

**GRANT  
CYCLE FIVE:  
YEAR ONE**



**JULY 1, 2023  
TO  
JUNE 30, 2024**

# **VOCATIONAL & LIFE SKILLS EVALUATION ANNUAL REPORT**

 | NEBRASKA CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH

 | **N** SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY  
AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents evaluation updates for the Vocational and Life Skills Program (VLS) for the first year of Grant Cycle Five (July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024). This report contains:

- 1) the VLS logic model for grant cycle four,
- 2) a geographical depiction of where providers offer services and/or programs,
- 3) a snapshot of participation across the programs,
- 4) program and staff highlights,
- 5) program offerings provided in the final year of grant cycle four.

This report is collaborative in its presentation given that it is shared with NDCS administrators and funded program providers in the final drafts to ensure it is comprehensive in measurement, analyses, and result interpretations. Feedback and questions on this report can be directed to the Principal Investigator, Dr. Ryan Spohn, whose contact information is on the back of this report.

The Nebraska Center for Justice Research (NCJR), housed at the University of Nebraska Omaha, has evaluated the VLS initiative since 2014. NCJR provides reports to the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) regarding the implementation process and data updates on a monthly and quarterly basis. The VLS evaluation adheres to evaluation requirements outlined in LB 896 and is intended to provide a grant cycle interim look at the progression.



# PROGRAM PROVIDER DESCRIPTIONS



Associated Builders & Contractors (ABC) is part of a national company that provides trade-specific apprenticeship training and work-based learning opportunities for careers in the construction industry.



Black Men United (BMU) is a non-profit corporation that was founded in 2003 and focuses on human services, training, and community development organization. The primary goal of BMU is to help Black men and boys grow and support the development of their communities.



Bristol Station with the Western Alternative Corrections, Inc. allows formerly incarcerated individuals to transition into the community in a residential setting while providing opportunities of self-discovery and pro-social routine development.



Community Alliance is a non-profit agency serving individuals who are experiencing challenges with substance abuse and their mental health. They provide a diverse range of services such as psychiatric and health care, supportive housing, family education, vocational and community rehabilitation.



The Community Justice Center (CJC) provides restorative justice programming and restorative re-entry services. The mission of CJC is to transform harm to healing and hope by advancing community safety, respect, responsibility, reintegration, relationships, and healing through restorative justice evidence-based programming.



Mental Health Association (MHA) promotes a culture of hope and healing through Intentional Peer Support services that includes evidence-based programming in both residential and correctional settings.



Metropolitan Community College (MCC) is a public education institution that supports the 180 Re-entry Assistance Program (180 RAP) to provide education and work readiness training both within correctional facilities and on the Omaha campus.



Midland University created the Reentry Code Academy (RCA) which would assist inmates with the process of returning to society. The RCA could be implemented at any of the nine correctional facilities in Nebraska based on the need.



Opening Doors is a program administered by the Center for People. It provides comprehensive services and opportunities to support low-income, high needs individuals in correctional facilities and at the Center for People facility in Lincoln.



Persevere is a non-profit organization with the goals of increasing public safety and reducing recidivism. Their programming includes technology-based job training, career readiness instruction and support, case management, job placement, and long-term reentry support.



Project Reset is a nonprofit organization focused on increasing the qualified workforce in NE that support formerly incarcerated persons in gaining and maintaining trade employment as they work towards a designated trade apprentice status.



ReConnect, Inc. offers short courses that balance life skills and cognitive restructuring techniques with employment training to help clients reach their full potential.

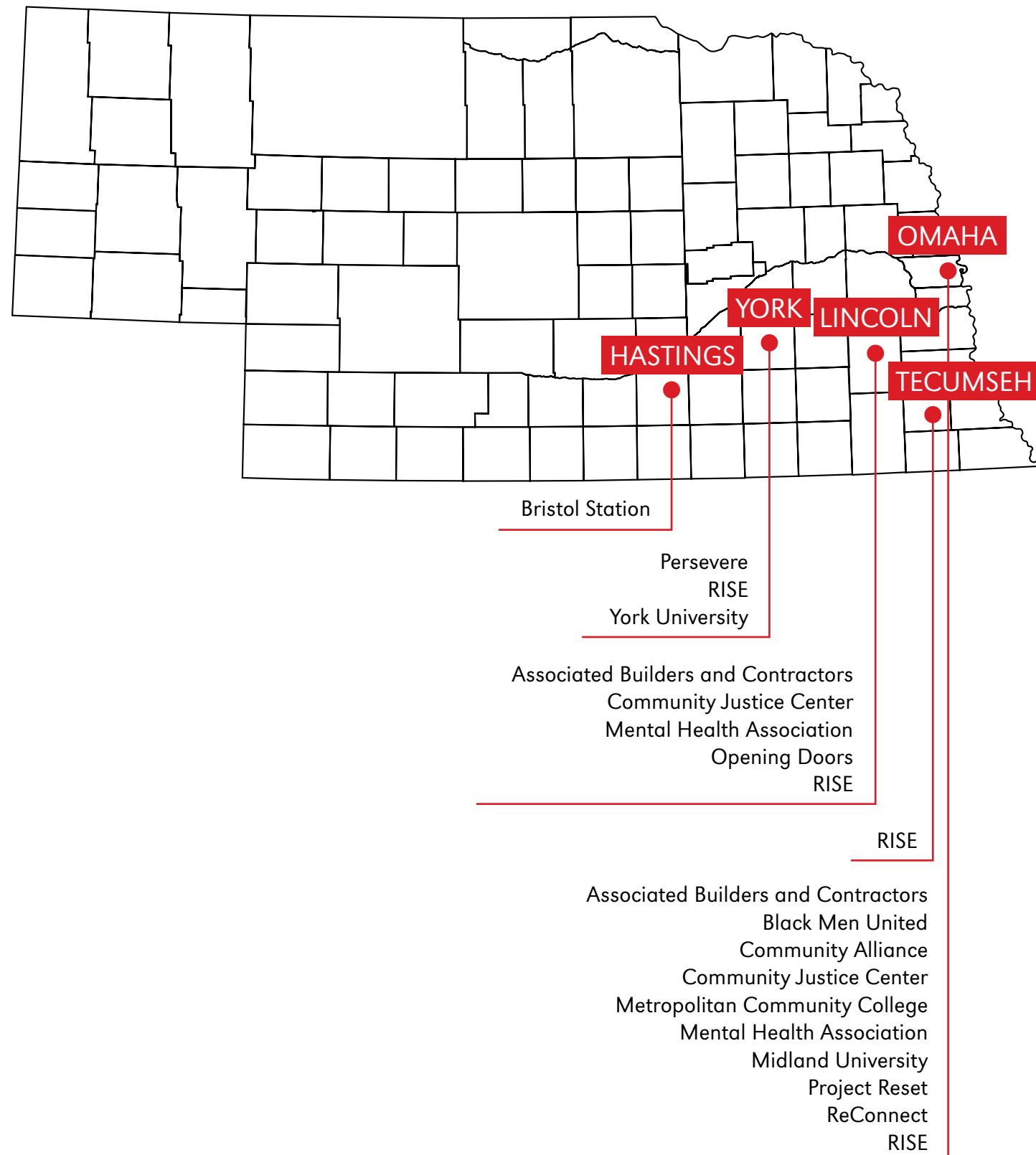


RISE seeks to end cycles of incarceration by equipping currently and formerly incarcerated people with job readiness, reentry planning, housing and employment pathways that help participants thrive.



York University is a private education institution that provides participants the opportunity to earn an Associate of Arts degree and prepares them for gainful employment using a spiritual approach to improve cognitive thinking skills and relationship skills.

# VLS SERVICE GEOGRAPHIC REACH



# THEORY OF CHANGE

A *theory of change* refers to the central mechanism by which change comes about for individuals targeted by interventions.<sup>1</sup> NDCS seeks to increase the overall quality of life and meaningful employment among VLS participants, which can indirectly reduce recidivism.<sup>2</sup> Reentry programming reduces the barriers individuals face as they reintegrate back into the community, but the environments to which they return are often conducive to criminal behavior. Thus, programming alone is not a complete solution to recidivism, but it can equip individuals with valuable skills that can alleviate strain in the reentry process. NDCS currently administers funding for 14 service providers that support individuals during the reentry process. Some VLS providers focus on job training that has been demonstrated to increase earning potential and reduce economic strain. Others offer education that seeks to broaden individual perspectives, increase readiness for more advanced vocations, and increase self-efficacy. Finally, mental health is addressed by some VLS service providers to increase functionality and self-esteem. *Collectively, VLS service providers deliver interventions intended to increase pro-social behaviors, confidence, competence, job skills, and social awareness.*

Individuals chose to commit crime for a variety of reasons, such as having limited legal income or embracing anti-social attitudes developed as a juvenile.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the decision to change one's lifestyle within the context of effective and available social support systems must happen for positive change to occur.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes interacting with others who have been successful in reentry can provide the motivation to change patterns of criminal behavior. Many VLS staff have lived-experience with incarceration, mental health needs, and/or substance use, and those experiences often inform staff on ways to motivate participants and increase trust in the process of behavioral and lifestyle change. Once striving towards conformity, the likelihood of someone re-offending *can and often does* decrease.<sup>5</sup>



When the VLS program was initiated in 2014, lawmakers were discussing the importance of community supervision of persons released from prison. These discussions were informed by a Council of State Governments (CSG) study, which indicated that incarcerated persons with short prison sentences were often released from prison without community supervision. CSG's report also indicated that Nebraska lacked parole guidelines to ensure those convicted of serious felonies received community supervision.<sup>6</sup> Advocates of public safety suggest that a period of community supervision is a prudent component of the efforts to assist individuals making a safe transition, and is supported by empirical evidence.<sup>7</sup> However, the logic that community supervision increases returns to prison through these supervision efforts (e.g., drug tests, portable breath tests for alcohol, and home visits to check for weapons or criminal associations) is sound, and supported by considerable evidence.<sup>8,9</sup>

As a complement to necessary community supervision, VLS programming generally uses a strength-based strategy to address client needs. VLS focuses on promoting meaningful employment through a variety of case management and supervision strategies. Some examples of supervision provided through VLS program offerings include highly structured residential placements; mental health-focused transitional housing; cognitive-based programs that address criminal thinking and promote pro-social thinking; vocational training programs that prepare individuals for careers in industry; and educational courses that promote individuals'

educational and career goals. Although focus and dosage (or intensity) vary by program and individual, VLS grantees place individuals in supportive, pro-social environments that hold participants accountable for attendance and completion, while promoting cognitive and behavioral change targeted at meaningful employment and long-term community success.

Finally, in addition to improving the quality of life among participants and their families, increased employment rates among participants also benefits the state of Nebraska by reducing strain on general social services, by increasing tax contributions, and by contributing to safer communities.<sup>10</sup> The logic model on page 11 of this report illustrates this theory of change that is possible with the support of multiple agencies, employers, and service providers.



# Theory of Change

Reentry programming can reduce barriers for justice involved

Increase skilled workforce in the state of Nebraska

## Long-term Goals:

Increase overall quality of life among participants

Increase meaningful employment among participants

Decrease recidivism rates among participants

## Grantee Outcomes

Increase Capacity

Increase Support

Increase Action

# VLS PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL GRANT CYCLE 5 (2023-2025)

Input					
Legislative funds	Physical space	Equipment	Collaborate services	Internal svaluations	Evaluation meetings
Participation			Outputs		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Participants</li><li>✓ NDCS</li><li>✓ Probation</li><li>✓ Parole</li><li>✓ Grantees<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Administration</li><li>• Case workers</li><li>• Instructors</li></ul></li><li>✓ Community partners</li><li>✓ Employers</li><li>✓ Evaluators</li></ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Case plans and leading measures</li><li>✓ Expanded skill set</li><li>✓ Degrees, certifications, or licenses earned</li><li>✓ Identification documents obtained</li><li>✓ Basic needs met</li><li>✓ Stabilizing factors maintained<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Housing</li><li>• Employment/education</li><li>• Mental health management</li><li>• Substance use management</li><li>• Family/supportive relationships</li></ul></li><li>✓ Increased<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attitudinal scale scores</li><li>• Marketability</li><li>• Pro-social resolve</li><li>• Social supports</li></ul></li><li>✓ Institutional navigation skills</li><li>✓ Employment obtained</li><li>✓ Increased pro-social connections</li><li>✓ Community integration</li></ul>		
Activities					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Intake &amp; assessment</li><li>✓ Training<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vocational</li><li>• Educational</li><li>• Life skills</li></ul></li><li>✓ Barrier assistance</li><li>✓ Basic need assistance</li><li>✓ Life coaching and case management</li><li>✓ Facilitate community networking</li></ul>					
External Factors					
+/- Peer Networks			Hiring Bias of Justice Involved		

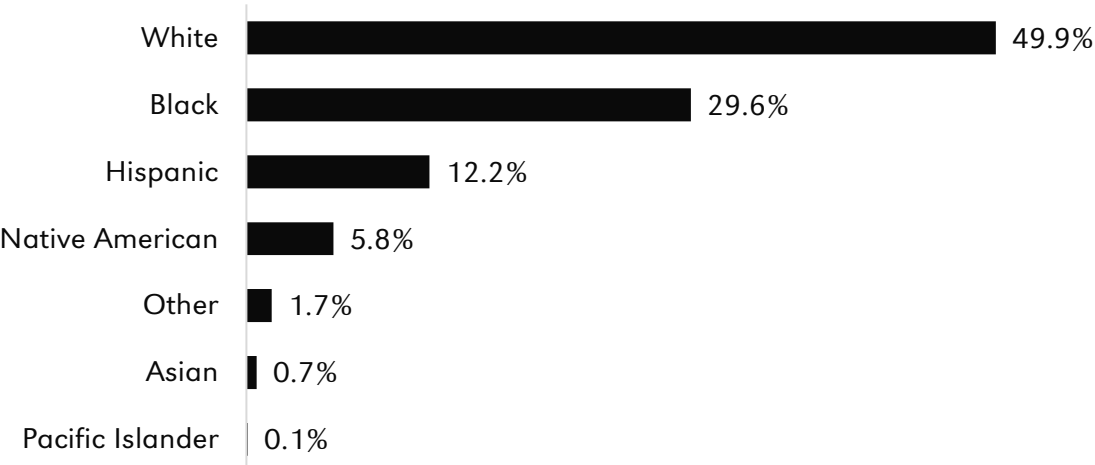


# PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

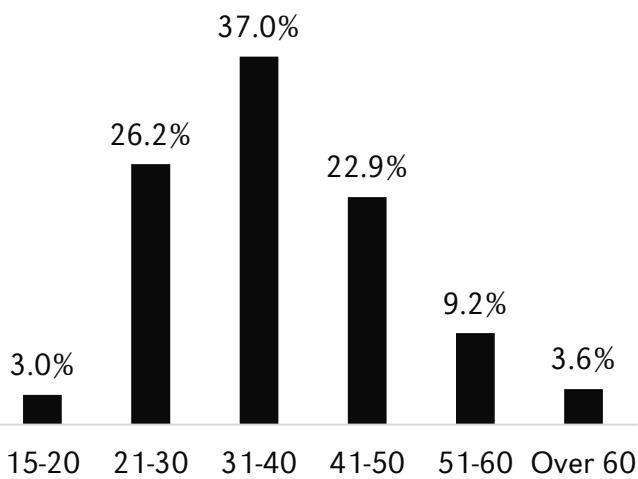
Program staff collect and verify a variety of self-reported information from participants in their programs. In this report, we present select characteristics on VLS participants.



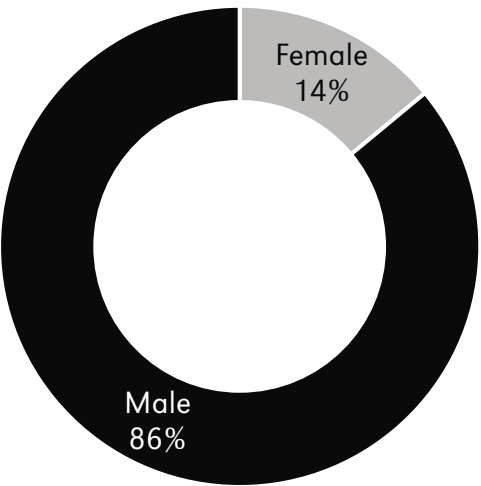
Race and Ethnicity



Age



Gender



# VLS PARTICIPATION FOR YEAR ONE OF GRANT CYCLE FIVE

There have been **3,303** successful completions out of the **3,382** VLS participations that ended in the first year of grant cycle five. Participants are considered successfully completed when they meet all requirements set by program staff. Although most participants successfully completed programming (**98%**), others stopped for a variety of reasons: decided to leave on their own accord (withdrawn from program) or were asked to leave by the program (terminated from program). The average VLS participant completed programming within **71** days.

Table 1: Participation in Year One Across VLS Programs

Program Provider	Total Participant Completions <sup>a</sup>	Successful Completions <sup>b</sup>	Average Days to Successful Completion
ABC	334	310	10
Black Men United	114	114	2
Bristol Station	71	64	Not applicable <sup>c</sup>
Community Alliance	195	135	92
CJC	797	794	4
MHA	787	757	54
MCC	1,432	1,416	17
Midland University	16	5	200
Opening Doors	174	150	22
Persevere	14	10	368
Project Reset	150	149	46
ReConnect	616	604	30
RISE	313	307	12
York University	3	0	Not applicable
Total Individuals Across VLS Programs	3,382	3,303	71 Days

<sup>a</sup> **Total participations:** A summation of individuals who participated in VLS funded programming in the year and ended a program offering by the end of the year.

<sup>b</sup> **Successful completions:** A summation of individuals who completed all required components of a VLS program offering during the year.

<sup>c</sup> Days until completion across the different program offerings within the larger residential program are not an appropriate estimation of the average time commitment for Bristol Station participants. Rather, it takes more days on average to complete all the recommended program offerings at Bristol Station.

# ASSOCIATION OF BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

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



ABC Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Applied Construction Math	1	0	1
Core	19	7	26
Electrical 1	2	2	4
Electrical 2	2	1	3
Electrical 4	2	0	2
OSHA 10 Hour Construction	213	10	223
OSHA 10 Hour General Industry	240	12	252
OSHA 30 Hour Construction	8	3	11
Plumbing 1	1	0	1
Total	488	35	523

# BLACK MEN UNITED PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

The mission of Black Men United is to help Black men and boys flourish and support the development of the communities where they live, work and play. The Kumani Center strengthens local communities by providing justice-touched individuals holistic support to help them reconnect with their families, reintegrate back into their community, and restore their economic opportunities through employment and entrepreneurship education and support.



Black Men United Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Reentry Navigation	120	0	120
Workforce & Life Skills	4	0	4
Total	124	0	124



# BRISTOL STATION PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

Bristol Station assists formerly incarcerated persons in transitioning into the community in a residential setting located in Hastings, NE. They provide opportunities of self-discovery and encourage participants to develop sustainable pro-social routines.



<i><b>Bristol Station Program Offerings</b></i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Incomplete</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Communication Skills/Problem Solving</i>	6	1	<b>7</b>
<i>Conflict Resolution</i>	43	17	<b>60</b>
<i>Dress for Success</i>	43	17	<b>60</b>
<i>Employment Readiness</i>	40	2	<b>42</b>
<i>Employment Retention</i>	35	10	<b>45</b>
<i>Getting Back on Track</i>	2	0	<b>2</b>
<i>Interviewing Skills</i>	42	18	<b>60</b>
<i>Job Coaching</i>	42	18	<b>60</b>
<i>MRT</i>	1	1	<b>2</b>
<i>Money Management</i>	7	1	<b>8</b>
<i>Other Services</i>	2	0	<b>2</b>
<i>Personal Growth/Family Reunification</i>	18	2	<b>20</b>
<i>Relapse Prevention Group</i>	14	4	<b>18</b>
<i>Residential Case Management</i>	40	18	<b>58</b>
<i>Residential Reentry</i>	42	17	<b>59</b>
<i>Transitional Skills</i>	21	5	<b>26</b>
<i>Victim Awareness</i>	4	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>534</b>

# COMMUNITY ALLIANCE PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

Community Alliance seeks to decrease recidivism and provide new opportunities and positive outcomes for individuals who were previously incarcerated and are struggling with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. The program will result in a safer community and provide support to individuals facing significant mental health and/or substance abuse challenges who are reintegrating into society after a period of incarceration.



<i><b>Community Alliance Program Offerings</b></i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Incomplete</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Care Coordination</i>	38	2	<b>40</b>
<i>Charting a New Course</i>	56	25	<b>81</b>
<i>Employment Assistance</i>	24	3	<b>25</b>
<i>Family Support</i>	0	1	<b>1</b>
<i>Financial Literacy</i>	55	55	<b>110</b>
<i>Housing Assistance</i>	24	0	<b>24</b>
<i>Integrated Health</i>	12	2	<b>14</b>
<i>Peer Support/Mentoring</i>	10	1	<b>11</b>
<i>Substance Use Support Group</i>	2	0	<b>2</b>
<i>Transportation Assistance</i>	4	0	<b>4</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>314</b>

# COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

The Community Justice Center provides restorative justice programming and follow-up restorative reentry programs and services that adhere to restorative justice practices. They offer institutional and community programming that serves the needs of the population affected by harm.



Community Justice Center Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Circles of Support	533	0	533
Community/Family Support	32	0	32
Restorative Justice Intervention/Key Reentry Support	41	0	41
Victim Empathy	737	3	740
Total	1,343	3	1,346

# METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

Metropolitan Community College is a public education institution that supports the RAP 180 program to provide education and work readiness training both within prison and on the Omaha campus. They provide college courses, workshops, employment consultations, and a food pantry for those in need.



MCC Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
3 MCC Core Credit Courses	2	0	2
Associate Degree	5	0	5
CDL Preparation	33	0	33
Employment Readiness	375	0	375
Forklift Certification	68	0	68
Four-Week Workshops	40	0	40
Long-Term Relief Group	35	0	35
MCC Credit Course	582	101	693
MCC Certificate of Completion	9	0	9
National Career Readiness Certificate	3	0	3
National Certification	7	0	7
Non-Credit Workshop	277	0	277
Orientation	910	0	910
OSHA	17	0	17
Other Services	447	0	447
Trauma Informed Peer Support	243	0	243
Total	3,053	101	3,154



# MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

The Mental Health Association provides peer-run behavioral and “wrap-around” support services in Lincoln and Omaha. This holistic approach provides participants with access to services on an as-needed basis. Services include evidence-based programming and peer-group activities that are provided in residential and facility settings.



MHA Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
CARES	76	29	105
HONU	53	17	70
HOPE	219	0	219
Intentional Peer Support (Peer)	1	0	1
Outreach	9	0	9
Peer Prevention Group	531	0	531
Rent Wise	66	0	66
Total	955	38	1,001

# MIDLAND UNIVERSITY PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

The Reentry Code Academy program aims to teach individuals transferable skills marketable for junior developer employment that allows participants to attain a living wage after release. In addition to providing participants with education, the program also focuses on developing interpersonal skills to help job prospects and to maintain jobs upon hiring.



Midland University Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Reentry Code Academy	5	11	16
Total	5	11	16

# OPENING DOORS PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

Opening Doors is a program administered by the Center for People. It provides comprehensive services and opportunities to support low-income, high-needs ex-offenders in prison and at the Center for People facility in Lincoln. Services include courses or trainings, but focus on relational, cognitive, and technical skillsets.



Opening Doors Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Career Connection	5	2	7
Center Care Competencies	131	23	154
Computer/Administrative Skills	129	10	139
MIG Welding	10	0	10
Other	4	2	6
Tooling-USNE	1	0	1
Warehouse/Manufacturing Logistics	49	4	55
Total	329	41	370

# PERSEVERE PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

Persevere offers a holistic, comprehensive program of evidence-based practices including technology-based job training, career readiness instruction and support, wraparound case management, job placement, and long-term reentry support to help justice-impacted individuals develop meaningful job skills, gain access to the labor market, and succeed in quality jobs in the technology industry.



Persevere Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Career Readiness	10	4	14
Coding/Tech Instruction	10	4	14
Total	20	8	28



# PROJECT RESET PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

Project Reset is a nonprofit organization focused on increasing the qualified workforce in the state of Nebraska at the Nebraska Center for Workforce Development and Education. They support formerly incarcerated persons in gaining and maintaining trade employment as they work towards a designated trade apprentice status.



Project Reset Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Apprenticeship Placement	3	1	4
Core Foundations Workshop	40	3	43
Financial Wellness Workshop	26	0	26
First Aid	4	0	4
Fork Lift	3	0	3
Hand & Power Tool Training	14	0	14
Job Coaching & Development	48	0	48
Mentorship	49	0	49
Orientation	119	0	119
OSHA 10	6	0	6
Pre-Apprenticeship Employment	2	0	2
Resume & Interview Workshop	55	0	55
Stability Factor Improved	32	0	32
Tape Measure Training	15	0	15
Trade Job Placement	12	0	12
Trade Preparation Workshop	13	16	29
Transitional Job Placement	25	6	39
Total	466	27	493

# RECONNECT PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

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



Reconnect Program Offerings	Completed	Incomplete	Total
Construction Tool-Box Credentials	5	0	5
Final Number	6	0	6
Final Number 2.0 - Independent Learning	71	0	71
GPS (self-paced)	40	0	40
KEYS 1	50	0	50
KEYS 2	30	0	30
Post-Release Reentry Support	179	3	182
Ready for Work	1	0	1
Right Start	4	0	4
Right Start 2.0	227	1	228
Success Prep	202	12	214
Success Prep-Bloom	36	2	38
Total	851	18	869

# RISE PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

RISE seeks to end cycles of incarceration by equipping currently and formerly incarcerated people with job readiness, reentry planning, and housing and employment pathways that help participants thrive in their communities.



<i><b>RISE Program Offerings</b></i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Incomplete</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Crisis Intervention</i>	85	0	<b>85</b>
<i>Emotional Support</i>	1,285	1	<b>1,286</b>
<i>Employment Assistance</i>	172	0	<b>172</b>
<i>Family Program</i>	22	0	<b>22</b>
<i>Financial Assistance</i>	54	0	<b>54</b>
<i>Focused Cognitive Work</i>	1	0	<b>1</b>
<i>Housing Assistance</i>	132	0	<b>132</b>
<i>Parole/Probation/Supervised Release Support</i>	156	0	<b>156</b>
<i>Post-Release Reentry Support</i>	25	4	<b>29</b>
<i>Pre-Release Reentry Support</i>	59	6	<b>65</b>
<i>RISE</i>	47	4	<b>51</b>
<i>Reentry Planning</i>	480	0	<b>480</b>
<i>Substance Use Assistance</i>	6	0	<b>6</b>
<i>Transportation Assistance</i>	45	0	<b>45</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,569</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2,584</b>

# YORK UNIVERSITY PROGRAM OFFERINGS PROVIDED

York University is a private education institution that provides participants with education courses and prepares them for gainful employment using a spiritual approach to improve cognitive thinking skills and relationship skills. Participants earn college credit with slightly modified curricula from regular York courses.



<i><b>York University Program Offerings</b></i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Incomplete</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Associate Degree</i>	0	3	<b>3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>



# PARTICIPANT HIGHLIGHTS: YORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT ARTWORK



York University recently published student artwork in a booklet titled UNVARNISHED WORDS for distribution in Spring 2025. A handful of featured pieces were created by students residing at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (NCCW). Since this work was developed during the first year of Grant Cycle Five, it felt fitting to include it in this year's annual report. The first section showcases six-word stories—brief but powerful reflections of identity, while the second includes a narrative reflection. Together, the artwork offers a window into the ways students are grappling with their past, contemplating their present, and imagining their futures.

## Six-Word Stories

The students in ENG 113: Composition I at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women were asked to write a six-word story that represented them in some way. This is what they (and their instructor) wrote:

- Brittianee Bates – “The loudest silence I’ve ever heard.”
- Cassandra Farfalla – “Like a phoenix, I’ll rise again.”
- Maria Gonzalez-Diego – “Manifesting my life. Adding intense pressure.”
- Steven Hardy – “Never left college. Right choice? Maybe.”
- Andrea Moffatt-Rankin – “Molding reality to fit my perception.”
- Carla Montoya – “Dream, pray, and don’t lose hope.”
- Chinyere Nwujwu – “Little white lies tell big stories.”
- ShyAnne Parrott – “Tinted lenses. Hopeful wishes. Dreamless visions.”
- April Rogers – “Everywhere I go, there I am.”
- Harlie Saathoff – “Stuck in a revolving set routine.”
- Paige Seaton – “Colors were everywhere. Life is gray.”
- Sharon Turnell – “Hold on. Pain ends. Don’t despair.”
- Tausha Whitman – “Sorry – messy house. Making memories here!”

## Crushed Spirit

While sipping this instant black Columbian coffee from a small plastic, tan cup, the acrid bitterness dominates my taste buds. A touch of granulated, white sugar only brings out the sweet bitterness even more than before. With my eyes wide open, there is nothing around me to brag about. The floor is made of warped white and blue speckled tiles that have seen thousands of broken footprints. They are shiny from recent weekly buffing. I can see my reflection in them. The four walls seem to be closing in on me, trapping and crushing me in mind, body, and spirit. Depression descends upon me knowing what these drab, gray walls represent. I am a caged bird whose wings have been clipped by my own past life choices.

Laying on the bottom bunk, I can see an assortment of plastic, see-through, prison-issued items hanging from the underside of the top bunk. The 15-inch Hiteker prison television/monitor sways from the paperclips that hold it up. The set’s cords slither across the wall like a black, garter snake. A small desk lamp casts a luminescent glow upon the wall as dust particles dance in its ambience. The clip-on fan, that doesn’t oscillate, whirls on, creating circulation and the ability to breath in this 10 x 13 cubical that was meant to house three female inmate, but lucky for me, only two of us are assigned to it right now.

In the community room, Black R-10 headphones adorn my ears. My curly brown hair poofs out from the sides. The headphones help to zone out the loud and increasingly irritating sound of the squawking, diverse group of women who are conversing in an all-too-close-in proximity lobby. The music cascades into my eardrums, blasting into my conscious mind on the most damaging volume available. The artist, Juice Wrld, serenades and poetically describes my past life with each verse. The lyrics dance and glide around in my ears and thoughts. They create visions of who I once was. Charged with emotion, this artist’s music resonates with my own tumultuous emotions. Together, Juice Wrld and I fade away from these peeling, gray walls and free-fall on this emotionally damaging roller coaster only known as prison.

~ **Cassandra J. Farfalla, YU student – NCCW**

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND OOH DE LALLY

Ooh De Lally is a nonprofit restaurant in Omaha's historic Dundee neighborhood that blends culinary excellence with a powerful mission. In partnership with Metropolitan Community College's (MCC) 180 Re-entry Assistance Program, it provides formerly incarcerated individuals with hands-on culinary training and meaningful employment opportunities. Through a 12-week internship, participants rotate through various kitchen stations, gaining skills and confidence to support their reintegration into society.



Located at 4916 Underwood Avenue, Ooh De Lally occupies the former space of Mark's Bistro and honors its legacy by featuring Mark's Signature Mac & Cheese on the menu. The restaurant offers a range of dishes, including a Connecticut-style lobster roll, seared scallops, and a dark chocolate crème brûlée.

### Ooh De Lally Hours

Tuesday through Thursday from 11 A.M.-2 P.M. and 4-9 P.M.

Friday and Saturday from 11 A.M.-2 P.M. and 4-10 P.M.

Sunday from 10 A.M.-2 P.M. and 4-9 P.M.

Reservations are recommended.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This report underscores the enduring value of the Vocational and Life Skills (VLS) Initiative in Nebraska. With over 3,300 successful program completions across 14 partner organizations, the collective impact of these efforts is significant. From educational attainment and vocational certifications to emotional resilience and peer support, VLS participants are not only gaining critical skills but also finding meaningful pathways to stability, dignity, and reintegration.

The stories and data presented here highlight both the measurable outcomes and the human experiences behind the numbers. Whether it's a published six-word story from a York University student or a new career opportunity developed through Ooh De Lally and MCC, each example represents a step forward — not just for individual participants, but for the communities to which they return.



These successes were made possible through sustained collaboration between program providers, NDCS, evaluators, community stakeholders, and the continued support from the Nebraska Legislature.

As we look ahead to the final year of the grant cycle, the Nebraska Center for Justice Research remains committed to capturing and communicating the outcomes of this important initiative. The data will continue to guide improvements, and the stories will continue to inspire our collective vision: one where meaningful second chances are not the exception, but the norm.



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