

In 2011 NCircle organized as a group of community members who wanted to support successful reentry to the returning citizens of Johnson County. That year we began a welding program in partnership with Johnson County and a local volunteer who is a Certified Welding Educator. Dennis Wright had recently retired from Zephyr Products and had experience working with justice involved adults. By the end of the first year, we saw success getting people trained in welding and employed. By the second year we began seeing some of our welding students back incarcerated and struggling. Upon interviewing these clients, we learned that they lost their welding jobs because of a lack of work ready soft skills.

Subsequent interviews with employers validated these findings. Most employers can train the hard skills on the job. Employers frequently comment that the skills needed are work ready soft skills. Employers have noted that especially with the reentry population soft skills are lacking and essential for workplace stability.

In 2015, Lee Jost, our Executive Director was certified as an Offender Workforce Development Specialist, and we began developing curriculum that would address the soft skills deficit most of our clients have. In 2016 NCircle formally organized as a nonprofit and Launched the College of Trades. College of Trades is a program that includes 12 weeks of Essential Skills for the Workplace and entry level training in skilled trade. Essential Skills for the Workplace is a 12-week program that teaches 7 core soft skills: punctuality-attendance, teamwork, effective communication, coachability, organization, attitude, and urgency. Since instituting these new measures NCircle has seen a dramatic increase in workplace stability for reentry clients. Clients are staying on the job nearly twice as long as their counterparts who do not enroll in College of Trades.

NCircle recognizes that those who are currently incarcerated need preparation for the workplace. Skills enhancement is essential for giving reentry clients an opportunity to find and secure employment. NCircle partners with Johnson County Community College Continuing Education and the Johnson County Community College Foundation to provide training in skilled trades. Trainings have included Customer Service, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Construction Basics, Automotive Technologies, Welding, Blueprint Reading, and OSHA 10. We have also recognized many of our clients lack basic computing skills and in partnership with Goodwill Missouri Kansas, Goodwill provides NorthStar Digital Literacy to our clients.

In 2020 NCircle began using a validated instrument to track work readiness and client improvement. The Employment Readiness Scale (ERS) is a validated work ready assessment. Reentry clients who enter the workforce lacking both hard and soft skills are far less likely to succeed. Reentry clients often carry additional barriers to success in the way of personal and systemic challenges. ERS helps NCircle assess a client's readiness and identify interventions to support long term employment.

Upon entry into the College of Trades, 50% of our clients had sufficient skills to reenter the workforce. 75% of our clients reported they felt they lacked sufficient education to successfully enter the workforce. By completion of a short skilled trade program 72% of our clients showed sufficient skills to successfully enter the workforce. Our program graduates also saw an improvement in employability soft skills. Our clients saw marked improvement in self efficacy and identifying social supports for successful employment.

Successful employment is more than job skills. To remain successfully employed reentry clients often need additional support. 66% of our clients indicate that legal problems including fines and fees will make keeping and maintain employment difficult. 58% feel their recovery is tentative and they will need additional support upon reentry. 50% are concerned about how they will care for their children while working. Workplace stability needs a holistic approach to see reentry clients employed and stable in the workforce.