Issue Brief: Workforce Supports for the Reentry Population During the COVID-19 Pandemic[1]

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Introduction

COVID-19 disproportionately impacted U.S. prison populations. As of June 2020, people incarcerated in federal and state prisons had a rate of infection that was over five times that of people in the general public and a death rate that was about 30 percent higher (Saloner et al. 2020). Factors that may have contributed to these rates were reported to be the lack of social distancing that could not be maintained in correctional facilities and frequent overcrowding (Equal Justice Initiative 2021). Policymakers attempted to reduce populations in the facilities by decreasing admissions and increasing early releases to mitigate these factors, especially early in the pandemic.[2] As has been found in surveys of reentry providers administered in June 2021, they also tended to

Study background

This brief is a product of the Pathway Home Evaluation. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) began funding Pathway Home grants to expand the availability of services for individuals in the justice system, both before and after release, to improve their chances of finding meaningful employment and avoiding recidivism. At that time, DOL also funded Mathematica, and partners Social Policy Research Associates and Council of State Governments Justice Center, to design and conduct an evaluation of the Pathway Home grants. This brief focuses on the first 20 Pathway Home grants awarded in 2020 and describes the grantees' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. DOL also funded an additional 22 grantees in 2021 that are not part of the analysis discussed in this brief. This brief is based on a descriptive study which did not assess the effectiveness of the strategies discussed.

restrict access to organizations providing social services inside facilities during the pandemic (Jarrett and Cohen 2021). These efforts do not appear to have had a large impact on prison and jail populations; after prisons experienced a reduction in their populations in March of 2020, the populations did not continue to decline, and findings from a national sample of 415 county jails suggest that jail populations decreased about 10 percent from March 2020 to December 2021 (Widra 2022).

These policies did, however, limit the ways in which many facility-based services could be delivered to inmates, including participants of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)-funded Pathway Home grants (see sidebar on page 1). To examine the implications of these policies as well as the experiences of the grantees implementing their programs in a correctional facility during the pandemic, Mathematica and Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) conducted five virtual group discussions with frontline staff and grant managers in December 2021 from 18 of the 20 organizations that received grants in 2020.[3] Mathematica and SPR also

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[2] See Stein et al. (2020) for Mathematica's data visualization on use of executive orders to reduce incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic at https://www.mathematica.org/dataviz/how-states-are-using-executive-orders-to-reduce-incarceration-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.

[3] Each group discussion was tailored to focus on a different aspect of implementation and each grantee only attended a single group discussion. Four grantees attended the discussion on recruitment and enrollment challenges, three discussed partnerships for pre-release service provision, four discussed case management, four discussed employment-focused services, and three discussed post-release supportive services. However, the major themes reported in this brief are based on findings across the five different group discussions in which grantees may have reported on topics that were not the focus of their group discussion. As a result, counts are provided where possible to reflect the number of grantees that contributed to a specific point, regardless of the group discussion they attended.

supplemented these group discussions with information from a review of grant applications, a round of phone calls with individual grantees conducted in November 2020 to clarify the information in their grant applications, and data from grantee performance reports as of December 31, 2021.[4] The analysis of these data led to this brief, which details the challenges Pathway Home grantees faced related to COVID-19, how they adapted their programs to these challenges, and how these experiences might inform future programming of the grant activities carried out in a similar context.

> **Summary of findings from interviews and focus groups with Pathway Home Grantees in 2020-2021**
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> - Grantees that reported more established partnerships and stronger communication channels with correctional facilities appeared to be better positioned to implement their Pathway Home program during the COVID-19 pandemic, including conducting recruitment, obtaining referrals, and gaining access to the facilities.
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> - Grantees reported that early release policies at correctional facilities in response to COVID-19 hampered enrollment into the program and participation. Individuals were being released early to reduce overcrowding, making them ineligible for the program or reducing their time in pre-release services. Grantees found it helpful to have a partner who would commit to providing timely information on release dates, such as someone in the correctional facility or the local prosecutor's office.
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> - To address COVID-19-related restrictions, Pathway Home grantees and their correctional partners reported an expansion of technology in facilities such as providing participants with tablets and using DocuSign for paperwork, to improve the virtual outreach, intake, and enrollment processes.
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> - Staff turnover at both grantees and correctional facilities was reported to pose substantial implementation challenges, as did social distancing restrictions. Grantees reported modifying their office layouts and policies, and updating the occupational training courses they offered through the program to adhere to social distancing policies.
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> - Grantees reported that the strong labor market in 2021 increased the jobs available for participants and employers' interest in Pathway Home programs (as a source of potential employees), but decreased participant interest related to training and employment services (because jobs were readily available). Grantees had to develop creative approaches to engaging participants, including providing incentives for participating in the program, and using social media to stay in contact with participants after release.

The findings reported are observational and describe the 2020 grantee experiences and should not be interpreted as causal claims.

Overview of the 2020 Pathway Home grants

DOL awarded grants to 20 organizations in 2020 to partner with correctional facilities to provide services to eligible people who were currently incarcerated and within 20 to 180 days from their scheduled release date.[5] In addition to providing services to the eligible population while they are still incarcerated, grantees were also required to provide transition services pre- and post-release (see box).

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[4] The Quarterly Performance Reports were provided by DOL and summarize status reports including counts on active participants, exits, and other outcomes submitted by each grantee.

[5] See DOL press release for list of grantees: https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/eta/eta20200707.

Pathway Home participant eligibility and program requirements

The Department of Labor defines eligible participants for the Pathway Home program as those who meet all the following criteria:

1. Are at least 18 years old
2. Reside, at the time of enrollment in the project, in a state correctional facility or local jail for adults
3. Have a release date scheduled between 20 to 180 days from the individual's enrollment in the program
4. Are scheduled to return to reside upon release in the target area identified in the applicant's application
5. Are low income as defined under WIOA, Section 3(36)
6. Are legally eligible to work in the United States

Pathway Home grant programs were required to provide participants with the following services:
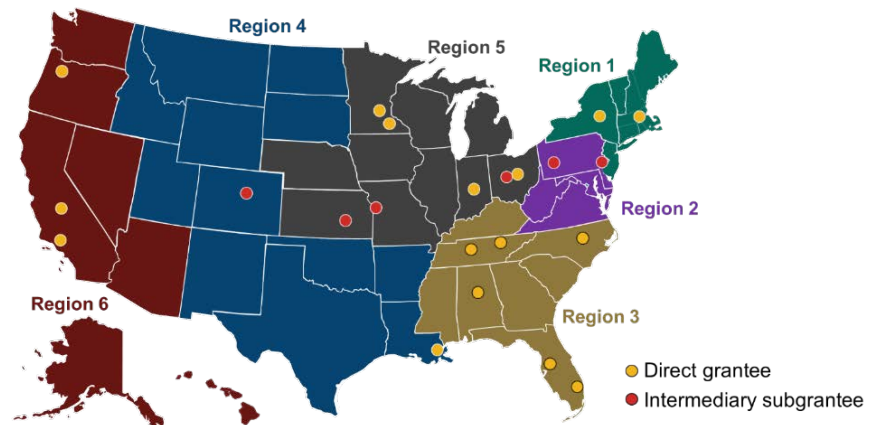
1. **Pre-release services** that include job preparation and developing individual development plans, including identifying barriers to employment, career exploration and planning, counseling, and assistance with linking inmates to the social services required to help them transition back to their communities
2. **Transition services** that maintain the same caseworker pre- and post-release
3. **Post-release services** that include skill-building services, such as apprenticeships and occupational training in in-demand industries that lead to industry-recognized credentials

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. Notice of Availability of Funds and Funding Opportunity Announcement for Pathway Home. Funding Opportunity Number FOA-ETA-20-02.

Direct grantees and intermediary subgrantees[6] are located in 15 states[7] across the six DOL regions (Exhibit 1). A review of grantee applications and individual calls with grantees confirmed that 14 of the 20 grants went to community-based nonprofits. The other six went to either a government agency, a faith-based nonprofit, or a consortium of workforce development boards. All but one grantee had at least some prior experience operating a reentry program. Eleven grantees reported modeling their Pathway Home program on a current or prior reentry program. For example, during the clarifying calls, one grantee noted its Pathway Home program built on established connections and used existing services from a previous DOL reentry grant, but the addition of pre-release and linked services was entirely new to the organization.

Exhibit 1. Locations of 2020 Pathway Home grant programs
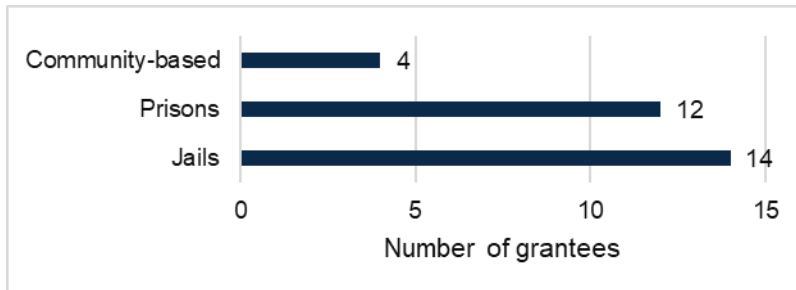

Source: Grant applications.

Note: Yellow dots indicate direct grantee locations, and red dots indicate the locations of the subgrantees who received awards from the four intermediary grantees. The U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration maintains six regional offices whose staff monitor programs, services and benefits provided under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and grant investments like Pathway Home (see https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/regions).

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[6] Four grantees are categorized as intermediaries because they awarded subgrants to other organizations.

[7] The 15 states include the following: AL, CA, CO, FL, IN, LA, MA, MN, NC, NY, OH, OR, PA, TN, WI.

Each of the grantees partnered with varying numbers of correctional facilities to develop and implement their Pathway Home grants. Four grantees partnered with a single correctional facility and the remaining 16 grantees partnered with between 2 to 13 facilities. Grantees partnered with jails, prisons, community-based correctional facilities, or a combination of facilities (Exhibit 2). Through these partnerships, Pathway Home grantees enrolled participants in a variety of services, including employment-focused services and supportive services such as mental health support, starting inside the facility and continuing into an individual's life post-release (Exhibit 3).
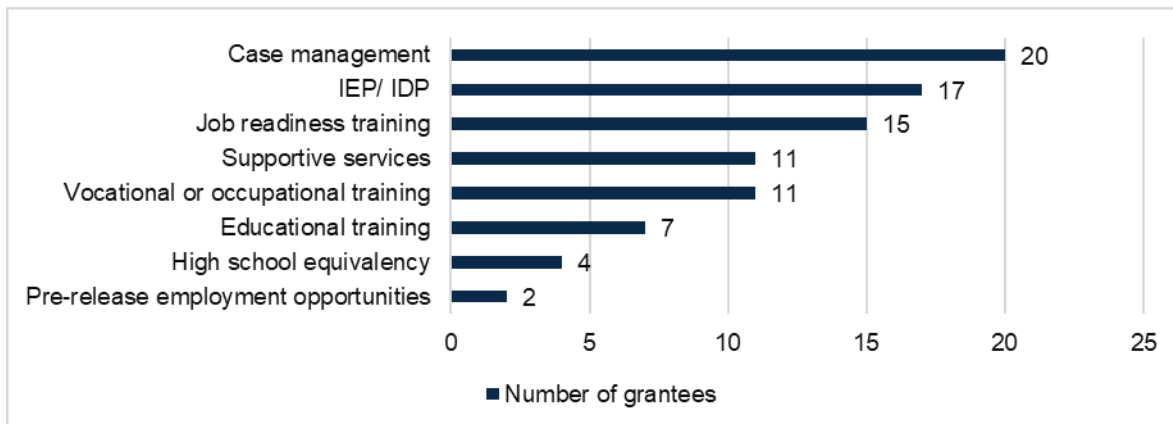
Exhibit 2. Types of correctional facility partnerships among 2020 Pathway Home grantees

Source: Grant applications and grantee clarifying calls.

Note: Grantees could have multiple types of corrections partners.

Exhibit 3. Pre-release service offerings as stated in grant application
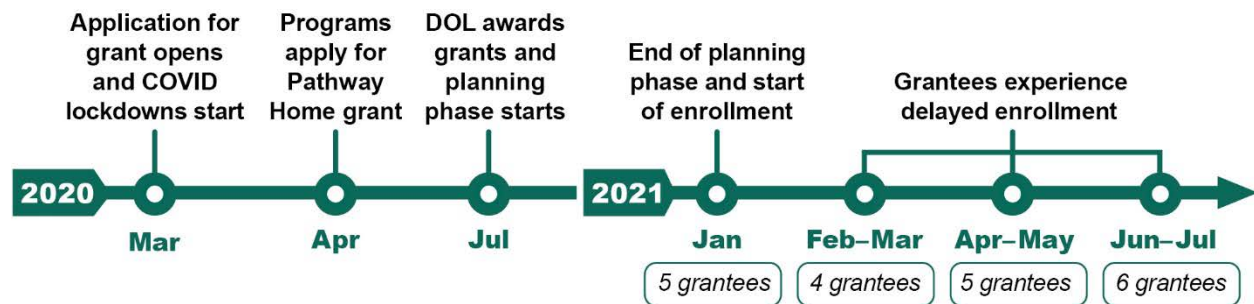

Source: Grant applications.

IDP = individualized development plan; IEP = individualized employment plan.

How COVID-19 influenced the 2020 Pathway Home grantees

Grantees applied for funding in April 2020, soon after states started enforcing stay-at-home orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From a review of grant applications, 9 of the 20 grantees acknowledged the potential need for adapting their plans due to COVID-19. DOL awarded grants in July 2020, and grantees began the planning phase of their grants at that time with the goal of beginning enrollment in January 2021. However, by late 2020, in coordination with DOL as reported on grant applications and clarifying calls, 18 grantees had revised their original plans, expanding the planning period, delaying the start of their enrollment, and shortening the 24-month implementation period. Fifteen grantees also changed their

approaches: instead of offering pre-release services in person, they planned to do so virtually, through correctional facility staff, or both. Grantees also anticipated challenges in meeting their enrollment goals as a result of facilities releasing individuals early to ease crowding. Enrollment goals varied across grantees from 100 to 550 participants. Five grantees reported starting enrollment as expected in January 2021, while the remaining 15 grantees started to enroll over the course of the next six months (between February and July 2021, Exhibit 4).[8]

Exhibit 4. Grant application and implementation timeline

Source: Grant applications and virtual group discussions with staff in December 2021. Two grantees were not able to attend the group discussions but are included in the data on enrollment.

Findings and implications from discussion groups with 2020 Pathway Home grantees

The following sections of this brief discuss how grantees implemented key aspects of their Pathway Home program: partnerships with correctional facilities, outreach, enrollment, service delivery, and employment during the early enrollment and implementation period. Each section discusses the challenges or adaptions that grantees shared. At the end, implications for future grantees and DOL are discussed.

Partnerships with correctional facilities

Strong relationships with correctional partners reportedly facilitated grant planning and communication. Pathway Home grantees partnered with staff in correctional facilities to recruit and deliver services to eligible participants who were incarcerated, which was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic when access to facilities was sometimes limited. Grantees had to establish and maintain these partnerships virtually or through a combination of virtual and in-person communication. Grantees shared their experiences with these partnerships and the factors that helped or hindered them.

Six grantees suggested that setting up communication structures and having dedicated contacts was important for establishing and maintaining strong partnerships with facilities.

Three grantees described ways they developed communication structures to establish rapport with facility partners, including:

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[8] Two grantees reported their enrollment start dates but were not able to attend the group discussions.

- **Having scheduled meetings.** One grantee met with three contacts from three different jails monthly to provide updates and discuss any implementation changes.
- **Acknowledging facility staff for their support.** One grantee met with facility contacts at the end of each quarter to give facility "champions a shout out" for their support.
- **Educating them about the program**. The grantees stressed the importance of educating correctional staff about the program to ensure they are communicating accurate information to potential participants, especially when programs were not allowed in the facility due to COVID restrictions.

Having key contacts in place within the facilities was reported as a facilitator for better communication.

Three grantees described how helpful it was when facility partners have dedicated staff to support the program. One grantee shared that a facility partner assigned them a single point of contact to communicate with the case managers in the facility. Another noted that facility partners that were most "passionate" about the Pathway Home program have a transition coordinator position within the facility to help with reintegration programs like Pathway Home. The grantee added they see higher numbers of referrals and success for participants completing the program than with facilities that lack dedicated staff to support the program.

"In some facilities, the DOC [Department of Corrections] staff are passionate about what we're doing and they have a transition coordinator position that is passionate about this type of work and helping with reintegration."

– Program Administrator

Five grantees reported having an easier time communicating with facility partners with whom they had more established relationships, and the length of time was key.

These five grantees shared that having established relationships prior to the grant was important and partnerships were better with facilities with whom they had worked with longer. Three grantees noted having longstanding relationships with correctional facilities allowed them to implement the initial planning activities successfully including conducting recruitment, obtaining referrals, and gaining access to the facilities. For one of the three grantees, its longstanding partnership with the Department of Corrections provided the grantee with training and "equal" access to the facilities as facility staff. Three grantees also noted the importance of the length of the relationship in receiving support; one of the grantees has been working with the correctional facility for 10 years, and reported the facility was "supportive from the top down." One grantee also shared that having support from the sheriff was important for a successful collaboration.

Four grantees indicated challenges communicating with correctional facility partners virtually, especially for those that were starting their partnerships for the first time.

These grantees shared it was difficult to communicate with facility partner staff virtually, especially to educate them about the program to help with recruitment. Three grantees noted they could not confirm whether facility staff were conveying the program accurately to prospective participants. Two of these grantees noted they were first-time grantees that were not allowed in the facilities, which made it more difficult because facility staff did not know who they were. Two also noted they had to compete with other programs that had strong presence in the jails or learned that some participants were enrolled in other programs offered at the facilities at the same time.

Outreach to potential participants

Grantees described challenges conducting outreach as a result of limited access to correctional facility partners due to lockdowns during the pandemic and policies affecting service providers within the facilities. Sixteen grantees reported being affected by facility lockdowns and social distancing policies prior to December 2021. According to these grantees, the correctional facilities went in and out of lockdown during the pandemic and enacted policies that limited grantee access to facilities.

Six grantees reported being unable to do outreach in person due to facility lockdowns.

These six grantees mentioned using a combination of their own staff and facility staff to conduct outreach virtually. For example, one grantee implemented a referral form that participants could fill out to request more information about the program from facility staff. Two grantees worked with their correctional partner to generate lists of potential participants to recruit to the program. These grantees also used unique strategies to facilitate their virtual outreach process, including providing outreach materials on paper for easier distribution, and creating videos that could be aired on closed circuit television (Exhibit 5). One grantee was placed on its facility's free call list, which allowed people incarcerated in the facility to call the program for information at no cost to them.

Exhibit 5. Virtual outreach strategies used by 2020 Pathway Home grantees

| Paper-based materials | Working with community partners | Placement on a free-call list | Videos in the facility | Printing materials at the DoC print shop |

Source: Virtual group conversations.
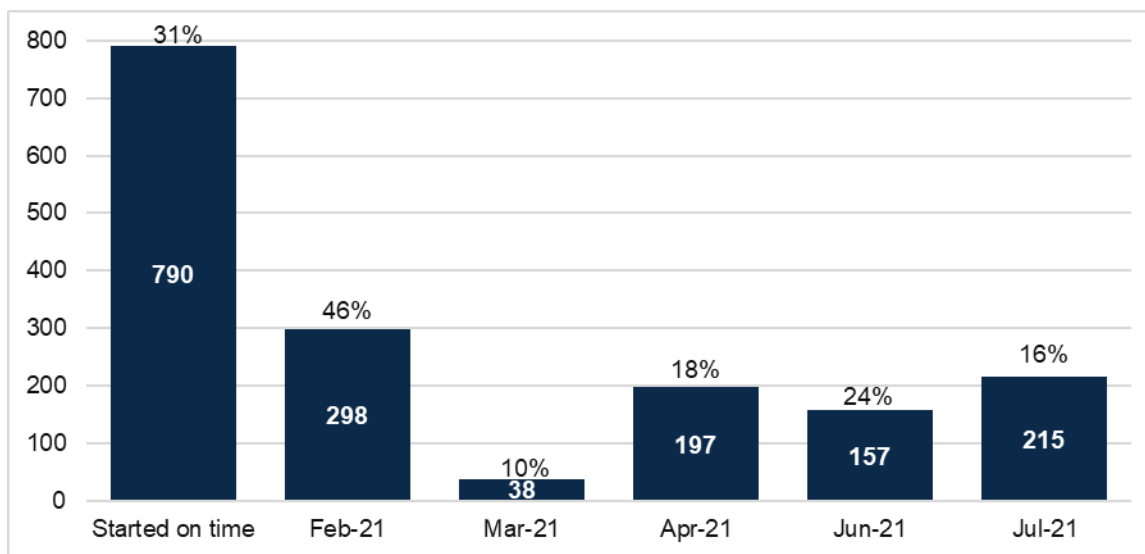DoC = Department of Corrections.

Despite these efforts, one grantee faced a challenge in the lack of devices for potential participants to learn about the program virtually, while three grantees mentioned that potential participants may not have received accurate information about the program during pre-release because facility staff did not know the program well or because potential participants are "signing up for whatever they can sign up to get into." One grantee said, "jail staff had never heard of us before" therefore relying on them to relay the message is "really challenging." Two grantees reported that potential participants approached their organization solely for supportive services like bus passes but were uninterested in the employment services because they were only informed that supportive services were available. One grantee said, "[correctional staff] will say 'go sign up for the program, you'll get a voucher.' and that's not just [only] what we do."

Enrollment of participants into the program

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, five grantees reported fluctuating facility lockdown policies made it more challenging to enroll participants in person. According to the quarterly performance reports of December 31, 2021, 20 grantees enrolled 24 percent of their combined enrollment target, have until December 2023 to enroll the remaining 76 percent, and have until December 2024 to finish providing services and following up with participants. Enrollment progress varied between grantees, although those that began later in June or July 2021 have had less progress (Exhibit 6). Of the total of 1,737 participants

who have enrolled and participated in the program across all grantees, a total of 212 participants exited the program, and 1,508 were active.

Exhibit 6. Number of participants enrolled and percentage of enrollment target by December 31, 2021, by 2020 Pathway Home grantee start date

Source: Quarterly performance reports for 2020 Pathway Home Grant recipients for the quarter ending December 31, 2021.

Note: Two grantees did not report data in December 2021 and have been excluded. One grantee's most current data was submitted in June 2021 and the other grantee's most current data was submitted in September 2021. Grantees that started on time began enrolling between July 2020 and January 2021; 6 grantees started enrolling on time, 2 started in February 2021, 2 started in March 2021, 3 started enrolling in April 2021, 2 started enrolling in June 2021, and 3 started enrolling in July 2021.

The percentages reflect how much of the enrollment target has been achieved as of December 31, 2021 by the grantees based on their start dates. For the 5 grantees that started on time, they have reached 31% of their enrollment target collectively as of December 2021. For the 4 grantees starting in February and March 2021, they have reached 46% of the enrollment target collectively as of December 2021.

Five grantees reported unique strategies to facilitate virtual enrollment.

Grantees had to adapt their enrollment process during COVID-19, which included adjusting to not being in person and not always having direct access to participants. The grantee staff shared a variety of adjustments they made to their processes, including enrolling participants via phone and splitting intake across multiple sessions (Exhibit 7).

Eight grantees reported using data from their justice system partners during intake and screening.

Grantees reported working closely with their justice system partners to facilitate a smooth intake process pre-release. One grantee reported that, in response to COVID-19, its facility partner allowed it to access the facility's offender management system for information on the history of each participant during enrollment. One grantee gathered assessment data (the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory) from its correctional partner instead of doing it itself, because the facility had the information on file. Two grantees used sentencing guidelines from parole officers during the screening and enrollment process to understand what is mandated for each participant and what the program may be able to assist with. One of these grantees said, "If we receive a referral, we can reach out to their probation officer to send over the

specific guidelines" because it "helps as far as the screening and enrollment process." Two grantees mentioned correctional staff would assist with intake by signing up participants and providing the program with their completed applications. One grantee shared a secure live document with its facility contacts to inform referrals, discharge planning, and ongoing needs.

Exhibit 7. Strategies for virtual enrollment used by 2020 Pathway Home grantees

	Splitting intake across multiple sessions (two grantees)
	Doing intake after the participants were released (one grantee)*
	Enrolling participants over the phone (one grantee)
	Enlisting workforce center staff to conduct virtual enrollment (one grantee)

Source: Virtual group discussions with grantee staff in December 2021.

*This grantee requested a modification to its Statement of Work because it was unable to enter the facilities and potential participants were released earlier than their sentenced incarceration time. The grantee completed intake with participants after release because potential participants were released from facilities before the grantee could begin the intake process.

Grantees leveraged new and existing technology available in the facility to aid in enrollment.

Three grantees mentioned that facilities improved the availability of technology within the jails and prisons in response to COVID-19. This included services like *JPay,* which "make email available to inmates who get a little tablet they can use," giving participants access to tablets, and using DocuSign for enrollment paperwork. One grantee used existing technology to complete participant assessments remotely. Eleven grantees also mentioned using technology that may have already been in place before COVID-19 when working with pre-release participants.

Early release policies in response to COVID-19 hampered enrollment, as reported by 13 grantees.
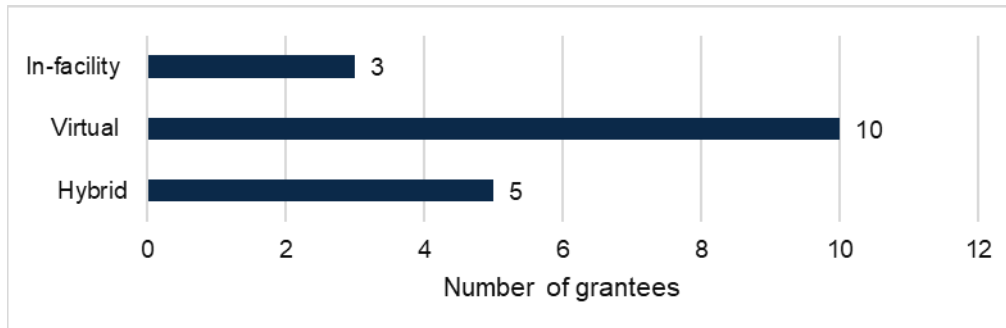
Due to COVID-19, grantees found it difficult to accurately assess when potential participants would be released because they could be released early to free up space in the facility. The 13 grantees that faced limited time to do enrollment and intake reported it was because potential participants may have been released earlier than expected, making them ineligible to participate because they are not within the 20- to 180-day window. One grantee noted, for example, that a participant had a set release date, but then the participant's parole board released them earlier than expected, which caused them to receive fewer than 20 days of pre-release services. Another grantee found potential participants who were not sentenced yet, and therefore did not "fit in that window." A different grantee reported that it worked with correctional staff to get release date information, but the staff did not always notify grantees in time. Another grantee successfully partnered with a division of the local prosecutor's office called the conviction integrity unit that informed the grantee of individuals who could benefit from the program and the times when they would be released.

Service delivery under the grant

The COVID-19 pandemic affected staff capacity and tested the limits of technological infrastructure for service delivery. As part of the Pathway Home grant, grantees planned to provide pre-release services

such as job preparation, creation of individual development plans (IDPs), counseling, linkages to social services, and continuous case management, which would continue after release to help participants transition back into the community.[9] During the group discussions with staff, 18 grantees reported that to an extent COVID-19 affected their ability to provide these services both before and after release. As of December 2021, when the virtual group discussions took place, only 3 grantees were offering services in person, 10 provided services exclusively virtually, and 5 were combining virtual and in-person services (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8. Location of services as of December 2021

Source: Virtual group discussions with 2020 Pathway Home Grant recipients in December 2021.
Note: This information was reported by 18 grantees as of December 2021.

Delivery of pre-release services

Three grantees were able to leverage technology in the facilities to deliver pre-release services, while four others were not.

One grantee provided case management services virtually, using tablets and facility TVs. One grantee used Zoom for weekly classes led by case managers to build rapport with participants, while another used computers with wireless internet for virtual job shadowing. However, four grantees noted that using technology in the facilities was a challenge, including connectivity issues, and an inability to get permission from the facility to get tablets for participants to use.

Three grantees were able to provide pre-release employment services in person but had to adapt them to comply with social distancing policies.

This included having smaller classes with a maximum of six to eight people and requiring masks. One grantee implemented its occupational training outdoors, reduced the class size, and used specific cleaning protocols to adhere to guidelines.

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[9] U.S. Department of Labor FOA-ETA-20-02
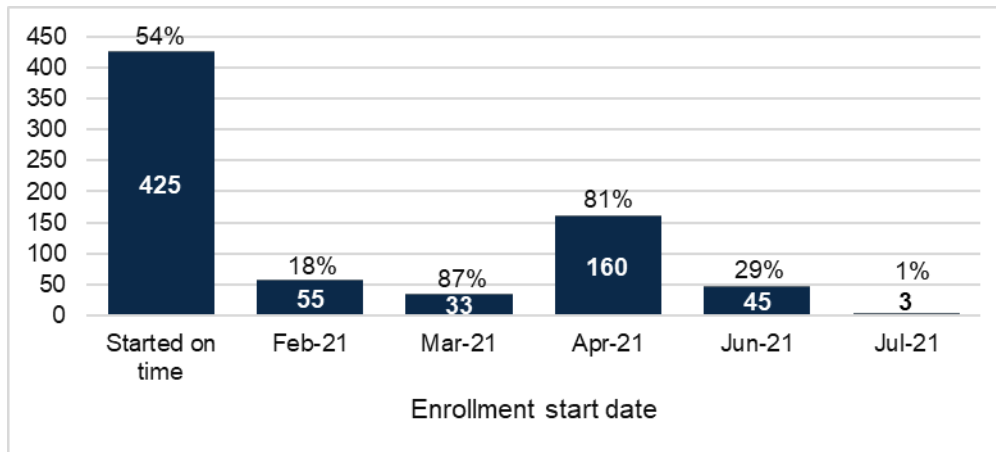
Delivery of post-release services

COVID-19 policies were reported to influence the way grantees provided post-release employment services.

Two grantees mentioned ways that they adapted post-release employment services to the COVID-19 pandemic. One grantee offered adult education classes over Zoom, while providing other services in person. The second grantee had to modify its offices given health concerns by closing its kitchen, changing its janitorial system, and changing the occupational training course to be a mock installation instead of a real installation.

Grantees were still able to provide many participants with occupational training as part of the grant.

Across all grantees, 741 participants have enrolled in training (43 percent of all enrolled participants) and 591 participants have completed training of December 2021. Grantees trained an average of 37 participants across all grants, although two grantees trained more than 100 participants each. Six grantees trained more than 76 percent of their enrolled participants, while eight grantees trained less than 25 percent.

Exhibit 9. Variation in the number of participants enrolled in training across 2020 Pathway Home grantees as of December 2021 by 2020 Pathway Home grantee start date

Source: Quarterly performance reports for 2020 Pathway Home Grant recipients for quarter ending December 31, 2021.

Note: A total of 741 participants received training across the grantees. Two grantees did not report data in December 2021. One grantee's most current data were submitted in June 2021, and the other grantee's most current data were submitted in September 2021.

       The percentages reflect the number of enrolled participants who received training as of December 31, 2021 based on grantee enrollment start dates. For the 5 grantees that started on time, they have placed 54% of their participants in training collectively as of December 2021. For the 4 grantees starting in February and March 2021, they have placed 18% of their participants in training collectively as of December 2021.

Four grantees found that maintaining contact with participants after release was a challenge due to participants losing interest or pursuing work instead of receiving services.

These four grantees noted that it is challenging to keep in touch with participants after release, with some individuals initially showing interest but not showing up after their release. Solutions varied across grantees including four grantees using social media and alternate contacts to maintain contact with

participants and one grantee providing phones and technology to participants so that they can continue receiving post-release services, such as online occupational training or support services, if they are quarantined. One grantee explained that "social media has helped a lot because that's our best way of staying [in contact] with [participants]." Five grantees also reported using incentives such as $50 gas cards to encourage participants to show up to post-release services at either their offices or their workforce partners' offices.
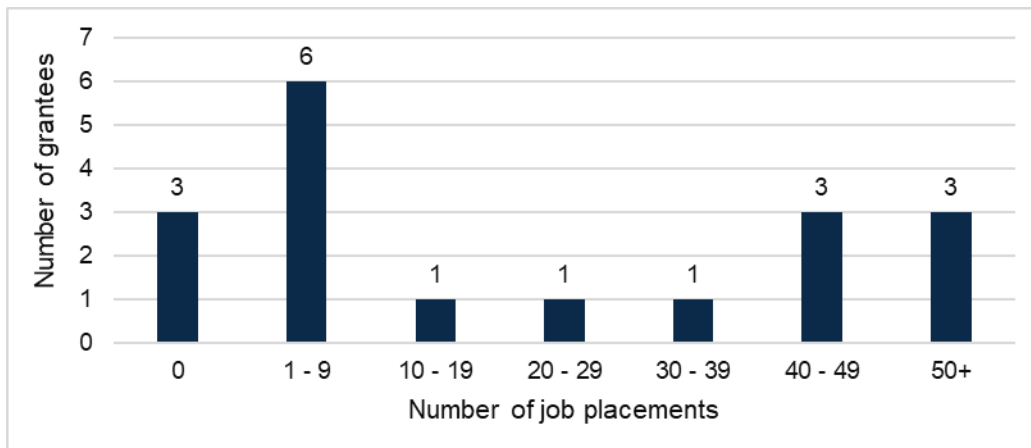
Two grantees found being flexible with both participants and program staff helped them achieve their post-release goals.

One grantee said they advocated for judges to let participants use Zoom to attend court dates because "[participants] can walk outside of their employer for 30 minutes and Zoom into their court time." Another grantee partnered with the local workforce agencies and found that giving career navigators[10] flexible schedules where they can use technology to work from home was helpful because it "empowered" them to meet with participants according to the participant's schedule, instead of solely during business hours. Navigators were able to meet with participants before or after work to meet their needs, which included providing them with grocery or gas cards when they were available.

The United States labor market during the COVID-19 pandemic

Pandemic-related labor market changes appeared to have increased employer demand but reduced participant interest (Maurer 2022). At the time of the virtual group discussions in December 2021, grantees were still enrolling participants in training or in employment opportunities. Six out of 18 grantees that reported Quarterly Performance Report data in December 2021 reported between one and nine job placements, while 6 grantees reported 41 to 77 job placements as of December 31, 2021 (Exhibit 10). Grantees shared their early experience and reflections working with employers and participants in the volatile COVID-19 labor market.

Exhibit 10. Number of job placements reported by 2020 Pathway Home grantees

Source: Quarterly performance reports for 2020 Pathway Home Grant recipients for quarter ending December 31, 2021.

Note: The graph reflects data from 18 out of the 20 grantees that reported data in December 2021.

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[10] Career navigators were case managers who assisted people released from incarceration with job development and other needs-related services during post-release.

Nine grantees mentioned high staff turnover within their own organization and for facility partners as a challenge to service delivery.

Three grantees mentioned experiencing high program staff turnover, and six grantees mentioned experiencing facility staff turnover that influenced their ability to implement Pathway Home grant program services. One grantee reported multiple "unfilled positions" at the facilities. Among program staff, positions that faced high turnover included caseworker and training coordinator positions. Grantees noted the staff turnover and unfilled positions were due to the "great resignation,"[11,12] COVID-19, and the strong labor market. One grantee said "there's a lot of jobs out there and we've had a number of staff just go for better opportunities."

Eight grantees believed that the labor market during the COVID-19 pandemic increased employers' demand for their programs and jobs for participants.

During the first year of the pandemic, the labor market performed poorly with employment falling by 5.4 percent (Kochhar and Bennett 2021). However, by the time the discussion groups took place, eight grantees found employers were more eager to engage with the program because they were eager to hire. One grantee noted this was especially true for restaurants, but another mentioned a solar agency that came to the grantee seeking employees hired a participant from their program. As one grantee explained, employers are "so desperate" for employees that "they are willing to make accommodations they weren't willing to make before."

> *"I am seeing an interesting trend in the last couple of weeks where partners and programs and even employers are coming to us and saying, we need bodies. We need people in our training programs. We need people in jobs and we can't find anyone. How about we tap into your population? So suddenly we're very popular."*
>
> – Program Administrator

Three grantees adapted outreach to continue to engage employers virtually and in person.

A grantee reported it was working with employers to hold "employer spotlights" through Facebook Live to advertise job opportunities to participants, including those still in the facility. To adapt for social distancing, the same grantee also held drive-through employment fairs, where participants can drive through an outdoor space to learn about the different employment opportunities instead of walking. Another grantee noted having employer relationships established prior to COVID-19 helped maintain interest during the pandemic when employers were unable to meet with participants in person.

Despite employer demand and grantees' efforts to engage participants, the strong job market was reported to reduce participant interest in Pathway Home services, especially employment-focused services.

Four grantees noted difficulty engaging participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two grantees suggested participants were less engaged in their employment-focused services and in the broader Pathway Home program, given that jobs were more readily available and offered higher wages than previously. For example, one grantee explained the "rate of pay in other jobs is increasing tremendously,"

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[11] https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/01/job-quits-resignations-december-2021/.

[12] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/#:~:text=The%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic%20set,20%2Dyear%20high%20last%20November.
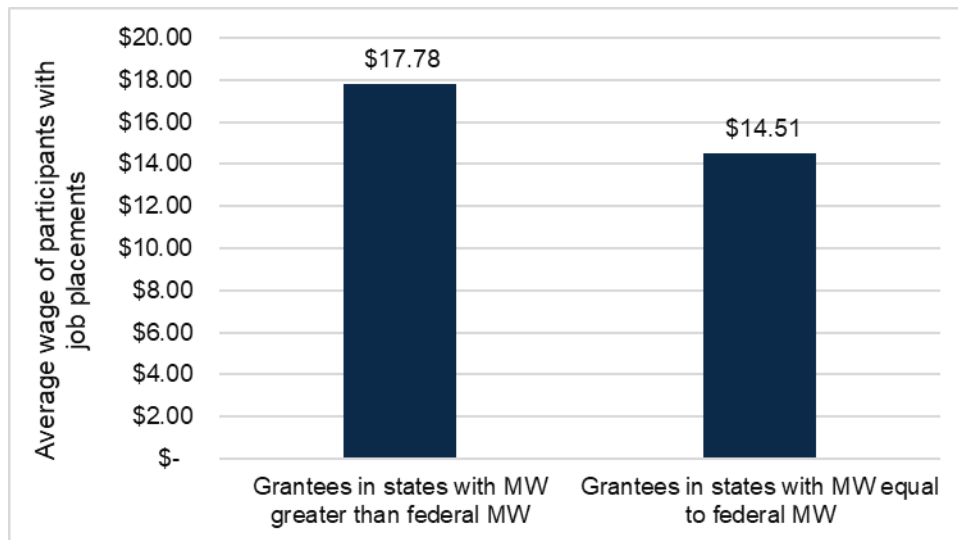
and potential participants are hesitant to enroll in the program after learning they can earn more at McDonald's, which pays $15 an hour while the grantee's program pays $10 an hour. At the end of December 2021, 7 out of the 15 grantees that submitted quarterly report data reported the average wage for participants placed in jobs was below $15, and 8 reported an average wage of above $15 (Exhibit 11).

"We've been in workforce for a long time. We used to run the American Job Centers for years ... Our biggest challenge is they don't need us right now to get a job."

– Program Administrator

Exhibit 11. Average wages reported by 2020 Pathway Home grantees, by state minimum wage status

Source: Quarterly performance reports for 2020 Pathway Home Grant recipients for quarter ending December 31, 2021. State minimum wage data available at https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/mw-consolidated.

Note: The graph reflects data from 15 out of the 20 grantees that reported data in December 2021. Five grantees did not report average wage information for their program. 9 grantees in the states with MW greater than federal MW and 6 in the states with MW equal to federal MW

MW = minimum wage.

In response to labor market conditions, two grantees adjusted their programs to make them more appealing to participants.

One grantee modified its grant to include food stipends and incentives to pay participants while they are in training during pre-release and after release as a way to encourage participants to remain in the program. Another grantee is developing training for jobs that are expected to pay a "decent" wage "because of the great resignation…people don't want to come back to work and work for low wages." For example, one training is for participants to learn how to build cell phone towers, which is a job that pays $60,000 per year for entry-level positions.

Conclusion

The 2020 Pathway Home Grant recipients implemented their programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they encountered challenges including facility lockdowns, a shift to virtual environments, early releases of potential participants, and reduced interest in the program due to a strong labor market as the pandemic went on. Some grantees worked through the challenges of the pandemic by adapting

components of their program to be remote, including outreach, enrollment, services, and employer engagement. Grantees reported that leveraging their correctional partners and technology in the facilities greatly enhanced their ability to adapt to COVID-19 and social distancing policies.

In addition, grantees came up with innovative solutions for maintaining connections with participants post-release, including offering a hybrid of virtual and in-person services, using social media, and purchasing phones and technology to keep the program accessible. Despite the challenges they faced, grantees implemented their programs and adapted their processes to continue serving individuals in the justice system.

Considerations for organizations serving individuals in the justice system before and after release

Below are considerations for service delivery that individual discussion group participants found particularly useful for implementing their programs during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Enrolling participants virtually.** Programs could work with correctional facilities to put program staff on free phone call lists so potential participants can connect with programs more easily. Staff could conduct intake over the phone and consider splitting sessions when necessary to complete the intake process during facility lockdowns.

- **Requesting access to correctional facilities' internal technology systems.** Systems such as the facility's offender management system and email system could provide useful information on the background of potential participants, help programs communicate with participants, and help program staff communicate with correctional staff.

- **Leveraging existing technology in facilities.** Facilities may already have internet-equipped tablets for participants or facility TVs that may be used for outreach, intake, case management, or other services virtually.

- **Identifying correctional facility staff who could be dedicated to the program and foster relationships on an ongoing basis**. Although many factors were reported to influence the feasibility of grantees having dedicated correctional facility staff and forming long partnerships with them, programs could promote these relationships by educating staff on the benefits of program services, publicly acknowledging the contributions of facility staff, and establishing concrete communication plans. For example, grantees could propose standing meetings to discuss successes, challenges, and updates.

- **Offering monetary incentives to participants for attending program activities.** Grantees could budget for incentives such as stipends for attending training, meetings, or completing key milestones. After participants are released, offering food, clothing, or transportation may encourage them to continue to engage with the program.

- **Using social media and technology to maintain contact with participants during follow-up.** Providing phones and technology such as hot spots to participants were reported to support them to continue receiving post-release services. Creating a social media presence to connect with participants virtually may encourage them to maintain contact with the program. For example, encouraging employees to advertise job opportunities through social media could engage potential candidates.

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