

BC3 may serve as educator in possible Butler County re-entry program

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Tracy Hack, Butler County Community College’s coordinator of community leadership initiatives, is shown Tuesday, Dec. 11, 2018, during an empowerment training information session on BC3’s main campus and attended by Butler County governmental, business, nonprofit and education officials.

(Butler, PA) An employment planning summit hosted by Butler County Community College may lead to BC3 serving as an educator in programming designed to assist those incarcerated or previously incarcerated in developing skills to re-enter the workforce, a BC3 administrator said, and address an objective in the college’s 2017-2022 strategic plan.

The summit drew approximately 60 representatives from BC3, the Alliance for Nonprofit Resources, Butler County governmental offices and the Butler County judicial advisory board, among others – “those who would have a vested interest in a re-entry program,” said Tracy Hack, BC3’s coordinator of community leadership initiatives.

“It’s all about empowering people who have barriers to employment,” Hack said of the goals of the summit, which featured presentations by the Turning Leaf Project, Twin Cities Rise and Berks Connections/Pretrial Services – identified as “three model programs” by summit organizers who sought to identify elements of each that could be incorporated into Butler County’s programming.



Butler County governmental, business, nonprofit and education officials are shown Tuesday, Dec. 11, 2018, during an empowerment training information session on BC3’s main campus.

Turning Leaf, North Charleston, S.C., serves those who have been formerly incarcerated to “change their attitudes, thinking and behavior so that they can complete probation and stay out of prison,” according to its website. It offers a classroom bootcamp, in-house employment and assists with job placement.

The mission of Twin City Rise, with offices in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., is to “transform lives out of poverty through meaningful employment,” according to its website, which adds that the organization’s curriculum transcends teaching through its “signature personal empowerment program” that provides transformative change and fosters self-confidence and self-reliance.”

Berks Connections/Pretrial Services, Reading, Pa., provides “pretrial services and re-entry programming for inmates and returning citizens, as well as services for their children and loved ones,” according to its website, which adds that its goal is to improve lives within communities by building hope, creating opportunities, providing second chances and strengthening connections.

Major portion of re-entry “about education”

The second of four pathways within BC3’s 2017-2022 strategic plan calls for “connecting to our downtown and helping with economic revitalization,” Hack said. “Part of revitalization is going to be how do we get sustainable jobs for people who have barriers to employment, and how to create a healthy, thriving, working environment.”

Those attending the summit, Hack said, learned about the successful re-entry programs for the workforce, considered whether such programming could be implemented in Butler County, and what elements of those programs would be most useful.

“The major portion of re-entry is really about education,” Hack said, “because you are helping people build skills. You are educating them on cognitive skills, on work skills, on life skills. This is all under the umbrella of education.”

A Butler County program could also assist disabled residents and those in “generational poverty” to enter or re-enter the workforce, Hack said.

“There are a host of things that keep people from seeking good employment,” she said, “and being able not only to obtain it, but to stay with it.”

Re-entry programming may also help those whose incarceration was based on drug use or drug-related offenses, said Hack, who spearheads BC3’s “Reset Your Brain: A Revolutionary Approach to Opioid Addiction & Recovery,” which in 2018 drew more than 110 participants to three monthlong “Hope is Dope” educational programs based on natural endorphin-resurrecting ideas to overcome opioid addiction.

“Become part of society again”

The most recent studies by the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that 67.8 percent of prisoners in the United States were re-arrested within three years of their release, Hack said, and about 50 percent of those incarcerated have a mental health concern and a substance addiction.

“Most studies show that those prisoners have an even higher recidivism rate than other prisoners,” Hack said. “Evidence continues to show that incarceration is likely to worsen mental health and substance addiction symptoms. Most institutions do not have the resources to treat mental health or addiction problems.

“Society puts offenders in prisons, which are coercive, violent environments that have great psychological impacts and then when they are released, they face a lot of barriers. Society makes it difficult for them to get jobs, find housing, or get the right support.”

BC3’s role in a Butler County program could include providing education on soft skills – “You might have to teach them how to manage their finances because they haven’t been doing it for who knows how long?” Hack said; social skills – those “they have lost because they have been isolated. People in addiction isolate themselves,” she said; and other cognitive skills such as learning to overcome addiction.

“You have to teach them,” Hack said, “how to become part of society again.”

Community colleges such as BC3 are uniquely positioned to help such individuals become a part of society again by offering such programming, Hack said.

“This is all part of helping your immediate community,” she said. “I think you are going to see as time progresses that community colleges are going to start dealing more with the social injustices in the world by providing education and opportunities for people who have been rejected for a long time. I don’t know who else would be able to do it better than a community college.

“That is what we are here for.”