

Workshop 16: Post Release Employment Assistance Service (EAS)

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This paper explores the importance and effectiveness of work preparation, employment, training and general support in the rehabilitation of offenders upon release from prison.

Foreword

This paper is the result of an action learning project which commenced as a pilot in 2000 to assist offenders prepare for employment on release and re-establish themselves in the community. It will outline some of the strategies the Post Release Employment Assistance Program team has implemented. I have not drawn on research but have documented the history, progress, strengths and weaknesses throughout the development of the EAS. While I am delivering these findings, I am aware of the contribution the entire staff has made to this service and without their commitment, we would not have achieved these positive results.

Introduction

The Post Release Employment Assistance Service (EAS) is a successful, innovative service provided to offenders since July 2000. It was first funded through the Department of Corrective Services and is now funded through Department of Employment and Training and administered by the Department of Corrective Services.

Initially the contract was shared between CEA, HTC Vocational Institute and Second Chance. CEA and Second Chance operated in south-east Queensland and the HTC Institute operated, in the north Queensland region. Southern Edge Training now operates the contract in northern Queensland. In 2002 CEA tendered successfully and was granted funding in its own right for the entire south-east Queensland sector.

As south-east Queensland is CEA's region and significantly larger than the north, I will specifically relate CEA's experience in metropolitan, regional and rural south-east Queensland from Gympie to the NSW border and as far west as Tara.

At this point, it is helpful to offer a thumb nail sketch of CEA as an organisation. CEA is a not-for-profit, community-based organisation which has operated for disadvantaged, unemployed people since 1981 in the south-east Queensland area. CEA is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) providing vocational education and community employment programs. We offer employment opportunities to long term, disadvantaged, unemployed

job seekers including mature aged, people with disabilities, people from a non-English speaking background, ex-offenders, youth and indigenous people.

Offenders, while not previously a specific target group in their own right, have always been serviced as a component of the disadvantaged clientele previously mentioned. With this expertise and experience, CEA management and staff considered they were well placed to develop this service successfully offering value for money for the funding body and support, encouragement and positive outcome for clients.

Development of Service

Not having dealt with offenders as a group previously, we were on a steep learning curve to come to grips with departmental and contractual requirements, the best way to meet the needs of offenders and duty of care to staff.

The development of the service was and still is, a continual learning process. It is a case of trial, review and retry and even in our fourth year we are still refining the procedures. Initially, as we were providing the same service, we tried to link forces to partner with the other two EAS providers. One, in the north, was very happy to work with us and the other was keen to work as a referral agency only. In the south-east Queensland region, CEA had half the prisons and the other provider servicing the remainder.

This worked well until offenders were inevitably transferred between correctional centres, then difficulties arose particularly in relation to claiming outcomes. Eventually however, after the pilot evaluation and second submission process, CEA was nominated as the sole provider in 2002 in south-east Queensland. This doubled rewarding payment. CEA is contracted to visit each prison in south-east Queensland. This occurs between one and four times per month depending on the type of centre, the number of offenders, pre release program dates and release dates.

Referral

Clients must now register in prison up to six months prior to their release date in order to be assisted when released. Those on parole or bail are not eligible for the service. CEA's Education Officers also refer clients to agencies which are better placed to assist with specific problems. These referral agencies include St Vincent de Paul for accommodation, The Smith Family for food and furniture, Princess Alexandra Hospital for medical care, TAFE for training purposes, Rehabilitation Centres and Relationship Australia for family counselling. Follow up occurs in all cases to ensure clients get the right help at the right time and return to the EAS to seek employment.

Referral to more specific services such as the Commonwealth Government's Transition to Work program for parents, carers or people over 50 and the Personal Support Program for clients who have multiple barriers to employment is made. While these referrals are not categorised as outcomes, it is possible clients will, in time, receive appropriate assistance and eventually undertake employment through the EAS.

Training

This contract requires CEA to provide basic accredited job search training. While vocational skills training is well recognised and of interest to clients, job search is not particularly valued. This accredited training consists of several competencies 'Resumes

and Portfolios' and 'Job Interviews' from the Certificate I in Employment Skills Training package.

Staff has also provided specific training such as intensive job search or Workplace Health and Safety on a fee-for-service basis in classrooms with clients being bused to our premises. Non-accredited, informal training takes place pre and post release such as methods of seeking work, attitude, interview techniques and personal presentation.

CEA staff builds, where possible, on skills which clients have gained in and out of prison. In some instances, this is the first training they have received post school. It is important to add that CEA as an RTO is also contracted to provide training in Literacy, Engineering, Information Technology and Business in prisons. Students have attended CEA's welding classes at Borallon and upon release, have undertaken further studies at CEA's Industry Training Centre and moved into apprenticeships shortly afterwards.

Staff assists clients through a skill audit, counsel them as a suitable vocational area and arrange relevant training. While funds are not available for extensive training, forklift, first aid and General Safety Certificates are readily available. A recently released male client undertook the Certificate III in Community Services (Aged Care) conducted through CEA's Queenslanders Working Together program and now has a traineeship in an aged persons home. Another, working on a Community Jobs Plan project is due to undertake an apprenticeship as a painter.

Employment

Clients seeking employment must register in prison and are then placed onto our database. Upon release, they contact CEA to arrange an interview to commence job seeking. It is up to the individual client whether or not they advise an employer of their criminal history and approximately 50% will decide to disclose. We ask them only if their crime related to children in order to place them appropriately. the workload but streamlined service delivery with clients having to deal with only one provider.

Originally we designed and presented an 8-week Pre Release program complete with speakers from organisations such as the Domestic Violence Unit. We thought the preparatory phase would be more beneficial than the post release phase. The problem with this was it left no time for actually completing registration forms, skills analysis sheets and the business of finding employment. As a result, the focus shifted more to post release intensive assistance. CEA, instead of conducting our own pre release program, became more involved in the available pre release programs delivered in prisons. Each pre release program has a session on training and employment and CEA staff provide job related information, lists of the type of jobs which may be available on release and the general support services of EAS.

Current Contract

All clients registered in this contract, that is since 1 July 2003 must be registered prior to leaving prison. This varies from previous funding rounds where we have been able to register clients, up to 6 months for males and 12 months for females, post release. The current contract requires CEA to provide 250 outcomes over the period 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004. This may not sound like many but ex-offenders with multiple barriers to employment are people who Centrelink refer to as Intensive Assistance clients. They are

the clients many Job Network providers ‘park’ because they fall into the “too hard” basket, are difficult to place and keep in employment.

Previously Job Network providers, Community Corrections and Centrelinks have called CEA immediately they registered an offender. This still occurs, but unless clients are registered with us pre release we cannot assist them post release. Our figures reveal that each of our 4 Education Officers have 3 to 5 people per day who would like to join the program but are now ineligible. We have to refer them back to the Job Network providers or advise them to undertake their own job search. Facilities are available at CEA for them to do this even though we receive no paid placement or outcome fee.

Our contract is to register clients, place them into employment or training for 20 hours or more per week and maintain that employment for 13 weeks, 91 days in all. On occasions, a client achieves 12 weeks and then returns to prison or disappears. This is disheartening, less because CEA does not get a final payment but more because clients return to prison or we simply do not know what happens to them.

CEA receives payment at three stages during the contract firstly on registration, secondly on placement and thirdly at the 13 week outcome stage which is the most financially

We must ensure a client’s expectations are realistic. We have had bankers who have been convicted of fraud who think they will be able to return to work in a bank. We encourage clients to take advantage of all opportunities and to take ownership of their own job search process. Sitting back and waiting to be offered a position is not how it works and most clients also register with Job Network providers. We will do our best to assist those who work with us and have the right attitude. Some people simply want a job to provide money for travel and to buy a car, others want to establish a solid job on which they can build to create a future for themselves and their families.

Registration, Placement and Outcomes Statistics since 1 July 2000:

Number of registrations	1826	1675 (M)	151 (F)
Number of employment placement	480	445 (M)	35 (F)
Number of 13-week outcomes	377	351 (M)	26 (F)

If previous statistics are used as a guide, 78% of people placed into jobs fulfil the 13-week outcome requirement. Our follow up investigations show, many clients who leave their positions are returned to prison because of drug related offences. Others leave due to low wages, workplace health and safety issues, harassment and discrimination. DCS has recorded that only 13.5% of EAS clients return to prison.

Clients who are not work ready but keen to work are sometimes employed on Community Jobs Plan Projects (CJP) and although not outcomes for CEA, these projects do provide a wage and supported employment. It is stressed to participants that CJP projects are supported employment and are an opportunity to build work habits and skills for 13 weeks. There is a strong emphasis on gaining employment upon completion. Community Employment Development Projects (CDEP) are a ‘real’ outcome if over 20 hours and assist indigenous people and some non-indigenous into work.

CEA staff has established a database of employers who are willing to assist an offender to make a fresh start. Some employers who will take ex-offenders indicate they will not

employ a violent offender or someone who has a history of drug offences but will employ someone with a history of fraud. CEA has a marketing person who canvasses over the phone seeking specific employers in specific vocational and geographic areas. These leads are then referred back to the Education Officer for placement. Clients on the release to work scheme are amongst the easiest to place as they have their basic needs met in terms of accommodation, food and are less likely to be drug affected.

The main employment outcomes are in the labouring and semi-skilled work areas with few moving into professional fields. CEA has employed several ex-offenders, all of whom are still employed and have become extremely valued and trusted employees.

Employers are advised of incentives such as the State Government's "Experience Pays Mature Worker" and Commonwealth Government trainee and apprenticeship incentives. Follow up for 3 months is a feature of this program and CEA staff work closely with employers facilitating mediation sessions, organising training and generally problem solving any workplace difficulties. CEA also supplies work boots, shirts, shorts, chef's and nurse's uniforms, black and whites for hospitality, sunscreen and hats.

We try where possible, to aim for long term employment rather than labour hire and casual, short term positions. We also try to assist people into employment in skill shortage areas where the long term prospects are more promising and where qualifications are valued. While the 13 week outcome period can involve several positions, the best possible result is to seek employment which will assist establish stability and provide continuity of income to rehabilitate our clients into the community.

Work experience can also be organised if a client wishes to explore a particular vocational field. They can volunteer their time, gain work skills, expose themselves to a particular industry and decide if this is the vocational area for them. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate and how keen they are and their skills.

Support services

There are no payments for social outcomes, which are often also significant and the care and support of damaged people is not recognised in terms of this contract. Simply keeping clients from re-offending and serious self-harm, clothed, fed and sheltered are time-consuming but often rewarding bi-products of attempting to place people into employment. For many clients, employment can be the reason stated for contacting CEA but in fact, there is often no-one else to turn to. Some clients make every effort to escape living and working with elements which led to their incarceration.

When the submission was first written, the cost of a Psychologist was factored in the budget to run workshops, counsel clients and assist staff to deal with some confronting issues related to work in prison. Many clients have utilised the service and so too have staff. As part of CEA's duty of care, staff are requested to speak with the Psychologist at least once every 3 months or after a critical incident.

Staff has assisted a father reunite with his 11 year old son, paid his bond to relocate away from drug users to an independent unit where they now live together. The father has been given clothing, a haircut, assistance with dental work and linkages with the Transition to Work program where he has been funded for training. We will continue to monitor his progress and support him into work once training is complete.

An official outcome has not yet been forthcoming but we are vigilant and hopeful.

Staff have supplied welding masks and have provided clients with money for car registration, chef's knives, carpentry tools, fares and bond money. In some cases this money has been a loan and arrangements have been made for repayment. In all but one instance, the money has been repaid sometimes \$20 per fortnight over 8 months.

CEA will not ferry people to and from work but initial transport to get to an interview is often provided. Staff have even met up with clients at petrol stations, paid for petrol so they could get to job interviews. Letters are also written to the Parole Board on behalf of clients to verify they are registered with the service and undertaking training with a view to seeking work on release. Staff also liaise with Centrelink in prison and assist offenders to apply for Department of Housing accommodation on release.

Several clients have admitted that Job Network and Centrelink services were inadequate because the understanding and grass root support was not available. Many offenders seeking work have a fear of failure and are fearful of disclosing due to discrimination.

The desire and need to work is strong but employment without accommodation, food and clothes is useless. Accommodation is a vital component in gaining and maintaining employment. We originally thought many more families would be prepared to take the offender back into their homes. This was not the case. As one woman said to me "I still have my TV and VCR since he went away, why would I want him back?" Sixty percent of ex-offenders who move in with family find it does not work out and leave within two months. Employment without the support services will not happen in sufficient numbers to make this program successful.

Disadvantaged groups

Women are the most disadvantaged of all in mainstream prison populations and the safety of women on release is of great concern. Jobs are not their priority but housing, reuniting with and/or gaining custody of children, is the focus. Years of addiction and lack of education have endowed them with few skills for employment and that can be the prime motivation for women to re-offend. Many look to menial factory jobs and while numbers have been achieved, it has been difficult.

People with disabilities are referred to specialised employment services such as East West Employment and Best Personnel. These providers are aware of and can cater for job seekers with special needs. They are also familiar with incentives that are available to employers for placing a worker with a disability. It should be noted the number of people registered with a disability is 37 (M. 35, F. 2). In reality, the number is much higher due to substance abuse and learning difficulties. Clients do not always recognise or have their disabilities diagnosed.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are another disadvantaged group which are firstly difficult to access in prison and secondly, difficult to contact on release. CEA staff has, with the assistance of DCS, accessed the arts and craft groups to gain registrations and while our contracted numbers have been achieved, it has been challenging. On follow up, the address and phone numbers given on registration forms are not where our clients can be reached. We do what we can and have enlisted the aid of specific agencies such as Eagle Placement Enterprises, the Brisbane Council of Elders, our own indigenous staff members and the indigenous Liaison Officers at Centrelink. We have secured several placements at hotels and stations out west in rural areas that have become long-term

outcomes. Southern Edge Training in Northern Queensland caters much more for indigenous people and CEA's placement and outcome rate is as follows:

Number of registrations	215	193 (M)	25 (F)
Number of placements	21	19 (M)	3 (F)
Number of 13-week outcomes	16	14 (M)	2 (F)

One hundred and thirty-five people from a Non English Speaking Background have registered for assistance. Some have been placed into our English language, literacy and numeracy program and then found work placements. Many NESB clients suffer from lack of English language skills, trauma and torture issues and diminution of dignity. This makes placing clients that much more difficult. Many return home and are employed in family businesses.

Staff

The staff primarily involved in the project include the coordinator, four education officers and a marketing person. Each education officer is responsible for their allocated prisons, Community Corrections centres and area offices. They have undertaken induction and corrections awareness training, have Workplace Assessor qualifications and many years experience in human resources, employment, placement and training. All are mature aged people with commitment to the service and work closely with DCS's own contract manager and employment officers.

The education officers work across CEA's 8 sites, support one another and have exchanged clients to effectively manage difficult ex-offenders. This has provided a fresh case management approach and led to successful outcomes when a client is too dependent on one individual. Staff adheres to CEA's Code of Conduct and clients are interviewed in public places such as coffee shops or correctional centres.

We have monthly staff meetings and invitations to attend are extended to centre managers, psychologists, education officers and coordinators at all correctional centres. Staff from DCS attend as do speakers from Job Network, Centrelink, church groups, indigenous organisations, employer groups and local government. Members of CEA staff also attend stakeholder meetings attended by other service groups such as Legal Aid, Sisters Inside, the Catholic Prison Ministry, S Team and church groups.

Promotion

CEA produces high quality brochures and fliers for prisons, community corrections, area offices, Centrelinks, accommodation centres and places where we can attract the target client group. We have also "spread the word" through the media via Murri Radio 4ZZZ, ABC Radio, The Logan News, all prison newsletters, public speaking engagements and employer groups. A list of jobs is supplied to prisons each month to inform clients of the types and locations of jobs so they know what they can expect on release. They can be optimistic that the system will work for them and good news stories are also forwarded to DCS each month for their Corrections Newsletter.

Evaluation

The service evaluation is constant and ongoing. We have internal weekly and monthly targets and figures are submitted, on a daily basis, to DCS. The fact that we have had 4

successful submissions to DCS in 3 years and a formal evaluation tabled favourably in Parliament, is testimony to the viability of the service.

CEA has not only met but exceeded required outcomes and offered a comprehensive holistic support service well beyond employment and training. We see this program as one that helps limit violence and delinquent behaviour in the community.

Accommodation is still an enormous problem. More clean, safe accommodation available on release would make our lives and the lives of newly released people much more productive. The other major problem is drugs and drug affectedness. It is impossible to maintain employment when clients are drug affected or dependant. It is heartbreaking to find six offenders full time jobs and have those six offenders return to prison within a month due to dirty urine tests. We realise it may take some offenders 3, 4 or 5 exposures to the outside world before succeeding, it is never-the-less disappointing for both clients and CEA staff.

Another difficulty has been the lack of definite release dates. In the first contract, we had access to clients in prison 6 months pre release and 6 months post release for males and 12 months for females. Now we must “capture” clients before they leave prison and, with flexible release dates, it is difficult. Identification is another major problem and one that has been looked at in DCS’s pilot ‘Transitions’ pre release program in which CEA was involved. It would be enormously helpful to have identification pre release for clients to obtain bank accounts, driver’s licences and housing. Equipping ex-offenders with identification, employment, training and a roof over their heads would greatly enhance their chances of gaining and maintaining employment.

It has been a trial and error type process which we have now rendered down into a sound working model. The prospect of funding not being available after June 2004 is real and we would hate to see the momentum this program has gained, be lost. Employment is an important factor in the lives of our clients, not only because it pays the bills, but because it limits isolation, boredom, anxiety and provides structure to daily life. Having a job provides good role modeling for family members where it may otherwise be lacking.

CEA staff feels the EAS is making a difference in the lives of the people the community often does not want to know about. In the words of one happy client “I don’t know how I would have coped without your help. I really like this job and I can get on with my life.”