

Heather Erwin:

Hello and welcome. April is Second Chance Month and we are pleased to bring you this limited series podcast in celebration of second chances. My name is Heather Erwin and I'm joined by Joe Williams. We are Technical Assistance Consultants for the American Institutes for Research. AIR works in partnership with the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to run the Youth Reentry Training and Technical Assistance Center, which provides support for grantees awarded Federal Second Chance Act funding. Each week this month we will engage an inspiring OJJDP grantee and clients from their program to reflect on different aspects of youth reentry. We hope you come away from these conversations feeling better educated about and inspired by how youth reentry works and why it's important.

This week's episode of Reflections on Reentry features the work of Second Chance Act grantee, the Utah Division of Juvenile Justice and Youth Services, known as JJYS. JJYS provides a continuum of intervention, supervision, and rehabilitation programs to detained youth while assuring public safety. The Office of Operational Policy and Special Projects provides support to the various areas of programming offered by JJYS. Second Chance Act funds granted to JJYS have supported efforts around youth transition for a number of years. The current program focuses on developing employment related skills and supplying employment related equipment for youth participating in JJYS services. Efforts revolve around assessing the interests of JJYS involved youth and providing opportunities for vocational training and certifications. JJYS partners with outside organizations to connect youth with stable careers and help build a solid future. We're pleased to be joined today by program managers, DeAnn Mason and Justin Seely, as well as program director Reg Garff. We are also happy to welcome E who is directly impacted by the juvenile system in Utah.

Joe Williams:

Good day everybody. This is Joe Williams and I want to welcome you to this week's episode of our Second Chance Month series podcast, Reflections on Reentry. This week we have a great group of people to share with you about their project. They are from the Utah Division of Juvenile Justice and Youth Services. We'll have them give their names and a brief introduction, and we also have a special guest who is a young lady who graduated from their project, and you'll really enjoy hearing from her. Since Emma is a youth and she's a former program participant, she'll be off camera during this podcast interview.

So can we start with introductions? So Reg, I see you first so you can start off.

Reg Garff:

I'm Reg Garff, I am Program Director for the Operational Policy and Special Projects and the Second Chance Grant is one of my special projects and I'm happy to be here today.

DeAnne Mason:

I'm DeAnn Mason and I also work on the Second Chance Act Grant and I am the program coordinator for a peer support team within our Juvenile Justice and Youth Services Division.

Justin Seeley: Justin Seely, I am the Employment Coordinator statewide for Juvenile Justice and Youth Services.

Luke Heperi: Luke Heperi. I'm the Case Manager for Juvenile Justice and Youth Services.

Emma: Hey everybody, my name is Emma and I am recently terminated from the program for Juvenile Justice and Youth Services and I'm here to share my story.

Joe Williams: Great, Emma, we appreciate you being with us. So Emma, let's start the conversation off by you telling us what you would like listeners to know about yourself.

Emma: I think speaking for me isn't something I do super well, so I tend to generalize. So if I'm speaking in a generalization, it's that it doesn't matter where you come from, it matters where you go, it matters what you do. And sometimes you're going to slip, you're going to fall. Just keep going, get back up, work harder, work smarter, go farther.

Joe Williams: Can you tell us a little bit about your experience in the program?

Emma: Yeah, I was 19 when I went into the program. An incident occurred when I was 17 and I spent some time deciding whether or not this would be a good program for me, and eventually they settled on it, that this was a good option. And so, I spent, it's weird, but I know the exact number of days. I spent 370 days in this program and it was an in-house kind of situation. So, you were away from home, away from your family, friends, etc., all of that. And I was there to be better.

I chose to go myself. I did definitely have a choice and I think I made the right one. This program, there's a lot of misconceptions around it. Most people think of the words juvenile justice and the first thing that comes to mind is ragtag delinquents. And while that's not too far out of the picture some of the time, I mean there's always going to be a reason for stereotypes and I guess I want to prove that stereotypes are there for a reason, but they're not always the truth.

In the program, I spent a lot of time lobbying for my education. I got together with some of the heads of JJYS, Brett and April, and I went over a plan to help educate these young women, because they deserve something better. I recently was a university student before entering the program. I was studying neuroscience at UVU, 4.0 GPA and it was fine. It was great. And education has been vastly important to me, and one of the first things I noticed when I got there was a lot of these women didn't have the same opportunities as me. We may have come from really similar backgrounds, low income, high risk families, and I realize that the defining factor is having something that gives you the choice, because sometimes you don't know you have it and sometimes you need a little push to get there. And I believe that was my purpose in this program. So I started meeting and lobbying for all kinds of educational

programs for these young women. Out of all the facilities in the state, the Women's Youth Center was the only one without any kind of postsecondary education. I made it my mission to change that.

So I headed up the resident council, I went to all these meetings and changed things. Did the best I could in every way that I could. I try to inspire others with my actions.

And I ended up being pretty successful with my endeavors. Justin actually, he came too, we actually ended up being certified bicycle mechanics in the program. I got together with the Bike Utah, oh gosh, organization Bike Utah, and we helped provide these young women with job offers, technical skills, something that can help them kind of channel all this energy and confusion into something productive and something that's rewarding. I mean, a lot of these girls hadn't ridden bikes in years, and they fixed them themselves and we rode them around the courtyard and I've never seen them smile so big. All 370 days, that was the one I remember the most.

Another thing I did, which I actually consider my greatest achievement, was I made history by being the first juvenile incarcerated woman to ever weld.

Joe Williams: Congratulations.

Emma: I started a welding program for these women, in conjunction with Decker Lake Youth Center and Davis Technical College, and I actually still weld today. I'm currently a welding student at Mountain Land Technical College, best in my class. And I think that passion is a huge driving factor for what makes someone grow.

Heather Erwin: Thanks Emma. This is Heather. You can hear the passion in your voice when you're talking about the things that you've accomplished and achieved not just for yourself, but for the women that you've influenced and impacted. So thank you so much for sharing that story with us. I would love to hear what you plan to do next.

Emma: Well, I'm continuing welding of course. You don't think you'd fall in love with molten metal, but it's surprising. And the passion I found there is, it's kind of overflowed into every area of my life. I actually started my own independent graphic design company. I make stickers and stuff, and so it's really fun to take the drive that I learned and apply it everywhere. That's the great thing about education is it's not just a one and done kind of deal. You go to school, you're getting your degree and everything, but it's not over, because then there's always the next steps. It can help you start a new business, start a new program, or help someone else do the same.

Heather Erwin: Wonderful. Thank you again for sharing your story, your insights, your earned expertise around education in particular, not just life experience. We appreciate

that. I think it would be great to hear reflections from the JJYS staff on just maybe what Emma shared and your experiences with other young people like Emma and how else you feel like the program has had an impact.

Justin Seely:

Sorry, I've got to choke back the tears a little bit, listening to her story and thinking about that opportunity when they had the chance to ride the bikes in the program and watch those walls disappear. They've learned that skill, but also to see the walls disappear and for some of those individuals to be kids again.

I'm lucky and fortunate with the foundation work that was done and a 2017 grant that DeAnne overseen. She built a solid foundation and we realized there were some areas that we needed to improve on, and that was our transitional work and employment work that we needed to do.

And prior to that, as she talked about the education, housing was another major focus and the state actually picked up that side. So there's a great foundation laid and this grant focused around employment and those opportunities.

Really early on, my job was to help connect job opportunities and businesses together and provide vocational opportunities where we could do that. And so, we've been really successful in creating that and that's where we helped remove some barriers for the youth, or for those who are using it. And that's really where the case managers coming in works perfectly. And Luke has done a phenomenal job in this area as far as being able to provide the money for them for these opportunities for their jobs, for some of the certificate programs. And then Luke has to do the lion's share of the work and he works directly with the client. So I'll turn some time over to Luke to talk about his role.

Luke Heperi:

Emma really, the first time I met her, she had emphasized how much and how important education was. She asked that she be able to participate in any and all available educational opportunities, and she really advocated for being able to expand that, not only for herself but for others. And then when she got out of the program and returned to a home setting, she was the one that really got after it, she enrolled herself in MTECH. A lot of times we'll have to help them out, but she really got after it. She was enrolled, had things set up before I even was able to get the orientation packet going for her. So it's been a real joy to see someone who is so educationally motivated who gets after things. She's very open with what she needs as far as that. And she keeps such a busy schedule that we have to schedule meetings earlier right before she runs off to her shift at times. And so, it's been really great to see someone who not only advocates for herself but for others. And it's been a real pleasure to be working with her through all of this.

Heather Erwin:

It's also really nice to see an agency that's responsive to requests from clients and to helping meet student needs. So we applaud those efforts as well.

Reg Garff:

The youth voice is an important aspect of the work that we do and it's actually something you have to work on. I mean it doesn't just happen. And we have expanded that youth voice option throughout all our facilities so that kids can actually talk to us and tell us what they want to have happen. In fact, they comment on our policy, we send that to the kids too, have the kids and the youth that are with us respond to it. I remember sending some of those while Emma was with us, they had some great feedback and we sent the review through all the administrators, but it was the youth who really nailed it down for us, to help us figure it out. So their voice is critically important to this work.

DeAnne Mason:

And one thing I'd like to note and that Justin kind of tapped a little bit on is each time that we've had our grant, our overall goal is for that to be implemented long term. We don't want to utilize the funds and then have it fade away once the funds are gone or once the grant is completed. And so, it's really been nice to see that absorbed and that those areas are being supported by our department and by our division. It's also really nice to see that the youth are having these factors implemented into their world that maybe they didn't have opportunities for before in hopes to help them decrease that likelihood of re-offending or continuing down the path that possibly had created the direction for putting them in with us to begin with.

Emma:

Something phenomenal about this program is exactly what you said, DeAnne, something that in my case has been really impactful. And thank you Luke for putting in so much hard work lobbying for me. I mean, you know me, I'm texting you all the time being like, "Luke, Luke, wait. This thing." Because as a welder I go through a lot of supplies. I mean, my clothes catch on fire and my boots get holes burnt in them. I mean I've caught on fire twice this week. It's just what happens.

I've been doing overheads all week so it makes sense, dropping down on me and whatnot, but I'll be like, "Hey man, I need some new flap discs for my grinder because I've been doing back to back bend tests," and you've got to grind it really, really, really flat and that's a lot of metal to go through and it's just sandpaper. So I really appreciate that he's been working so hard with the state to make sure, because like I said, I'm a poor kid from a low income family. I'm a full-time student with a full-time job, barely scraping by to make my rent. I don't have money to get all these welding supplies, so rent, groceries, and taxes, that's all I can do.

But thanks to Luke and the state, I've been able to get supplies when I need them and be able to continue my program, which has helped catapult me ahead. I mean I've been in this program about four or five months and it's a 16-month program and I'm more than halfway through. I mean I'm going through this thing at light speed because of the help I've been able to get. If I was waiting for money to be able to save up after I'm scraping pennies together in a jar, I wouldn't have nearly as much time for my future as I do now because of the great work that these people are putting in.

Heather Erwin:

That's such an important point, Emma. And by the way, I have zero idea what most of the words are that you said when you were talking about welding, but I can definitely hear how excited you are about it. So we should all be so lucky to have something we love, to be able to do something we love.

I really appreciate your points, because I think that is something that happens a lot in programming around reentry, right, is that support once you're out of the program. So thank you for highlighting that.

Justin Seeley:

I don't know if we're kind of to the point of final thoughts, but when they came to me and when they asked me to take on this job opportunity, they really got me with helping to end generational poverty and provide opportunities that were just not jobs, they were career opportunities in that. And I think it's so important for those listening to this, and especially upper administration, to be supportive of this program and the success. Letting us just kind of roll with it, come up, develop a program, and give us ultimate support and that. If it wasn't for the support that we have from our upper administration, Brad, April, Reg, the success that you're seeing wouldn't be possible. There's a lot of just outside the box thinking that actually occurred to put a lot of this together and they supported it a hundred percent along the way. They gave us a charge and a direction, and that's what we've been focused on. And to have that level of support has been amazing.

Emma:

This program, I mean it might be scary in the idea of it. I mean, to be frank, no one likes thinking about being incarcerated. No one likes thinking about being locked away from your life for a period of time for a mistake. And what I learned, especially from all of these wonderful people, it's not about what you did. It's not about what happened or how you got there, it's about what you will do, where you're going, how you're going to get there. And it can be hard for a lot of these multi-generational poverty families to have the means to actually get there.

I mean, I hate to say it, but money's as necessary as food and a roof. And you don't have that, you don't have either. Especially for people who are just getting back on their feet, there's so many things that you wouldn't think that are stressful that are, I mean, I remember how weird it was to shower the first time without shower shoes. I thought I was going to fall over. It was really whack. And putting on my own clothes, I was like, where's the uniform? This is wrong. Why do my pants have pockets? And then it's even driving a car for the first time, I was so scared. I was like, I'm going to kill somebody. I'm going to wreck this car. It's going to be terrible. And I was fine, thank goodness for muscle memory.

But there's a lot of little things that are terrifying because after, this is a quick I guess loop back side note, but anthropology says, Franz Boas is the father of anthropology. Anthropology makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange. And it's the same thing with coming home. You look at your house and you're like, this is somebody else's room, even though it used to be mine,

because you're not the same person. You look at your car and you think, I don't know what any of this means. And having helped to get back on your feet and being able to focus on just being a human again is really important. I mean, it's something nobody thinks about, but it's something everyone in this program goes through.

Heather Erwin: Yeah, that's Awesome, Emma. Thank you for sharing those things. I think it's really important for people to hear that.

Joe Williams: So I want to thank everybody for sharing in this conversation and we want to give you an opportunity to give any last thoughts you have.

Emma: I guess if I could say something before we all part ways, it would be to thank you for giving me this opportunity. It's nice to be able to inspire somebody. And ever since I've started JJYS, I've been told, because I know I have a pretty good track record when it comes to behavior and such. I've never really made much trouble. And I've been told that it's nice to see someone doing good. And it's the same thing now. It's nice to see people out here doing good. Doing good for the sake of someone else.

Sharing my story isn't something I do often, because quite frankly I don't have time. Like I said, full-time student, full-time job. So it's nice to have the opportunity to know that I'm still doing good for people who are doing good for others. Gives hope to the world that I guess, as Anne Frank would say, after all, I still believe people are truly good at heart.

Luke Heperi: I've been appreciative from the standpoint of working within the division and as Emma's former case manager there to be able to help out and help her get access to those resources. Because often it's, I think, for as much treatment that we can give them, being able to have somebody set up for a good springboard for the rest of their life is really rewarding, and I've appreciated the passion that Emma has brought to her education.

Justin Seeley: My final thoughts, I guess I kind of gave them, but the last thing I would add that I'd like people to know is definitely -- Utah's here. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. We're willing to spread the wealth and share what we've done. We're a phone call or an email away. And I'm extremely thankful for the team that I'm a part of. And I think what's important is building that team for success.

DeAnne Mason: I'm grateful to be a part of this podcast as well as to hear one of our youth articulate themselves so well. It is a wonderful achievement all around. I do believe that these young lives really are going to make the difference of that future. And the more we can chip away at some of those barriers and provide some added tools in their tool belt, the better it's going to be. And so I'm grateful to see how it's evolved, and I look forward to how it's going to continue the momentum going forward. But thank you for this opportunity.

Reg Garff:

I just want to recognize one thing, and that is our federal partners at OJJDP and providing the opportunity. It's only by means of the grant that we're able to try new things, and be inventive, and to think outside the box. And it took a couple of tries to try and get it right. And they were patient with us as we worked through those things and tried new things. And ultimately we hear from Emma today and her great story, and that's representative of a lot of other kids. And being able to change young lives and have the opportunity to do that is a great blessing. And so, we're grateful for our federal partners and being able to do that.

Joe Williams:

So thanks Reg, and thanks Utah Division of Juvenile Justice and Youth Services for sharing in this conversation with us, and for introducing us to Emma and for sharing this conversation with us, as well as with our listeners.

Heather Erwin:

Thank you for joining us during this Second Chance Month to talk about youth reentry. We'd also like to sincerely thank our guests for sharing their insights and experiences with us today, and for the wonderful work they continue to do. We hope you'll join us for the remaining podcasts in the series. Follow these links if you'd like more information on the Second Chance Act and programs funded by it. And for some more history and background on Second Chance Month, AIR, and how the Department of Justice enables important work supporting reentry success. We'll see you next time.