

Improved job readiness programs should be part of corrections reform equation.

by The Oklahoman Editorial Board ([/more/in-house](#)) ([?rel=author](#)) Published: April 9, 2015

FRANK Underwood is the fictional president on the Netflix series “House of Cards.” In Season 3, Underwood rolls out what he hopes is a signature jobs program.

The program is called America Works. Turns out, there’s a real-world program by that same name. It’s not a case of art imitating life so much as it is art *coincidentally* mirroring life.

The fictional America Works aims to create 10 million jobs by spending \$500 billion in taxpayer money. The real program involves a job readiness program aimed (in part) at helping some of the 650,000 inmates released annually from U.S. prisons and jails.

Underwood is from South Carolina, a Southern state that — like Oklahoma — is tough on crime. Throwing away the key takes a state only so far, though, as most inmates eventually will leave the prison walls. What then?

That’s the question addressed by America Works (the real version), as discussed by two University of Kentucky economics professors in conjunction with the Center for State and Local Leadership. Aaron Yelowitz and Christopher Bollinger say that as many as two-thirds of the inmates released each year will be arrested on a new offense within three years.

America Works could properly be called “Some of America Works.” Active in fewer than 10 states, its mission isn’t confined to inmates but other hard-to-place workers as well. For inmates, the program “uses a tough-love approach, stressing interpersonal communication and such ‘soft’ skills as time and anger management,” Yelowitz and Bollinger said.


Stressed are practical job-seeking skills, all taught in a one- or two-week period. A critical element is a network of employers who are open to hiring ex-offenders. Follow-up services are provided for six months.

Does it work? Yes, the economists say. Training designed to quickly place former inmates in jobs “significantly decreases the likelihood that ex-offenders with *nonviolent histories* will be rearrested.” (Emphasis theirs)

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Only 31.1 percent of nonviolent ex-offenders who got enhanced training were arrested during the 18 to 36 months in which they were tracked. For inmates who got standard training, the arrest rate was 50 percent.

“These results suggest,” the economists conclude, “that extra help in looking for work upon release from jail or prison can pay off in a big way but not for all types of former offenders. Enhanced assistance is most effective for those without a history of violence and with few prior charges — while the additional help is far less effective for those with a more difficult history, including violence or many prior charges.”

Oklahoma does what it can to prepare inmates for life after release. But the Department of Corrections has its hands full just housing and feeding inmates among a prison population that continues to swell. Given that so many crimes in this state carry long sentences, re-arrested inmates increase the strain.

Underwood’s America Works was a naked power grab. The amoral character has no better angels. He proposed paying for the program by cutting federal safety net programs such as Medicaid. That alone makes him a Democrat far out of sync with our real-life chief executive.

Yet Underwood’s America Works is a New Deal-style program not that far from the vision Barack Obama has for America as a country with more jobs because the government, not the private sector, creates them. The America Works studied by Yelowitz and Bollinger is small-scale, practical and costs about \$5,000 per inmate.

As corrections reform proceeds here and elsewhere, enhanced job readiness programs must be an essential part of the equation.

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