant from the Center for People in Need offered a similar assessment, "...they are giving me a grounding, a footing...They are giving me the capabilities to be somebody, and to open the doors for other job possibilities around here." A participant from Prairie Gold Homes made the following statement, "...getting into the career field that I want to go in to. I am big...if you find something that you love to do (it) you will never really work. You are going to love it anyway. So you will get paid doing what you love and that is what I want to continue doing.

In these and other statements, labor participation was acknowledged as an important pillar of future success and not just a condition of release. These sentiments appeared to be related to

beliefs about the value of new work skills, potential for a living wage, and satisfaction with professional aspects of employment.

An additional key characteristic identified by participants relates to learning specific knowledge and skills needed for employment. A VLS participant from Goodwill spoke to learning job specific competences like preparing a resume and professionalism:

Yeah, I didn't know how to do a resume you understand? They helped me to understand that portion and employment. They helped me to understand the whole field. I'm the person who didn't care about work. I thought that it couldn't do anything for me. I had no real concept of the people that like working hard. I'm just going to sit back and but now you working to get better pay. I didn't understand I guess. Through their process they helped me to understand how things are supposed to go.

Many interviewees, across programs, referenced learning to prepare for employment searches and applying specific knowledge learned in VLS programs. An interviewee from Metropolitan Community College (MCC) spoke to this preparation with this statement, **“Yes, definitely, especially like all the jobs you know trying to type a resume, learning to get a job and knowing the basics for business management...you won't just go out there blindly.”**

A related and connected theme apparent in statements centered on learning professional conduct and expectations for consistent work participation. A Prairie Gold Homes client made the following statement related to beliefs about work, **“Probably work ethic, you know actually working every day. Going out and wanting to work and actually getting out there and doing it. Really it's usually 8 to 5 or 8 to 3 every day.”** In the following statement, an individual completing programming from the Mental Health Association referenced the shift in thinking toward professional conduct:

What other skills have I gained? I guess professionalism. I was never a professional. I was never a professional. And I guess that word is almost, taboo. I guess when you think of professional you think suited, somebody in a suit and tie, or slacks and a dress shirt and high heels. That's what you think of when you think of professional, but I hold a professional title. And so I guess that's the difference. I'm a professional, and I can see myself as a professional.

It appears from interview statements that an important aspect of successful work transition is developing professional work skills and finding **meaningful** employment. Some prior research indicates that finding basic employment is not particularly difficult upon reentry, but often such labor is unskilled and obtained through employment agencies (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014). While such employment may enable reentry clients to develop a work history and meet minimal needs, higher paying professional and skilled labor seems to offer greater potential for successful reentry (Northcutt Bohmert, Hood & Meckes, 2017). Although not fully explored in this report, the vast majority of participants also discussed the role of education as a stepping stone to professional employment and interviewees clearly desire workforce participation on a professional and skilled level.

While housing is consistently identified as a barrier to successful reentry, it was not particularly established as a concern among VLS participants in this sample. One interview question specifically asked clients about housing concerns and analysis indicates that 77% of interviewees did not believe that securing house was a problem. At first glance, this seems contradictory to the reentry research, but various aspects of the current sample may explain these results. First, a majority of the sample were not likely looking to obtain housing at the time of these interviews, as 37% were post supervision having completed all required programming successfully. Another 25% were still serving their sentence in a correctional or

work release facility and not actively searching for housing. Second, some VLS programs aided clients in securing housing or were residential programs, and these residential facilities directly target those with the greatest housing needs. While supportive housing programming is part of some VLS services, one interview participant explicitly expressed some concern with a need for extended housing services. **“Like transitioning from here to another longer stay home if they need more time to save money, if they need more time to find a job, if they need more time to find housing. I think that's all I would say is another house with a longer, with a longer stay.”** Finally, some of the sample seemed to believe housing options were available through family or other community connection. Consequently, while a lack of housing is frequently identified as a recidivism risk factor among reentry populations (Lutze, Rosky & Hamilton, 2014), it was not a principal concern identified in the analysis of this sample.

## **SOCIAL SUPPORTS**

Prior research on reentry identified the glaring need for social support and findings suggest that individuals often lack reliable support from friends and family upon release from prison (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014). Additionally, a growing body of research identifies a lack of social support as a potential cause of criminogenic behavior in the first place (Baron, 2009; Baron, 2015; Colvin et al. 2002; Kurtz and Zavala, 2016; Wright, Cullen, and Miller, 2001). Consequently, an examination of both expressive and instrumental social supports is an important focal point for any exploration of factors influencing a client’s successful reentry.

In the current data, both expressive and instrumental social supports appear to be a strength of VLS programs; however, a lack of community engagement and social supports for

clients beyond the VLS programs may represent a recidivism risk. Respondents undoubtedly articulated some concerns with finding consistent social supports from family, friends, and the broader community. They mostly felt disconnected from the community and many expressed concerns that some prior friendships could reconnect them to criminal lifestyles and behaviors. One consistent pattern that arose in analyzing the data was the perceived social support of programming staff; 88% of those interviewed indicated elements of social support in discussing VLS programming strengths.

Expressive social supports, such as emotional encouragement and confirmation of an individual's worth, were frequently detailed by interviewees. A ResCare client discussed the role of expressive support in rebuilding self-regard by stating, **"It kind of helped just getting my self-esteem back and I think that made me a lot more positive..."** The importance of expressive support was also clearly noted by this MCC participant's statement, **"...she knows their face and name you know? It's just important when they know that somebody cares. That is what has really helped me you know? Because I know there's somebody that cares maybe outside of my family."** A Bristol Station client described the difference in support provided by the VLS program in specific contrast to parole from Texas:

No, no they didn't even ask. They kind of asked what your crime is and pretty much put you out to be kind of a bad guy. They didn't ask no goals, what is my life plans, were or anything like that. You know? (Regarding Parole from Texas) It was just like you are just a number when you are in the system. And then when I got out this facility here they kind of treat you more like a human being and try to help you into...I mean they done nothing but help me into, everything that's been going on into my life. All the positive things, a lot of it, has to do with this facility here. I'm going to do nothing but talk great about them here because they've done nothing but help me 110% of the way.

Many of the interview subjects across the programs indicate that direct expressive and emotional support as an important aspect for current and/or future success. A Bristol Station client notes this reaction by this statement, **“...it’s kind of nice to always have people in your court that are supporting, you know? And I don’t know, I guess for me they don’t view me as any different because of what I’ve done in my past. That’s kind of nice too.”** This positive regard for reentry clients was also observed in the following example by an interviewee from the Center for People in Need, **“Honestly I think the staff here go above and beyond. I have seen nothing but dedication to each and every individual. If they are faking what they are doing here, they are doing a very good job. If they are not faking it, then they truly are here and dedicated for us.”** This ResCare client also denoted the importance of expressive social support by staff, **“Hmmm gosh I don't know how to say this. Someone rooting for me, telling me I was worth more than I thought I was.”** In yet another example, a client from Goodwill – RESTART discussed meeting with staff as way to bolster positive thoughts when struggling. **“The ladies at the restart they want the best and not once did she make me feel like I was low. I don’t know if that makes any sense. If I talk to any of them and sometimes even before I got the job...I'd like to go in there because I'd feel better. Very positive you know?”** A simple statement from this Mental Health Association client sums-up the importance of expressive social support observed across programs. **“The minute I walked through the doors I felt loved.”**

Instrumental social supports offered by various VLS programs were also frequently mentioned in interviews and included a wide range of items like housing supportive services, securing financial resources, gaining employment, and connections to pro-social networks in

the local communities. A Mental Health Association client expresses the role of instrumental support by stating, **“It helped me tremendously, because it helped me get on my feet, helped me to get a vehicle, and it helped so much and to have staff on hand. A guy like myself criminal/mental illness, I get sidetracked easy. But by them having staff here keeps you in line, it’s a sweet deal.”** A client for MCC expressed a similar belief, **“Absolutely, this program, gives, it doesn’t like spoon feed you but...it gives you networking and abilities and it gives you the big things...”** This Mental Health Association client further detailed the many ways that the program provides instrumental supports for the unique needs of those returning to the community:

**For me, it could be something as simple as finding them an outfit. Or finding them clothes, you know some people come out of prison they have nothing. They have no money, no family, they have no job, no house, and they have no clothes. We get a lot of donations so taking someone down to the storage room to get clothes (background noise). And so, it goes, it just, like even something as little as that.**

In general, it appears that the social support elements of VLS have improved client conditions and expectations for reentry success. While this achievement represents an important success for VLS programs, the lack of existing and organic social supports, as well as the exclusion of those with prior felony convictions from most social welfare programs, may prove problematic for clients that complete programming. This transition from supportive services to post supervision could lead to what De Giorgi (2017) calls the “widespread public neglect, institutional indifference and programmatic abandonment...” of reentry populations (p. 92) if not managed in an appropriate manner.

## LACK OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

While the elements of VLS programming appear supportive and beneficial to participants, noted concerns arose from the analysis due to a lack of connection to the community. Client perceptions that they still, at least in part, faced restricted opportunities to fully engage in society were commonplace in these interviews. In one of the more memorable descriptions of community stigma, a Prairie Gold Homes reentry client offered this assessment, **“I've been locked up for a long time so, I am like a ghost in the world. I don't want to be that way and I want to be remembered as somebody that made a mistake but at the same time he came back.”** The metaphor of a ghost seems to aptly fit the general disengagement with broader society referenced by interviewees and may reveal a significant barrier to long-term reintegration. As one interviewee responded, **“Community, not so much.”**

Two-thirds of the sample indicated no extended connections to the community and another 22.2% referenced involvement in a limited community such as recovery groups or churches. Only three respondents seemed to indicate that they were fully engaged in the community and findings corroborate other research concerning a lack of social support as the most significant concern facing clients at reentry (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014). A consistent response to the question of community engagement was a simple “no” or “not currently” and frequently, the interviewer prompted for additional feedback from VLS participants. A MCC client responded with the following statement, **“Outside of family, I probably don't, can't say, that I feel like I'm part of a community.”** A similar response was provided by a Prairie Gold Home client, **“No, what is a friend, I don't know no support from**

**friends. I don't think that people even understand that word honestly."** Another reentry client stated, **"No I don't, community goes along I go do my thing."**

Interview participants perceived the lack of community engagement as an outgrowth of the stigma and marginalization resulting from a criminal record. A Center for People in Need client referenced the negative stigma here **"...you are already a felon you are already being pre-judged because you just got out of prison. You don't have nothing. You've already lost everything because you went to jail—now you are leaving with a stained record."** A Mental Health Association client shared a similar belief by stating **"I got felonies you know what I mean and yea so, it's a uphill battle you know."**

A minority of respondents indicated community engagement through treatment groups or a religious affiliation. While not fully engaged in the community, it certainly appears that such "limited" or specific community connections offered a degree of comfort and social support. A Metropolitan Community College participant referenced engagement with a treatment group with this response to the community question, **"I feel like now with attendance and support group meetings, 12 step meetings (I have a community). I don't know how you want to label it or call it, but I view it as a community."** A Mental Health Association client also referenced connection to a treatment community, **"Recovery community yea. I still, that's part...I still have some ways to go as far as doing well in society. (I) just lived this way for so many years it's taken some time..."** In a similar note, a ResCare client discussed her engagement with Oxford House as a form of community, **"Well I'm looking at Oxford House now and I've opened myself up and become friends with a lot of girls in the house. They don't let me get in my own head they give support."** A few interviewees also

spoke of connections with religious groups or churches as an important source of support. A Released and Restored client discussed church involvement by stating, “**...there are people from the community that go there too and they pull together to do what they can do to help us. They show their compassion and empathy to people that go to that church.**” While those engaged in more narrowly defined communities may not fully participate the broader society, these groups offered an obvious and important avenue for needed support for some individuals as they reintegrated into society.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewees from across the spectrum of VLS programs offered rich details on their perceptions of the reentry process, including specific concerns about program strengths and weaknesses. Several themes arose from the analysis and respondents offered insights into the importance of job skills and educational training, and the value of instrumental and expressive social support from program staff. Job skills and placement were frequently referenced as important, mostly identified as an invaluable area of the programming offered by VLS partners, and such perceptions are buttressed by the fact that previous literature established that job training and placement significantly reduces risk of recidivism (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014; Northcutt Bohmert, Hood, & Meckes, 2017). Thus, client perceptions of the value of employment training and job placement fits seamlessly with existing literature on the subject.

Social supports, both instrumental and expressive, were widely referenced as a strength of the VLS programs by interviewees, and those employed in these organizations should be applauded for creating a caring environment in which they delivered reentry services. The need for social support remains an important and understudied element of reentry programming, and Nebraska VLS service providers appear aware of the significance of social support as a success agent for reentry. This fits the argument offered by Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones (2014) when they wrote:

...recently released offenders must have a social support system in place to provide a structure and hold them accountable for their actions in a manner different than that provided by parole officers. Struggling with the effects of institutionalization, offenders not only require some sense of structure in their lives, but may also need someone to assist them as they make everyday and oftentimes mundane decisions. This will ensure that offenders do not fall back into old habits or begin associating with old friends

involved with criminal behavior, especially with such opportunities present in these often socially and economically deprived communities (p. 62).

While clients' perceptions offer just one data-point of assessment, such information is particularly vital in structuring reintegration programming that meets clients' expressed needs. The social support elements should certainly continue, and VLS programs must assess both client requirements and community strengths and limitations to ensure the most supportive reintegration process.

The two interrelated barriers identified in the analysis related to client connections with society as the majority did not indicate attachment to the wider community. Many also believed opportunities remained blocked because of their status as felons. As such, reentry under a punitive justice system and stigmatizing community seems to afford clients limited chances to fully reintegrate into society (Kury, 2016). These challenges to community integration could be further complicated if the supportive services offered by VLS programming is withdrawn following program completion. This may indicate the need for bridge programming or extended supportive services. Many VLS programs already do this, but more official channels should be established to provide ongoing support when participants are living in the community after release. Additionally, there should be more focus on community involvement to spread awareness about the needs and value of this population. Efforts could include more campaigns to reach other service providers or employers to boost social supports in communities. Transitional and long-term social support should remain a focal point of future research and reentry programs must assess the potential of these supports to reduce recidivism.

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## APPENDIX 1: VOCATIONAL AND LIFE SKILLS PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Introduction:** Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today about your experiences. We value your feedback. The purpose of this interview is to provide greater insight into the reentry process in Nebraska to see what was helpful for you. I will be asking you questions regarding your reentry planning and your program experience. We will also discuss other challenges you may face and your plans for the future. Your answers are confidential and will remain with me. I will ask a few demographic questions towards the end of the interview, but I will not ask for your name or other identifying information.

**Note:** Interviews will have questions to lead the conversation but will remain open so that new ideas may be explored as they are brought up during the interview. Feel free to add additional comments at any point that are related to the questions. Interviews will be recorded to be transcribed at a later date. The interview is expected to last around 60-90 minutes.

**Do you have any questions for me before I begin?**

**Program:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Pre-Program and Background

*First, I would like to ask you a few questions regarding your experiences before the program and your reentry planning.*

1. What kind of reentry planning did you do before starting this program?
  - a. What was most helpful and least helpful about that process?
2. Are you currently under supervision?
  - a. Did you begin the program under supervision? Did you finish your sentence/jam out?
3. How long have you spent under some type of correctional supervision in your life?
  - a. (months/years; probation, parole, corrections)
  - b. How long was spent for the most recent stay/probation?
4. What is your previous employment/job skills?
5. Are you currently employed?
  - a. If yes, what type of job do you have? How many hours/week.

If no, what are you doing now to find a job? Do you feel prepared to lead the search?

## **Program Experience and Satisfaction**

*Next, we will move into questions about this specific reentry program and your satisfaction with that program.*

1. Give me an overview of what you participated in during this program.
2. What type of skills or training did you gain by participating in this program? (job/educational/life skills etc.)
  - a. What is your previous employment history and/or job skills?
  - b. How will this translate into your life?
3. Would you change anything about the structure of the program? (length, schedule, classes, etc.)
4. What is the most valuable thing you got out of this program?
  - a. Least valuable or how it can be improved?
5. What was not part of the program that would have been helpful?
6. Would you recommend this program to other who are leaving a facility or on parole/probation? Why or why not?
7. How prepared do you feel to move forward with your life after this program (0%-100%)?
8. Did you receive additional services from other places in the community?
  - a. From where? What did they help with?

## **Outside Factors**

*Now I would like to explore other things in your life that might make your reentry difficult and may not have been addressed in this program. I am going to read a list of things that you may be facing. Tell me 'yes' to any of them you are currently dealing with or expect to deal with in the near future. Tell me 'no' if this is not or will not be a problem for you.*

## **Challenges**

- Trouble accessing substance misuse services for drugs or alcohol (or a history of substance use)
  - Trouble accessing mental health services
  - Lack of computer skills
  - Lack of other job or life skills
- List:
- Disability
  - Access to safe and affordable housing
- Follow-Up: where are you or where do you plan on living? At risk of homelessness?
- Affordable childcare (if applicable)
  - Reliable transportation (public transportation, vehicle, regular ride etc.)

- Trouble meeting probation or parole conditions (if applicable)

List:

- What are other challenges you may face that were not mentioned above?
- For all of these things you identified as challenges, how will they affect you reentry?(go through all mentioned)

### **Protective Factors**

*There may also be a number of factors in your life that provide additional support during your return to the community. Tell me which of the following apply to you.*

- I have support from family
  - Positive influence? How do they help?
- I have support from friends
  - Positive influence? How do they help?
- I feel like I am part of a community (city, church, school, program etc.)
- Other positive aspects (list)

### **Other Changes (attitudinal, behavioral, motivation to change)**

*The next set of questions are about changes in attitude or behaviors since starting the program.*

1. What kind of lifestyle changes are you making or are planning to make that are different than your old lifestyle?
2. What motivates you to continue going to this program?
3. Have you noticed any differences in how you react in situations that used to make you angry, stressed, sad etc.?
  - a. Have these behaviors changed since starting this program? How so?
4. Can you describe some of the things that lead to the crimes you committed (behaviors/attitudes)?
  - a. Have these changed?? How so?
5. What is your plan to continue on this path of change?

**Future and Goals**

*Next, I am going to ask you some questions about your goals and where you see yourself in the future.*

1. What are your goals in the next year? (employment, social, personal)
2. What are your goals in the next 5-10 years? (employment, social, personal)
3. How do the skills you learned in this program relate to those goals?
4. What do you think is the most important thing that will keep you out of the correctional system?
  - a. Was this present in the past? What is different this time?

***Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience in this program or your reentry process as a whole?***

**Demographic**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Education Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Children/Dependents: \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you again for providing valuable information that will help to grow and improve the reentry process in the state of Nebraska. If you have any additional comments related to this interview, please contact a staff member at this program.*

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