State Strategies for Advancing Apprenticeship
Expanding Apprenticeship by Developing Workforce Talent Pipelines

IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
Innovative Opportunities with Apprenticeships (IOWA) project in partnership with the Iowa Department of Corrections Apprenticeship Programs

Iowa set a goal to double the number of apprentices in support of the Governor’s Future Ready Iowa Initiative, which aims to upskill at least 70% of Iowans in the workforce with education or training beyond high school by the year 2025. To accomplish this, Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) formed partnerships with state agencies and intermediaries to create targeted pipelines, including a partnership with the Department of Corrections to add four new occupations and to increase the total number of apprentices to 325, double the number of apprentices in Iowa’s correction facilities.

In 2011, Iowa’s Department of Corrections (IDOC) embraced evidence-based decision making to reduce recidivism and improve the ability of offenders to provide for themselves and their families. Three important pieces of information stood out: (1) over 95% of Iowa offenders will eventually leave prison and return to society; (2) people who participate in correctional education programs have 43% lower odds of returning to prison; and (3) education or vocational programs improve ex-offenders’ likelihood of getting a job by 13%. IDOC offered education and vocational training, but a review of offerings revealed that they were often missing a critical component: a recognized credential.

IDOC worked closely with the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) Office of Apprenticeship State Director in 2015 to modify their training to get approval for a statewide Registered Apprenticeship Program with 10 Registered Apprenticeship occupations, which provide nationally-recognized credentials along with proven on-the-job competencies. By 2016, IDOC offered apprenticeships in 19 occupations, such as welder, plumber, cook/food service, and computer operator. “The program is an exceptionally good opportunity and career path,” says Tim Diesburg, Apprenticeship Coordinator for IDOC. “It’s a road to success for offenders and everybody.”

IDOC acts as the program sponsor. Apprentices are employed by IDOC or the Iowa Prison Industries and earn wages that progress from sixty cents to two dollars per hour. (Iowa Prison Industries is an IDOC affiliate that makes products and provides services to government agencies, school districts, and nonprofits, so it provides abundant apprenticeship opportunities in areas such as textiles, signage, furniture making and restoration, and services such as braille translation and moving and installation.) IDOC’s Standards of Apprenticeship outline responsibilities and expectations (such as apprentices tracking their own hours). Every apprentice signs an Apprenticeship Agreement and must pass a 6-month probationary period.

Apprentices access Related Technical Instruction in the correctional facility through self-paced study and distance learning, and local community colleges administer and score exams and provide tutoring. After successful completion of program requirements, apprentices can earn their apprenticeship certificate of completion. Those in the electrician, HVAC, plumbing, refrigeration and air conditioning, and heating programs can also take the state licensing exam to receive their license before they are released. Transition is essential: IDOC helps those who have completed their apprenticeship to find work upon release, and those who have not completed their apprenticeship to transition to another registered apprenticeship program with advanced standing.

The huge difference today is that when I now face organizational barriers, I believe every barrier can be taken down. It can be accomplished if you have the time and the heart to tackle it.

- Tim Diesburg, Apprenticeship Coordinator, Iowa Department of Corrections

IWD came alongside IDOC with State Apprenticeship Expansion Grant funds to build on their success. Funds are used to update curricula, add new occupations (such as landscaping management tech, sewing machine repairer, and carpenter), and increase the total number of active apprentices from 141 to 325. This partnership helps meet grant goals and expands opportunities for ex-offenders to find fulfilling employment once released – reducing recidivism, unemployment, and taxpayer expenses - while improving public safety.
ADVICE TO OTHER STATES

- **Work Closely with Employers to Address Misconceptions and Fears about the Population.** Tim Diesburg and the corrections facility sponsors actively network with area businesses to spread the word about IDOC’s apprentices, hold job fairs, and take offenders approaching their release date to job fairs and interviews. “Getting out there and educating employers is a big part of it.” Employers are drawn to the skill set as well as perks like the Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which gives employers up to $2,400 for hiring felons. Bringing employers onto the job site to meet apprentices, speak with supervisors, and observe the training has also proven effective at overcoming misconceptions and fears. “Be willing to break down barriers. Just because it’s not been done before doesn’t mean it can’t happen.”

- **Let Business Need Drive Selection of Apprenticeship Occupations.** Mr. Diesburg recommends starting with a pilot program in one prison, selecting a few occupations in high demand based on a review of labor market projections and conversations with area employers. He emphasizes the importance of listening to their needs.

- **Build on Existing Successes.** Iowa partnered with IDOC because IDOC had laid the groundwork and possessed the experience and buy-in to expand apprenticeship opportunities. “[Expanding apprenticeship] really can’t be done inside a box. You have to have partners involved in order to reach different populations, different groups, different employers. You yourself don’t have all the answers, so why not go to experts who can help you?” asks IOWA’s Program Coordinator Amy Beller.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPLICATION

- **An Apprenticeship Coordinator Along with Implementation Teams is an Effective Strategy.** Communication is a central component for effectively starting or expanding an apprenticeship program – communication with the USDOL Office of Apprenticeship staff, with employers and community colleges, with prisoners, and with management to build knowledge and buy-in. An Apprenticeship Coordinator can focus on the many details, serve as a point of contact for questions, and provide consistent messaging. Committees that work through planning and implementation details build more widespread buy-in and understanding.

- **Expect Some Unique Challenges Due to Prison Rules.** IDOC had to work through the challenge of getting permission for prisoners to take curriculum textbooks into their cells. They also had to plan how to help significant numbers of apprentices released prior to completion transition to apprenticeships with outside sponsors. (In Iowa, 271 IDOC apprentices have been released prior to completion since the programs began in 2015.)

- **USDOL Office of Apprenticeship Can Help Access and Understand the Apprenticeship World.** IDOC leadership worked closely with the USDOL Office of Apprenticeship State Director and Apprenticeship and Training Representatives to develop apprenticeship standards, program registration, and subsequent revisions to the standards to add new occupations.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

More than 70 offenders and ex-offenders have completed their apprenticeship programs since 2015. IWD and IDOC are collaborating to conduct a survey of individuals released to find out whether they are working in the field of their apprenticeship. They expect survey results in the fall 2017.

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To learn more about the IOWA project, visit:
https://www.iowaworkforcedevelopment.gov/iowa-registered-apprenticeship-apprenticeshipusa

To learn more about the IDOC apprenticeship initiative, visit the Iowa Prison Industries website here: http://www.iaprinsonind.com/