

Equitable Credential Attainment Case Study

Memphis, Tennessee

Background

In 2023, the Greater Memphis Chamber (GMC) partnered with Southwest Tennessee Community College, Tennessee College of Applied Technology - Memphis, Shelby County Office of Reentry and the Tennessee Office of Re-entry to expand equitable access to industry credentials for formerly incarcerated individuals. The initiative comes at a pivotal time, as Memphis continues to navigate longstanding economic opportunity gaps. More than 60% of residents live in persistent poverty census tracts, underscoring the importance of inclusive workforce strategies that address systemic barriers to opportunity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Additionally, while Memphis is home to strong industry sectors, the region has faced challenges related to disconnected talent pipelines and systemic barriers to economic mobility. Recidivism in Tennessee remains high, with nearly half of formerly incarcerated individuals returning to prison within three years (Tennessee Department of Correction, 2021). GMC and its partners are working to align training, reentry and employment systems around the shared goal of unlocking family-sustaining career pathways for returning citizens.

Approach

At their program's outset, the GMC project team envisioned developing new, short-term training programs ranging from four to 20 weeks designed specifically for justice-impacted individuals. The approach was grounded in labor market data and local employer input. The goal was to imbed industry-recognized credentials into transitional training models that could lead directly to employment in high-demand sectors like advanced manufacturing. However, as the team engaged in strategic conversations and assessed the landscape of existing initiatives, a more viable and sustainable path emerged. Rather than building new programs from the ground up, the project team shifted its strategy to better align with the strengths and activities already underway in the region. This refined approach focused on three core components:

- **Employer Education:** The team prioritized educating regional employers, particularly those in the manufacturing sector, on the value of second-chance hiring. Presentations addressed stigma, highlighted available supports and illustrated how inclusive hiring can meet the needs of employers.

- **Existing Programs:** Rather than recruiting individuals into newly designed training programs, the team shifted its focus to individuals already participating in existing reentry and workforce programming. Under the initial approach, project partners encountered challenges related to staff transitions, enrollment timelines and the level of coordination required to launch new programs. Leveraging existing infrastructure proved more effective, allowing the team to engage participants who were already receiving wraparound support services, which minimized duplication and enhanced collaboration.
- **Job Placement:** To ensure credentialed participants have clear pathways to employment, GMC is actively working with local stakeholders and community-based organizations to connect justice-impacted individuals with employers committed to inclusive hiring. These efforts focus on cultivating relationships with employers that recognize the value of second-chance talent and are prepared to offer meaningful job opportunities that align with participants' skills and training.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

This strategic evolution reflects the GMC's ability to listen, assess and adapt in real time—an important lesson for chambers seeking to shift from launching new programs to building alignment within existing systems. For this project in particular, success meant responding to employer needs while also centering the perspectives and experiences of the justice-impacted individuals they strived to serve. GMC's experience offers key insights for chambers and workforce organizations seeking to advance equitable credentialing strategies:

- **Start with what's already working.** Building entirely new credential programs can be resource-intensive and slow to launch. Memphis found greater momentum by strengthening and contextualizing existing offerings to meet the needs of justice-impacted learners.
- **Gain employer buy-in.** Building buy-in from the business community is essential when working with untapped talent pools. Framing second-chance hiring as a solution to labor shortages and retention challenges helped deepen employer engagement.
- **Center trust and continuity.** For justice-involved individuals, navigating training and employment systems can be complex and overwhelming. As GMC reflected, "We have learned that simply providing opportunities for upskilling is not enough without accessible and comprehensive support systems in place and aligned." Collaborative approaches with trusted partners are essential to strengthening the continuity of support justice-impacted individuals need along their path to employment.

Looking ahead, the Memphis team will build on several impressive wins that include TCAT-M's first cohort inside the Juvenile Justice Center. This has already produced two students with nationally recognized National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS) manufacturing credentials and a forklift-training program serving 40 justice-impacted adults is now cited as a statewide best practice. Additionally, five employer partners have committed to open their doors for facility tours and match-making sessions that will provide guidance to the students at the Juvenile Justice Center on applying for jobs at their companies. The GMC team plans to continue refining its model, integrating data tracking and sharing outcomes with regional stakeholders. Their work is a compelling example of how chambers can serve as key conduits for building more inclusive workforce systems.