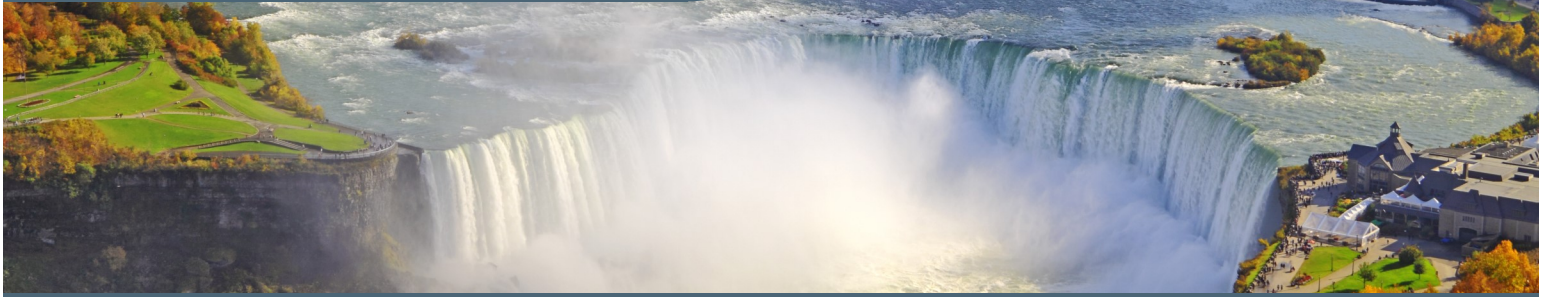




# Criminal Justice Knowledge Bank

An initiative of the Division of Criminal Justice Services



## Niagara County: *Ready, Set Work!* Program

### Practitioner:

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### Summary:

Niagara County's **Ready, Set, Work!** program is a skill-based job readiness program designed to equip probationers with the necessary tools to obtain and retain quality employment.

### Problem

Lack of employment or under-employment can be a factor in an individual's risk of committing crimes, and addressing employment needs can lead to improved outcomes for justice-involved individuals. As part of a larger employment-focused services program in Niagara County, the Probation Department implemented the National Institute of Corrections Offender Workforce Development Specialist Program and the state's Division of Criminal Justice Services model known as **Ready, Set, Work!**, which is designed to prepare individuals under probation supervision for gainful employment, and increase the likelihood of continued success in the workforce after completing their term of probation.

### Program Description

The **Ready, Set, Work!** program provides probationers with the opportunity to learn and demonstrate job readiness skills in a group setting. The 20-hour, skill-based training program aims to equip probationers with the necessary tools to obtain and sustain quality employment leading to self-sufficiency.

The program serves medium- and high-risk probationers, as determined through a risk and needs assessment. Individuals are referred to the program by their probation officer or are ordered by a judge to participate as a condition of their probation. Groups contain five participants who meet for 3½ hours a week for a six-week period.

Five probation officers who are trained as Offender Workforce Development Specialists facilitate the groups, which meet in a classroom onsite at the Probation Department. The class schedule is flexible to accommodate the needs and availability of participants and facilitators.

The 10-module curriculum teaches skills and competencies developed by the National Institute of Corrections. Lessons teach concrete skills, such as basic budgeting, including how to open and manage a checking account, as well as how to identify skills and attributes necessary to meet the expectations of potential employers. Participants also learn to identify their own positive qualities and interests that could contribute to a potential career, and how to develop a statement about their criminal convictions so they are prepared to discuss that information with employers at interviews. Individuals also learn how to identify potential employment opportunities, search for jobs and complete applications.

The program provides participants with the opportunity to practice interviewing to gain valuable feedback from facilitators and peers, and to identify their barriers to employment and triggers contributing to past job loss. Participants also learn about resources available in the community, and how to locate and utilize their local [One Stop](#), a source for career exploration, training, and jobs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor.

*An initiative of the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, the Knowledge Bank features summaries of promising local programs and practices and provides a platform for criminal justice practitioners to identify potential approaches to address their community's specific public safety issue.*

## Funding

The program is supported in part by local assistance grant funding provided through the state Division of Criminal Justice Services.

## Relevant Partnerships

Probation works closely with the Niagara County Employment and Training Department. A staff member serves as the **Ready, Set, Work!** group facilitator and assists with career counseling, resume preparation, mock interviews, job searches and completion of career assessments and applications. The Employment and Training Department also provides transportation assistance to program participants.

Local employers, including The Isaiah 61 Project in Niagara Falls, help conduct mock interviews and provide opportunities for vocational training and employment for program participants.

## Program Reviews or Evaluations

While no formal review or evaluation has been performed on Niagara County's **Ready Set Work!** program, the Probation Department closely monitors program outcomes, including employment rates. There were 93 **Ready Set Work!** participants in 2019 and 2020 and 65 percent (60) of them completed the program. Of those 60 completers in 2019 and 2020, 38 percent secured a job placement (23), and 52 percent of those with a job maintained it for at least 90 days (12).

In addition, the Department surveys participants on their experiences with the program to solicit suggestions for improvement. Participants have stated that the most helpful parts of the **Ready Set Work!** curriculum include skill-based learning exercises, including conducting mock interviews; preparing a statement to explain their past conviction(s) to potential employers; identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and learning how to job search and manage money.

## Supportive Research

The program is based on the [Offender Workforce Development Specialist Partnership Training Program](#), developed by the [National Institute of Corrections](#). The skills taught, such as career decision-making and job search skills, are designed to assist the probationer in acquiring and retaining employment.

## Critical Success Factors

- Probation's partnership with the Niagara County Employment and Training Department has been instrumental to the success of the program. Staff from both departments co-facilitate the **Ready, Set, Work!** groups. Staff also attend job fairs, share job leads, work together to obtain required employment documentation, and maintain contact with employers, with the goal of better serving program participants.

- Buy-in from employers in the community is essential. The Probation Department participates in local job fairs, creates awareness of the **Ready Set Work!** program and makes connections with local employers, who then contact the Department when they have potential employment opportunities for participants.
- It is important for probation officers to be familiar with the program, and emphasize its importance to the individuals they supervise. Group facilitators also meet regularly to discuss the program and solicit suggestions for improvement from participants.
- Niagara County Probation has an employment liaison who serves as a single point of contact so employers know with whom they should speak to communicate concerns and ask questions. The employment liaison also represents the department at job fairs, and works with the Employment and Training Department to identify potential employers.

## Lessons Learned

- Niagara County initially had difficulty with attrition among **Ready Set Work!** group participants. This challenge was overcome by individual probation officers speaking with participants, reinforcing the benefits of attending group, and using attendance as a point of weekly case contact. Probation officers also began following up with probationers who failed to attend a scheduled group.
- There also was an initial reluctance from local employers to hire probationers. To address this, the Probation Department worked with the Employment and Training Department to help probationers utilize an online resume bank that allows local employers to canvas candidates for open positions. Local employers also participate in mock interviews to help participants practice their interview skills, and participants are given the opportunity to develop and rehearse a statement regarding their convictions in group to use in interviews. Probation staff attend local job fairs to promote the hiring of probationers and address employer concerns.

## Additional Comments

- Due to COVID-19, Niagara County Probation temporarily suspended in-person **Ready, Set, Work!** classes in March 2020. Offender Workforce Development Specialists facilitate virtual groups to eligible participants and conduct follow-up as necessary. Packets are dropped off to participant homes with program paperwork and materials.
  - Program participants report preferring virtual classes compared to in-person classes, as they eliminate the need for transportation and childcare arrangements.
  - Niagara County Probation intends to resume in-person group sessions in the future.

## Submit a Program to the Knowledge Bank

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