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SUPPORTING THE EMPLOYMENT GOALS OF INDIVIDUALS ON PROBATION

Supportive Services in the Los Angeles County Innovative Employment Solutions Program

INTRODUCTION

For individuals on probation and those reentering their communities after incarceration, finding employment is often one of multiple challenges.¹ It can be overwhelming to think about finding and maintaining a job when concerns on an individual's mind might be *How will I get there? What if they find out about my record? Will I make enough money to support myself and my family?* Employment is an important factor in reentry but getting to a place where the focus can be on a job, education, or a career requires support in other parts of life as well. In the workforce development field, supportive services are used to respond to a range of needs, encompassing those directly related to and outside of work. These services are considered an important complement to employment-focused services provided through local workforce development systems.

The Los Angeles County Innovative Employment Solutions Program (INVEST) is designed to address the complex range of employment and supportive service needs individuals may have and support them in pursuing their employment and career goals. MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social research organization, is studying INVEST along with several other Los Angeles County-based, criminal legal system and reentry-focused programs. INVEST takes an innovative approach to providing employment and supportive services to people on probation in Los Angeles County. The program prepares staff members to understand the unique needs and challenges of people on probation while at the same time using a flexible spending approach that allows for comprehensive service provision.

This brief is the first in a series of publications that will explore INVEST in Los Angeles County.

Background

INVEST is one of several programs created in response to California Senate Bill 678 (SB 678), which allocated specific funds for services for people on adult felony probation. In Los Angeles County, the need for robust supportive services is particularly acute given that the county maintains the largest probation system in the country.² When Los Angeles County received SB 678 funding, it created an opportunity to develop a dynamic five-year partnership among three county agencies: the Los Angeles County Probation Department; the Justice, Care, and Opportunities Department, or JCOD; and the Los Angeles County

Department of Economic Opportunity, or DEO.³ Further, DEO, the county-level workforce agency, did not have targeted staff member training for responding to the needs of people on probation prior to INVEST. The partnership with Probation and JCOD developed and sharpened DEO's ability to provide services to clients with criminal legal system involvement and aligned these three separate agencies with the shared goal of improving employment outcomes.

SB 678 funds are allocated by the state and flow through the county agencies to community-based workforce centers around Los Angeles County called American Job Centers (each location across the state of California is known as America's Job Center of California, or AJCC). Across the United States, American Job Centers are part of a broad national network of job centers that host numerous programs funded at the federal level through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA); through state and local funding; and by way of private grants. A number of American Job Center core programs are funded by WIOA, which necessitates that American Job Centers form partnerships with and offer referrals to a variety of employment, education and training, and supportive service providers.⁴ Each AJCC participating in INVEST is independently run and hosts a range of these required services.⁵

When INVEST launched in 2018, five AJCCs were participating in INVEST across Los Angeles County. In the following two years, the program expanded to 10 AJCC locations and served over 1,100 individuals. The 10 participating AJCCs are located in diverse service areas where clients may choose to seek work or education. These areas include urban and suburban communities and areas with high demand in industries such as manufacturing, direct service casework and peer case management, logistics, and environmental services, among others.

Key Features of INVEST

INVEST is different from traditional (often federally funded) workforce programs in a few ways.

- INVEST was designed with significantly more funding for supportive services than typical workforce programs.⁶ This unique component allows staff members to provide multiple services in a flexible manner and to offer financial incentives and stipends to assist clients in meeting their employment goals.
- The program also requires an intensive, months-long Inclusive Workforce Development Specialist (IWDS) training and certification course for staff members that is intended to prepare them for the unique challenges and needs that individuals impacted by the criminal legal system experience as job seekers.
- Finally, the program features the co-location of an INVEST probation officer at an assigned AJCC.⁷

The first program component related to supportive services, financial incentives and stipends, and funding is the focus of this brief. While other workforce programs may incorporate a flexible spending model for service provision, INVEST's level of program funding enables a unique degree of tailoring to client needs (because they can combine services) as well as offering financial assistance

through incentives and training stipends (which help with motivation and self-sustainment during clients' program participation). In particular, incentives and training stipends are forms of financial assistance that are often limited or absent from other workforce programs.

A future final report will cover the different characteristics of INVEST, including its other unique features, like co-location.

Overview

This brief centers on one of the unique features of the program: the array of supportive services that staff members can provide and tailor to individual client needs under a flexible spending model, which is enabled by the significant program funds reserved for supportive services and financial incentives and stipends in ways not often seen in traditional workforce programs. It is an opportunity to share some of MDRC's initial findings directly from those who administer program services, staff members who connect clients to resources, and crucially, participating clients themselves. The content relies on virtual interviews conducted with program staff members and leadership during the spring and summer of 2022, and in-person and virtual interviews with program clients at 6 of the 10 AJCC locations in the summer and fall of 2022. The interview questions covered topics including program services, service receipt, policy and local context, employment background, and client and staff member experiences. The evaluation team only spoke with clients who had completed the program or were still involved. Interviews did not include anyone who did not participate or who discontinued program services.

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING/EDUCATION-FOCUSED SERVICES

Once clients enroll in INVEST, they meet with designated program staff members at the AJCC to develop a career map or case plan outlining their employment goals. Clients are asked to share the interests, needs, and barriers they may be facing during their earliest interactions with staff members. Multiple clients spoke about their experiences working with staff members, saying that staff were encouraging and took the time to understand their work and career interests. Based on a client's employment or educational goals, the client may decide to pursue immediate work or training/education (or both). Interviews with staff members and clients highlighted that both vocational training and subsidized employment opportunities were popular among INVEST clients.

Some of the employment-related services that an INVEST client can participate in include resume and interview preparation, case management, transitional subsidized employment and on-the-job training (subsidized by INVEST funding), vocational training programs, and education programs. For clients who wish to pursue training and education, INVEST staff members may connect them with vocational training programs, for which INVEST covers full costs, or other types of educational programs, for which INVEST can provide supplementary supportive services, such as books and laptops. For clients who are interested in immediate work, staff members can match them to INVEST-funded work experience opportunities or help them obtain jobs available in the community.

Some clients pursue a mix of employment services. One staff member said clients are encouraged to take advantage of multiple service offerings where possible—for example, clients can pair a subsidized job with a training program. The staff member reflected, “what makes this program so unique is you can take advantage of everything.” Another staff member described that after clients’ initial assessments they often say they need to work, so she likes to present the option of doing both work and, for example, an online training program. Many staff members expressed that one of the program’s ultimate goals was to help obtain career-oriented jobs through which clients can support themselves and receive benefits. However, they also acknowledged that not everyone was interested, ready, or able to spend time in training or educational programs for more career-focused positions. A member of program leadership explained the necessary balance of “recognizing that people are in different places in their [lives]... Sometimes you’re on a career journey” and sometimes people need a job at that moment.

At several AJCC locations, staff members noted that clients expressed a lot of interest in the training and transitional subsidized employment service components (see Box 1).⁸ There is some evidence that training and work experience programs can lead to increased employment.⁹ Training and transitional subsidized employment opportunities are both parts of traditional, often federally funded, workforce development programs, though traditional programs often have a cap on funding for activities like training programming (which are intended to serve the entire adult population rather than a specific subset of individuals with unique barriers). These traditional workforce programs also have more requirements to access funds (for example, federally funded programs require individuals

BOX 1

TRANSITIONAL SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

Transitional subsidized employment. This service is typically offered to clients who need work experience because they have a gap in their resume or they have little formal experience.* A client can work a job under transitional subsidized employment (either part time or full time) for up to 300 hours and INVEST pays for the client’s wages.†

Training. Vocational training programs can last between one week and six months, depending on the area of focus, and typically cost several thousand dollars. INVEST covers training costs. Examples of training program topics at America’s Job Center of California include Class A licensing (truck driving) and other commercial driving courses, heavy equipment operation, certified nursing assistant training, medical billing and coding, wild land forestry, and carpentry.

NOTES: *While transitional subsidized employment is an option for all clients, depending on a client’s past work experience the client might immediately start with a permanent job after joining INVEST, bypassing a work experience position altogether. Or, as was described by multiple INVEST staff members, sometimes employers were eager to hire and preferred to start someone off immediately as a permanent employee even if transitional subsidized employment was initially offered.

†The wage for INVEST clients working transitional jobs or participating in on-the-job training is set at the Los Angeles County minimum wage.

to be enrolled in Selective Service), which creates barriers to enrollment. INVEST supportive service funds can cover the cost of vocational training programs. INVEST also pays for clients' transitional employment and on-the-job training work experiences.

UNDERSTANDING CLIENTS' SUPPORTIVE SERVICE NEEDS

For both employment and supportive services, INVEST staff members tailor their approach to their clients' needs using program resources and providing general support and understanding in navigating work, school, and life circumstances. As noted, before INVEST was created, county workforce staff members at AJCC locations did not have specific training to serve people affected by the criminal legal system. The challenges these individuals experience may be different from or more complex than other workforce clients' challenges. INVEST was intentionally designed to build staff members' knowledge of clients' experiences through components such as the mandatory IWDS training. The intensive and targeted IWDS training seeks to equip staff members with an understanding of the unique needs and challenges individuals on probation face regarding employment, allowing for stronger personal connections with clients.

As a complement to this staff training, the availability of supportive service funds allows staff members to respond to clients' needs knowledgeably and comprehensively. One client shared that with “every barrier that I met, they had a solution... they'll sit there and tell you how you can make money, you know, and still go to school.” This particular client was preparing to start school and was provided a laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot so she could begin her program. While both INVEST and traditional workforce programs share a flexible spending approach to pay for supportive services, the availability of funds under INVEST means that in practice staff members can respond to multiple needs (such as covering a training program's costs in addition to associated supplies, like a laptop, Wi-Fi, and textbooks) whereas traditional programs may only be able to provide for smaller-scale, essential needs like gas and work tools once employed.¹⁰ The incentives and training stipends built into INVEST's flexible spending approach further demonstrate how program funds can be extended to respond to more client needs. INVEST offers these forms of financial assistance to clients in addition to its array of other supportive services. A staff member reflected on how the level of funding for incentives and stipends in particular is unique in INVEST, stating that many workforce programs “don't always have the kind of money that is needed in order to make it happen, but this program does, and it's fantastic.”

There are some significant client needs that can act as persistent impediments to engagement—for example, housing instability or health challenges (see Box 2). These are often needs that INVEST was neither designed to nor has the capacity to fully address. They relate to broad structural issues that impact individuals coming out of carceral institutions at higher levels than the general population.¹¹

BOX 2 COMPLEX AND UNMET NEEDS

There are some client needs that go beyond INVEST's financial and staff resources. Needs such as housing, mental health care or substance use disorder treatment, and consistent and affordable child care were raised by INVEST staff members and participants, and all require significant financial resources and sustained support over time.

At America's Job Center of California (AJCC), housing has been one of the most common barriers mentioned by staff members that many felt they were not able to adequately address. Each AJCC has partners to whom it can refer clients experiencing homelessness or housing instability. However, multiple staff members emphasized that without stable housing other matters, such as employment, would be a challenge for clients to focus on. Many shelters and housing service providers have long waitlists. As one staff member noted,

We've had to really work hard as a team...reaching out to our community-based organizations to find housing for our clients—because it's kind of a challenge to concentrate on finding employment when you don't know where you're going to sleep.

Two other barriers that are difficult to address through the program are child care and mental health/substance use disorder-related issues. INVEST staff members can provide referrals for child care providers to clients but there are often lengthy wait lists to access services. Staff members can also provide referrals to mental health and substance use disorder treatment providers. As with housing, staff members reflected that more complex mental health issues may cause some clients to struggle in the program, especially if they require any sort of in-patient services.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

INVEST acknowledges that personal challenges, obligations, or systemic barriers in a client's life can have an impact on program engagement, as well as the ability to find and maintain employment. The program's supportive services are designed to enable clients to focus on their employment goals. In practice, this principle translates to an expansive set of service options that INVEST staff members can provide so that clients can address needs such as food security, equipment for employment or training, and transportation. One creative, customized application of supportive service funds included paying for a gym membership for a client. An INVEST staff member identified that covering gym membership fees was a low-cost way to provide the client with access to a shower (\$20 per month for three months). This solution helped the client comfortably show up to work when the client otherwise may not have. After approving the expense, program leadership reflected, "as long as it can be tied to and has the nexus to employment, 9 times out of 10, I'm like 'Go for it.'"

INVEST staff members also leverage resources where they can, working with other agencies to secure additional funding for clients, including WIOA funding. Using funding from multiple sources is known as "braiding" in the workforce development field and can help maximize available funds to serve more clients. INVEST staff members are not required to braid funding before applying

INVEST program funds. They can immediately use their program resources if clients demonstrate an urgent need, though multiple staff members spoke of being conscious of maximizing resources where possible. In contrast, in workforce programs that rely primarily on WIOA funding, workforce staff members are required to seek out other public or private sources of funding before using the WIOA supportive service funding.

Different Types of Supportive Services

In general, INVEST supportive services can be divided into three categories: (1) in-house supports, (2) incentives and training stipends, and (3) outside referrals and community partnerships.

A key component of the in-house supports is financial assistance in the form of program milestone incentives and stipends. It is important to differentiate between some of the smaller-scale, though still essential, supportive services and the larger supports that make INVEST a unique workforce program, such as the incentives and stipends. Traditional workforce programs use their supportive service funding to help clients obtain work documents and certifications; connect clients with basic necessities like food and clothing; and cover other costs like transportation, work or school supplies, and cell phones. They will refer clients to outside partners, when possible, to braid funding and maximize program funds. INVEST does the same, and on top of these standard services offers clients incentive payments for completing INVEST milestones (delivered to clients as checks) and financial support for clients taking part in training programs. A training stipend is offered to clients throughout their training course to help cover some of their costs. As highlighted under “Employment,” INVEST also pays for clients’ full training program fees.

In-House Supports

Some of the in-house supportive services include:¹²

- Assistance obtaining **right-to-work documents, standard licenses, and identification cards**
- Provision of **work equipment and tools, clothing vouchers, laptops, textbooks, and Wi-Fi or hotspots**
- Help with **transportation-related expenses** like bus passes, ride shares, gas reimbursement, and on occasion minor vehicle repairs (see Box 3 for more information on transportation-related supportive services)
- Help with **miscellaneous other costs** (cell phones and on occasion utility bills)
- In more limited circumstances, arranging **hotel lodging** before an interview if the client is without stable housing and **temporary rental assistance**

Incentives and Stipends

- **Program milestone incentives**, for example, cash or cash-equivalent (gift cards) incentives for retaining employment for 30, 60, and 90 days, and for at least 6 months¹³
- **Stipends while enrolled in a vocational training course**

BOX 3 TRANSPORTATION

The lack of accessible transportation is one common barrier to employment throughout Los Angeles County. It is particularly acute and complex when considering the geographical size of the county, the potential distance between home and work or work opportunities, the high cost of gas, and the excessive amount of traffic that can make public transportation inconvenient in many areas. Los Angeles County is one of the largest counties in the United States and spans 4,084 square miles. It is made up of 88 cities and approximately 120 unincorporated areas.

Helping with transportation is the most common form of assistance that INVEST provides. For some areas, gas money or a bus pass allowed clients to attend school or work, even if they had to take multiple buses. For one client attending a five-week training program, America’s Job Center of California staff members helped pay for car insurance and gas so the client would be able to get to class. The client said that as a result, “transportation was never a problem. It was just that you had to communicate.” However, in other geographically separated parts of the county, transportation was an enduring issue that was only able to be partially addressed through INVEST.

Staff members described incentives as primarily serving two purposes. They are seen as a resource to keep clients engaged in services at various points as well as a way to provide clients with money to support themselves as they move through the program. While some staff members said it can be helpful to mention incentives up front as a recruitment tool, others stated that they do not typically disclose financial incentives to clients because they are concerned about the overall program budget for milestone-based incentives. Other staff members reflected that they did not want clients to focus on receiving incentives as their primary motivation for joining a training program. During interviews, staff members from two AJCC locations reported that they ran out of funding for incentives at the end of the 2021 fiscal year.¹⁴ This prompted one of these two locations to change the way it advertises incentives as a part of the program, instead opting to “surprise” clients with their milestone incentives.

Referrals for Outside Support

For other supportive services, INVEST staff members rely on referrals to organizations and partners within the community. These organizations may handle health-related service provision (including physical health, mental health, and substance use disorder treatment services), additional case management services and targeted educational supports, and responding to basic survival needs (for example, connections to food banks, rental assistance organizations, and child care providers). After identifying a client’s service needs and referral options, they provide a “warm hand-off” to the relevant supportive service organization(s).¹⁵

Further Comparison with Traditional Workforce Programs

The core ethos of supportive service funding in traditional workforce programs is similar to INVEST—these funds can be spent on a range of services as long as they can be tied back to helping clients meet their employment or occupational training goals. However, in practice, workforce staff members must often navigate limitations when thinking of responding to multiple needs because

they must seek out sources of funding other than WIOA funding first. This can create a potential delay in delivering supportive services. INVEST was designed with the expectation of a short turnaround time for delivering supportive services. The policy for responding to supportive service requests is a turnaround time of three business days, but since each AJCC has its own organizational and approval structure, turnaround time may vary from site to site.¹⁶ Under INVEST, staff members have a larger pool of supportive service funds and can respond immediately because they do not necessarily have to worry about leveraging other funding (although, as noted, most of the INVEST staff members interviewed were experienced workforce employees who were skilled at leveraging and braiding funding where possible). INVEST funding is entirely flexible, which for a well-funded program translates to having the means to respond to a multitude of client needs, pairing aspects of the program to maximize services that clients can participate in as well as providing financial supports.

CONSIDERATIONS

INVEST is an attempt to think about workforce services differently. It prioritizes a community that has historically been underserved in the workforce space, tailors its programming with individuals on probation in mind, and relies on a flexible spending approach that allows staff members to respond to client needs comprehensively and creatively in real time.

INVEST represents how new partnerships at the local level can pull together different perspectives, with the potential to result in programs that factor in unique needs and community context. When the needs of underserved communities are met more directly, individuals can be set up to thrive in educational, employment, and community settings, building careers and earning money to support themselves and their families. INVEST also demonstrates how crucial program funding is part of the larger story for flexible spending and providing clients with tailored services in workforce-focused programs. Over time, federal funding for workforce services has decreased. This trend is mirrored by concurrent declines in state funding for education as well as the availability of employer-provided training. A state-funded, county-operated program like INVEST fills some of those gaps. INVEST provides one promising example for innovative approaches to workforce services and prioritizing individuals impacted by the criminal legal system.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Probation, or probationary supervision, is “a judicially imposed suspension of sentence and a form of community supervision... [used] in lieu of a long-term jail or prison sentence.” Judicial Council of California Administrative Office of the Courts, Report on The California Community Corrections Performance Incentives Act of 2009: Findings from the SB 678 Program (San Francisco: Judicial Council of California, 2013).
- 2 County of Los Angeles Probation, “About Probation,” website: <https://probation.lacounty.gov/about-probation/>, 2023.
- 3 INVEST was initially designed with the Reentry Division of the Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry (ODR) as one of its key partners. ODR was established within the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services in 2015 to provide programs to divert people with serious mental, physical or behavioral health needs away from the Los Angeles County Jail and into community-based care and to provide reentry supportive services. In 2022, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors consolidated various efforts to support communities that are system-impacted by establishing the Justice, Care, and Opportunities Department (JCOD). The goal of JCOD is to divert people from incarceration and support individuals when released, with an emphasis on the non-clinical components of this work. Upon JCOD’s establishment, the Reentry Division within ODR and its programs were moved from ODR to JCOD; Los Angeles County Justice, Care, and Opportunities Department, “Home,” website: <https://jcod.lacounty.gov/>, 2023.

As with ODR/JCOD, another county agency involved in the design and implementation of INVEST has since undergone some changes. The economic and workforce development branch of the Los Angeles County Department of Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Services (WDACS) was also one of the key partners for INVEST. In July 2022, WDACS dissolved into two separate departments. Its economic and workforce development branch became the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO), which remains involved in the implementation and oversight of INVEST; County of Los Angeles Department of Economic Opportunity, “Home,” website: <https://opportunity.lacounty.gov/>, 2023.

- 4 The AJCC is responsible for distributing WIOA funds as well as other government and privately funded grants through its various programs. AJCCs operate on behalf of the County of Los Angeles as contractors.
- 5 Each participating AJCC administers program funds to clients enrolled in INVEST, with oversight and support from DEO and county-level agencies. INVEST clients may receive additional services through other (non-INVEST) programs at the AJCC or elsewhere.
- 6 There is no set amount of supportive service funds per participant. These funds are provided based on need by site, so each AJCC has flexibility in determining how much of its total program budget to set aside for supportive services.
- 7 There are three INVEST staff members at most AJCC locations: Deputy Probation Officer II (DPO), Career Development Specialist, and Business Services Representative. A DPO is assigned to each participating AJCC in a “community-based” role. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the co-location of DPOs along with the community-based workforce staff has been implemented differently across the county. Some DPOs spend more/less time working out of their AJCC assigned office. These three roles will be featured in the forthcoming INVEST final report.
- 8 Transitional subsidized employment opportunities, sometimes referred to as transitional jobs or paid work experience, are time-limited jobs for which some or all of the worker’s wages are paid for by an external funder. Transitional subsidized employment is designed for individuals who may have inconsistent work histories, have been out of work for some time, or need work experience.
- 9 Danielle Cummings and Dan Bloom, *Can Subsidized Employment Programs Help Disadvantaged Job Seekers? A Synthesis of Findings from Evaluations of 13 Programs*. OPRE Report 2020-23. (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.)

- 10** Workforce programs, even well-funded programs, may be unable to access certain federal funding streams for clients due to eligibility requirements. Federally funded programs require men to register with Selective Service in order to be eligible to receive services funded by federal dollars. Because INVEST is funded by the State of California, this requirement does not pose a challenge to accessing and utilizing program funding if an individual is not registered with Selective Service. However, registration is required for an INVEST client to co-enroll in WIOA-funded programs.
- 11** Lucius Couloute, “Nowhere to go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People” (website: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>, 2018); American Academy of Family Physicians, “Incarceration and health: A family medicine perspective” (website: <https://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/incarceration.html>, 2017).
- 12** Services related to the first two bullet points—assistance with right-to-work documents, standard licenses, identification cards, work equipment tools, clothing vouchers, laptops, and WiFi or hotspots—were delivered in-house at some AJCC INVEST locations but could be or were referred out to community partners at other locations.
- 13** Other milestone incentives may be provided for completing online job-readiness workshops, receiving a first paycheck, and signing up for and receiving a high school diploma, among other milestones.
- 14** INVEST guidelines permit modifications to how each individual AJCC allocates its budget across the separate line items of employment services and supportive services. Therefore, it is possible that the sites where staff members reported running out of funding for incentives could have had more funding but did not request a budget modification to allow for it.
- 15** As with employment services, specific providers or partners may vary by each AJCC and the surrounding service area but in general the same types of services are available through each location. Besides the incentives and in-house supports or payments, the referrals are services available to anyone who comes to the AJCC, not just INVEST clients. The term “warm handoff” originated in customer service where it is used to describe referrals that ensure that the customer is connected to someone who can provide what he or she needs. Health and Human Services, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (n.d.). “Implementation Quick Start Guide: Warm Handoff.” Website: <https://www.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/professionals/quality-patient-safety/patient-family-engagement/pfepprimarycare/warm-handoff-qsg-brochure.pdf>.
- 16** Any variance outside the three-day period is noted as a delay by DEO. The agency’s stance on the service delivery turnaround stems from acknowledging that to leave individuals in wait of necessary supportive services can have a negative impact on clients.

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