

# IMPROVED REENTRY EDUCATION

## VOICES OF REENTRY *It's Never Too Late for Change*

*Voices of Reentry is a series of profiles of people making good on second chances after they return from incarceration. Articles in the series tell individual stories to highlight the impact of programs funded under federal Improved Reentry Education grants.*

**Dorothy Gonzales got her GED in 2012, on her 49<sup>th</sup> birthday.** She studied for the test on her own for three months, closing herself in her quarters, shunning the TV in the common room, and telling her friends “don’t bother me unless it’s important.” She had to study on her own because the wait for the formal GED preparation classes at Topeka Correctional Facility for Women (TCF) was long, and Dorothy didn’t have time to wait around. That same sense of urgency propelled her to the door of the Certified Production Technician (CPT) classroom a few months before her release from prison, where she implored Brian Turner to allow her to enroll in the program despite the fact that her release date was imminent. Dorothy completed the class with weeks to spare, and within days of her release she began work at [Systemair’s](#) manufacturing and distribution center in Lenexa, KS. The odds of a woman in her fifties with a ninth-grade education and a criminal history transforming herself into a desirable job candidate are slim. But Dorothy beat the odds again and again, and Washburn Tech’s CPT program was a critical step on her long path toward recovery and reentry.

Dorothy left school in the ninth grade and had four children by the time she was 25. At 23 she married a man who, it turned out, was abusive. After divorcing her husband and moving back to her home state of Texas, Dorothy worked in a series of low-wage jobs: “I worked in a box factory, oil and tool company making tools for oil wells. I spot-welded...worked for a big company that remanufactured ink cartridges...and I worked 10 years for Lutheran ministries thrift stores. But most were factory jobs. All my life has been factory work.” Dorothy still works in a factory. The difference: Dorothy’s CPT

certifications—a nationally recognized set of certificates, awarded by the [Manufacturing Skills Standards Council](#), which tells employers that she knows how to do her work on the factory floor and also understands the big picture. In her current job, she understands the entire manufacturing process, can spot a safety breach, and is on a path toward promotion and pay increases.

### LEARNING TO VALUE HERSELF

Although she had a couple of short stays in jail in her past, prison was an entirely new experience for Dorothy. “It was a slap in the face,” she recounts. The first few years of her 92-month sentence at TCF were spent on the maximum side of the prison, where educational opportunities are few.



So Dorothy focused on overcoming her addictions and growing as a person and a mother. This was a difficult time:

*The first two years [in prison] was rehab—no family, no support; there were lots of times I wanted to give up—I saw the help the other ladies would receive and didn't know what I could do to get my children to help me—to even receive a call from me. I started going to church—tried a couple of different ones—found a spiritual mentor—I can tell her everything and anything. I prayed and worked with my mentor for a long time [on reestablishing relationships with her adult children]. My daughter finally came [to visit me in prison] on my birthday and we talked. I just hugged her. We cried and asked each other for forgiveness—just starting new, becoming the mom that I never was. I wasn't a mom because I didn't even know who I was.*

This process of personal growth and transformation is essential to successful reentry. The majority of the women at Topeka, and in all jails and prisons around the country, struggle with a history of abuse and neglect. Beth Hill, a job preparedness coach and Adult Basic Education (ABE) instructor in the CPT program, observes that much of the work her students need to do is developmental and emotional: they need to overcome traumas, learn to trust other people, and show love to their children. For Dorothy, the process of personal growth began when she was in her mid-forties: “I only started to pay attention to the world outside—politics, current events—about 10 years ago; before that I wasn't even important to myself,” Dorothy recounts.

Although Dorothy's children were adults when she was incarcerated, imprisonment ruptured her relationship with them. This is all too common an experience for women. Nearly 80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers, and most of their children are minors. These children are sometimes cared for by family members, but more often end up in foster care. Women frequently lose custody of children who enter the foster care system. Maintaining relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children can be extremely difficult, especially if a woman is housed in a prison that is far from her home or inaccessible by public transportation, or if visiting days and times are limited. When women are released, reengaging with their children can be difficult on many fronts—legally, financially, and emotionally—adding to the challenges of reentry.<sup>1</sup>

## ABUSE, TRAUMA, AND WOMEN'S RISING RATES OF INCARCERATION

The incarceration rate among women has been rising since 1980 and continues to accelerate faster than the rate among men, but the reasons for incarceration and the challenges women face upon release differ significantly from those of their male counterparts:

- A woman's path to crime is often rooted in a history of abuse and trauma: 75 percent of women in prison are survivors of intimate partner violence.
- Women are less likely to be charged with violent crimes, and more likely to be incarcerated for drug-related offenses linked to their history of abuse, coercion, and sexual exploitation.
- Thirty-one percent of women detained in county jails battle mental illness and substance use disorders related to their trauma, compared to 14.5 percent of men.

Women—and more specifically women of color and poor women—are disproportionately affected by system failures that limit access to quality education, employment opportunity, housing stability, and other support services needed to overcome trauma and abuse.

Source: “The Realities of Reentry: Making Reentry Work for Women,” August, 2016, <http://www.jff.org/blog/2016/08/18/making-reentry-work-women>

Having become important to herself, Dorothy set out to make up for lost time. After she transferred to the minimum security side of TCF in the spring of 2012, Dorothy approached the GED instructor looking for a spot in the program. But there were no open spots, only a long wait list.<sup>2</sup> So Dorothy seized on the instructor's suggestion that she study on her own. Dorothy's main challenge was algebra, “I knew nothing. A tutor who lived in the dorm helped me so much—she walked me through step by step.” Passing the GED is a source of tremendous pride for Dorothy. “I couldn't wait to call my children and tell them I'd graduate—to actually be in a cap and gown—that is something I always wanted.”

That sense of pride and accomplishment, and the students' growth in self-confidence, are critical aspects of reentry education. For Beth Hill, "watching the lightbulbs go off; giving them opportunities to realize how smart they really are; seeing them get an A on a test which they've never done before" is the most rewarding aspect of the work. And Carol Hill (no relation), the ABE instructor in the CPT program on the maximum-security side of the facility, explains that "the women's self-esteem growth is tremendous; they are so nervous and scared on the first day, they don't think they can do it. By the time they leave, their self-esteem has taken a leap; they do something they never thought they can do. The world opens up to them...to graduate with a cap and gown is a big moment in their lives."

As someone who dropped out of high school, Dorothy is typical of the vast majority of incarcerated people, who have low levels of educational attainment:

- 30 percent of all inmates have less than a high school diploma<sup>3</sup>
- 60 percent of state prison inmates have only a high school diploma<sup>4</sup>
- 94 percent of adults coming out of prisons cite education as their primary need to successful reentry and reintegration into their communities.<sup>5</sup>

At Topeka Correctional Facility, 80 percent of women score below the ninth-grade level in math on their [Test of Adult Basic Education](#), and 57 percent score below the ninth-grade level in reading.<sup>6</sup>

Without a high school diploma or access to postsecondary education, people with a criminal history have limited employment options and are likely to continue to commit offenses, which lead to further incarceration and reduction in educational and economic opportunities.

## DEMAND FOR EDUCATION OUTPACES SUPPLY

Although Dorothy was hungry for self-improvement, she didn't get another opportunity for education until it was almost too late. Because Washburn Tech's Certified Production Technician program was first offered at TCF shortly before Dorothy's release date, she was ineligible to participate. But Dorothy knew that this program could be essential to her future, so she sought out CPT instructor Brian Turner, and begged him to let her participate in the program, assuring him that she would be able to complete the coursework before her release date. She arranged for unpaid time off from her job at the cabinet factory across the street from the prison, where she had worked for a number of years, so she could concentrate on the CPT program, and proceeded to work her way methodically through each of the program's modules. The program is designed to take around 10 weeks to complete, but students work at their own pace and some take more time. Dorothy made sure she got the work done: she came early, stayed late, and worked doggedly, asking for help when she needed it and staying focused on her goal of completing the program before her release. In forfeiting the pay from her factory job in order to obtain the CPT training, Dorothy chose a long-term investment in her future over the short-term reward of wages.

### *Educational Attainment for Correctional Population vs. General Population*

Educational Attainment	Incarcerated	General Population
Some High School or Less (no diploma)	30%	14%
High School Diploma	64%	50%
Associate's Degree	4%	9%
Bachelor's Degree	1%	17%

Source: [http://www.seattlejobsinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/BeyondHeadlines\\_FEB2012.pdf](http://www.seattlejobsinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/BeyondHeadlines_FEB2012.pdf)

## THE CERTIFIED PRODUCTION TECHNICIAN PROGRAM AT TOPEKA CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

The CPT program is part of the [Accelerate Opportunity: Kansas](#) (AO-K) designed to provide an accelerated pathway to economic opportunity and self-sufficiency for adult learners with low levels of educational attainment. In partnership with TCF, Washburn University has extended this initiative to women who are incarcerated.<sup>7</sup>

Through Washburn's CPT program, students can earn eight nationally-recognized certificates and work with a job-readiness coach. Students who do not have a GED can also take ABE courses to earn their GED, and GED instruction is integrated with the CPT training, so students learn math and improve their reading skills by working with the technical content of the course. Some of the modules are offered online only, and there is limited Internet access in the classrooms. In addition to the technical courses, students learn how to write a resume and practice other job preparedness skills.

### CPT Program Certifications:

1. Nationally Certified Production Technician\*
2. CPT Safety Certificate
3. CPT Quality Practices & Measurement Certificate
4. CPT Manufacturing Processes & Production Certificate
5. CPT Maintenance Awareness Certificate
6. Kansas WorkReady! Certificate
7. OSHA 10 Certificate
8. Forklift Driver's Certification

*\*All the CPT certificates are awarded by the Manufacturing Skills Standards Council.*

### Program Staff:

- **CPT instructor**—teaches the technical material students need to master in order to gain each of the certifications
- **ABE instructor**—teaches Adult Basic Education to students who need to get a GED or high school equivalence diploma
- **Job readiness coach**—helps students develop a résumé and practice interview skills
- **Alternative workforce specialist**—works with the business community to build relationships, raise awareness about reentry, and develop employment opportunities for CPT program graduates. This position is funded by [KANSASWORKS](#).

The job-readiness coach helps students with resume writing; conviction statements, in which students explain why they were in prison and practice answering that question in interviews; and mock interviews with **KANSASWORKS** representatives, who give the women feedback on their resumes and interview presentation style. The job readiness coach also help students identify resources in the community and does as much as possible to prepare the women for reentry, although the instructors working inside the prison have limited access to resources in the community.

There are currently four instructors working inside the prison, and the job preparedness coach doubles as the ABE instructor. Two hundred thirty-four women have participated in the program on both the maximum and minimum sides of the prison since its inception in 2014. The graduation rates are high (96 percent on the minimum side and 88 percent on the maximum side), as is demand for the program.<sup>8</sup>

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***“I did [the job interview] almost to a T how they taught me—not as a former prisoner, but as a recent graduate of the program; told them about all the classes I had taken, all my certificates; told them I just needed one chance to show them what I could do.”***

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In addition to gaining technical knowledge and certifications, Dorothy gained valuable job preparedness skills from her work with Beth Hill and Kathie Harris, the alternative workforce specialist who works closely with students in the CPT program. Dorothy describes the interview at SystemAir: “I did it almost to a T how they taught me—not as a former prisoner, but as a recent graduate of the program; told them about all the classes I had taken, all my certificates; told them I just needed one chance to show them what I could do.” Not only did Dorothy get hired, but in the short time she’s worked there she’s received lots of positive feedback from managers.

Dorothy can’t say enough about the support she got from Kathie Harris. The two spoke numerous times in the weeks before Dorothy’s release, and Kathie went to great pains to find jobs that interested Dorothy. “It’s a great match,” Dorothy says about her job. Despite the distance from her home—Dorothy drives about 40 minutes each way—she loves the job and looks forward to each day at work.

## **NOT JUST ANY JOB**

One of the many challenges people face when they leave prison is finding a job that pays family-supporting wages. When people who reenter the community can find only low-wage jobs with no opportunities for advancement, the likelihood that they will struggle and fall back on old behavior patterns and relationships, and ultimately return to jail or prison, is very high.<sup>9</sup> The CPT program addresses this fundamental challenge of reentry by giving graduates a set of nationally-recognized certificates that make them appealing employees. Dorothy explains what this looks like in practice:

***The jobs I had before weren’t much different than the one I have now, it’s just knowing what the company talks about when we have our meetings.... The understanding of how the company runs...the safety of all the machines, the emergency stops. Recognizing safety hazards, which I found two today and reported them, and was asked to be on the safety committee. (I definitely said yes.) Just having these certifications opens doors.***

Stephen Arny, the CPT instructor on the maximum-security side at Topeka, underscores Dorothy’s assessment of the value of the credential, describing how demand for the program keeps growing: “The rest [of the women in TCF] hear about it; realize that there’s a market, hear about graduates of the program who have landed a job, they feel like this could be a ticket to success for them. The program offers wonderful support...it’s a great first step” toward a self-sustaining future.<sup>10</sup>

## CREATING COMMUNITY AND EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS

Kathie Harris views her work with Washburn Tech's CPT graduates as the capstone of the two decades she's spent developing relationships with Kansas businesses and helping business and community leaders learn about the state's large population of people with criminal histories.

In her current role as the alternative workforce specialist for [KANSASWORKS](#), Kathie works directly with people reentering the community, parole officers, employers, and workforce centers. She also works at the state level to bring together the various agencies that have a hand in workforce development and reentry services, and she and her colleagues provide training on working with people with criminal histories. This 160-hour, free training is designed for anyone in the workforce system who is going to work with people reentering the community. Participants in these training programs, which have been offered since 2003, become part of the statewide network that both provides services to people reentering the community and raises awareness of the issues surrounding reentry.

Raising awareness of reentry is a central part of the work Kathie does in building relationships with employers and helping them understand the potential labor pool that people with a criminal history represent. In Kansas, over 4,000 people each year are newly released into the community. Kansas employers are seeking skilled workers, and reentry programs like Washburn Tech's CPT program can provide employees to fill those needs.

## HOPE AND PRIDE

"The biggest thing for me is watching the difference in hope—giving the women hope, a chance of success; the impact on their lives is huge" says Stephen Army. Without education, these women are doomed to repeat the past. And Beth Hill observes, "the majority of women are really eager to change" but they need the help and support that the CPT program provides.

"I love who I am today" Dorothy says. "I feel better now than I felt at 35; my kids tell me 'I'm so proud of you, mom.'" The CPT program is helping to instill that sense of pride and purpose that is essential to successful reentry.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Waldman, A. 2015. "Women Face Many Obstacles After Prison Release." Humane Exposures blog. Available at: <http://humaneexposures.com/blog/women-face-many-obstacles-after-prison-release.html>; Swavola, E., K. Riley, & R. Subramanian. 2016. *Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice.
2. Roughly 100 women are able to earn a GED at TCF each year. There are typically around 800 women incarcerated at TCF. (Source: Gillian Gabelmann, grants coordinator, Washburn Technical College.)
3. Rampey, B.D., et al. 2016. *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education and Training*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Available at: [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/PIAAC\\_Prison\\_102816-Updated.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/PIAAC_Prison_102816-Updated.pdf)
4. Ibid.
5. Federal Interagency Reentry Council. 2013. *Education*. New York, NY: Author. Available at: [https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SnapShot\\_Education.pdf](https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SnapShot_Education.pdf)
6. Gillian Gabelmann interview with Erica Brien, July 2016.
7. Barton Community College, another IRE grantee in Kansas, has similarly adapted the AO-K model to reentry work, extending their welding program to two corrections facilities.
8. Gillian Gabelmann, correspondence with the author. June-September, 2016.
9. Employers within 800 occupations ranging from barber shop to child care ban hiring those with a history of incarceration; over 30,000 state laws allow employers to discriminate against people with a criminal history; in the 1990s, only 32 percent of employers ran criminal offender record information (CORI) checks, while today over 90 percent of employers either regularly or always run CORIs; Raphael, S. 2010. *Improving Employment Prospects for Former Prison Inmates*. NBER Working Paper Series. Work Paper 15874. April 2010. Available at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w15874.pdf>; National Research Council. 2014. *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; Rodriguez, M.N. & M. Emsellem. 2011. *65 Million "Need Not Apply": The Case for Reforming Criminal Background Checks for Employment*. New York, NY: The National Law Employment Project.
10. For most people, reentry occurs between ages 25 and 54, the prime age for labor force participation. Although over 80 percent of 25- to 54-year-olds are employed across the general population, only 33 percent of all released inmates find employment within the first year, a number that tends to taper off in subsequent years; Schmitt, J. & K. Warner. 2010. *Ex-offenders and the Labor Market*. Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research; Pager, D. 2007. *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.