- [Rachelle] Hello my name is Rachelle Fife and I'm going to be talking to you today about serving previously incarcerated individuals.

First, we will define what a previously incarcerated individual is. This is someone who has been convicted of criminal offense and returns to the community after a period of incarceration in a correctional facility. This could be in an institution, also known as a prison, or a residential facility, as it's also known as a work-release facility.

Some quick facts about the Iowa Department of Corrections and Community-Based Corrections. The Department of Corrections currently has nine correctional institutions. And they house about 8,600 incarcerated people. 80% of that current number are going to return to their communities at some point. So that's about 6,880 people that'll be returning citizens. The Community-Based Corrections has eight judicial districts and they supervise 28,500 individuals that are on probation, parole, which is supervision after a period of incarceration, a special sentence that is specific to sex offenses, or pre-trial release. They also have 22 residential correctional facilities, again, also known as a work-release. And they house abour 2,250 individuals. So the breakdown of the race of those incarcerated is 68% White, 26% Black, 7% Hispanic, 2% American Indian, and 1% Asian. Iowa's current recidivism rate is 37.8%, which you'll see is below the national average, that is currently at 43%. The unemployment rate for formally incarcerated individuals is 27%.

So research tells us that unemployment is a top risk factor in recidivism. There are a number of barriers that the are faced with, they get in the way of them obtaining successful employment and job retention. When providers can identify and find ways to deal with those barriers, they are able to offer information on resources and referral sources to help them with a seamless transition with employment services and back into society. So, we'll talk about some of those barriers.

We have internal barriers and external barriers. The internal barriers are going to be something within you that prevents you from reaching your goal, things like your thoughts, feelings, life experiences. And external barriers are some things that are in your environment that can prevent you from reaching your goals. So for example, resources, people, job, those are all examples of external barriers.

We'll talk about the internal barriers first, and start with poor self-concept. So, a negative self-concept affects their motivation to pursue a job, to persist through possibly getting multiple rejections when applying, and to follow through with action, a lack of knowledge of societal norms, or they may not be able to articulate very well, so they get frustrated easily and shut down. Negative beliefs. They tend to create a negative outlook on life. They are unlikely, it's unlikely they were taught to set goals and shown how to achieve the goals. They typically lack the planning and decision-making skills required to be successful. And they could have strong ties to criminal peers, so those individuals that they're used to engaging in criminal activity with. Lack of self-awareness. They're unsure of their interests, skills, work values, abilities. Or it could be they're not thinking about a job versus a career. They're just kind of lookin' for something to get them by in the moment.

More internal barriers. The next one is vulnerabilities. They may have been abused psychically or sexually, so they have some trauma that needs dealt with. They may have been lied to, which could cause them to be untrusting. They have manipulated into doing things against their will. They may not take personal responsibility for their behavior, and the consequence that follows. So they don't buy into the whole concept of self-efficacy, basically because they don't see as anything is their fault. Struggling asking for help sometimes. Their pride gets in the way. Also, a thing called the criminal code. Basically, there's kind of a code among their criminal peers that it wouldn't be appropriate for them to ask for help or if they did ask for help, they wouldn't get any help to help the be successful. They could be uneducated, lack of knowledge about the labor market. And minimal or no support system.

The next one is mental illness and substance abuse. So, often they have been known to self-medicate mental illness with drug abuse. For example, somebody that should be on prescribed medication for anxiety tends to, or could be known to, drink alcohol to make them feel better and less anxious, instead of following through with the prescribed medication. Lack health insurance needed to pay for medication, and, or treatment services. They may possibly have chemically altered their brain with the drug abuse, so it's hard for them to find what we would call a new normal, or life with their brain having been altered from the drug abuse. And unmanaged mental illness is a disruption in their life.

Next, we'll move onto external barriers. The first one we'll talk about is transportation. So, it's possible that they owe hundreds or thousands of dollars to get their driver's license re-instated. They could have lost the driver's license due to their criminal conviction. Used to be that if you were convicted of a drug offense, that you would have to wait 18 months after being released from incarceration to get your driver's license re-instated. They've just recently changed that law. Or it could be OWI-related, which is operating while intoxicated. And they have barriers that they'll need to complete before they can get that driver's license. Inability to pay financial obligations such as child support, which could leave them without a driver's license again. And then they may live or desire employment that's not on a bus line, if they don't have reliable transportation or a driver's license.

Childcare. They may rely on family to watch their children, thinking they can save money. But basically, that family is reliable only until they aren't reliable. And it's expensive. So, it could be they can't afford it or don't want to use money earned to pay for that. And lack of awareness for the childcare systems, programs out there that could help them.

Could be the documents that they need to get the job, birth certificate, social security card, photo ID, all those documents that prove who they are. They could have moved repeatedly, so they've lost them or they're in and out of the prison and they don't know where these documents ended up at.

Next one is criminal history. So, there's limitations on jobs they can obtain. For example, sex offenders have additional employment restrictions and registry requirements through the Department of Public Safety that kind of dictate where they can and can't work. Could be violent offenses in their criminal history, which is murder, robbery, vehicular homicide, possession of a firearm, child endangerment. Or it could be the employer attitudes about hiring someone with a criminal history. If they're hesitant to do so, they may not get that second chance to get back into the workforce.

Clothing for a job interview. Their clothes may no longer fit after they get out of the institution, or perhaps they don't possess any clothing once released due to various reasons. Maybe it was all in storage and family was unable to pay for that so they lost everything they owned, things like that.

Financial obligations. They immediately owe a $300 supervision fee, if they're on probation and parole with the Department of Correctional Services in Iowa. That fee can quickly climb to $1,500 if they are a sex offender in need of treatment services. They are, of course, required to pay restitution for the criminal offense. If they are sent to a work-release facility after incarceration to transition back into the society, they pay rent. And it's usually anywhere from $400 to $500 a month. So, they'll start the second they walk out of the facility that they owe that. Child support can build up while they're incarcerated, unless it's modified. There is a child support modification program that they can sign up for. But, again, it's the awareness of knowing it's an option for them, and being able to fill out the paperwork, and comply with all the terms to get that granted. And also, private pay for additional treatment services. So, when they first get out, there could be a lag in trying to get the Medicaid approved. Perhaps they've already bounced around a couple addresses within that first 30 days waiting for that paperwork. Or maybe they have gained employment and they're waiting for insurance to kick in with that company.

So, now that we've learned some of these barriers and characteristics of working with those that have been previously incarcerated, we want to talk how we can better serve this population. So, it's going to be pretty much a fine-tuning of the skills that you already possess can help you with your interactions with this population, help it be more positive in a trusting relationship.

The first is to practice empathy. So it's really easy to let our personal biases get in the way of our professional role. It's very easy to, basically, to pass judgment. Maybe you're not okay with the crime that's been committed or maybe you frown upon how the individual looked that day, or something specific about their character. So, just kind of think about what it would be like to walk in their shoes. Many times over, they've been shamed or rejected in one form or another as they move through the criminal justice system. So we want to be the agent of change. When interacting with them, we want to be sure to validate their perspective, validate their feelings. Examine your own attitude and listen to what they are saying. This will allow you to better understand their needs. And if we can do that, then hopefully we can provide individualized services, rather than just a blanket of overall services.

Build trust. So, trust is something that takes years to build and seconds to break, the old saying. They respond better when you're firm, fair, and consistent with your interactions. Don't promise services that you can't deliver. And follow through with what you say that you can help them with. Maintaining their confidentiality is going to be a big one. Again, they may have trust issues so when they do open up to you or they do ask for your help, it's going to be very important that you maintain their confidentiality and they feel like they can really trust you. It could be there's things in their criminal history that they're ashamed of or embarrassed by. They may disclose things from their past that they aren't comfortable with or haven't dealt with before. And also share things that could make you uncomfortable. But just kind of keep aware of how you're feeling as you're helping them move through this process.

Following principles, such as what we mentioned, will assist you in establishing and maintaining a professional boundary, which that's going to take us to our next slide. You want to clearly define your role and the services you can provide them. So communicating to the individual that you're forming this professional relationship, what your expectations are going to be in working with them. And it's also okay to hear what they expect from you, so, it's a double-sided relationship. Address any misconduct, disrespect, or inappropriate behavior immediately with that person. And, if at any time you feel uncomfortable, or that maybe the boundaries aren't so clear, then definitely reach out to your supervisor or co-worker and kind of talk about that, so you can get a solution to address that.

Next one is transferable skills. So previously incarcerated individuals have lots of skills that they've used. Often more of them are, in fact, very creative and very talented but they've used them in an illegal way to get their needs met. So, they have training and employment skills that they get while they're incarcerated. And, basically we want to educate them on how to reference those in those job interviews and talk about that experience. Explain to them what transferable skills are, and then again, help them identify what skills they already have. Knowing their current skills sets can be instrumental in their job placement. And about 80% of previously incarcerated individuals want to work and are desperate to re-enter the workforce and contribute to society again.

We'll talk about soft skills. So, soft skills may also be known as work readiness skills, people skills, interpersonal skills. Employers value those that can work well with others and know how to get along in the workplace. They're going to be essential to building those relationships and hopefully, can create more opportunities for advancement in the workplace. Some of the most important soft skills recognized in the workplace by management are communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem solving, and leadership. So we want to assist the individual in identifying their soft skills, basically, what they bring to the table. And then we can do referrals to the in-house workshops with the American Job Centers or maybe even outside agencies, if there are areas that they need or want to improve in, we can assist them in connecting them to those resources.

Educate is the last one here. So, often times uncomfortable for a previously incarcerated individual to sell themselves when it comes to getting a job, or maybe even getting the courage to apply in the first place. It could be due to low self-esteem or lack of a pro-social role model in their lives, obviously, a barrier to employment. We want to educate them on a couple unique job placement tools that they can use because they have barriers to employment. One is Federal Bonding Program and the other is the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, also known as WOTC. They're both programs that have, so that the employer has the potential to take advantage of and kind of get a peace of mind in hiring someone with a criminal history.

So, wrapping up. The goal at the end of the day, obviously, is to help that person find employment, just like you do with any other person that walks into your office. So, someone who has previously been incarcerated has a lot more at stake. If they are on that parole supervision, they have parole violations that, it's a different burden of proof. So they could, for example, be found guilty of quitting a job or not maintaining employment, or their financial responsibilities and they can get revoked back to prison. So, that's a pretty big deal for them to get employment as soon as they're released. Again, they're eager to work and provide for their families. And every previously incarcerated individual that you help find and, or retain that employment, is a benefit to society and it's going to help reduce that recidivism.

That's the end of the presentation. So, if you have any additional questions that I can answer, you can contact me, Rachelle Fife, Work Force Program Coordinator at Workforce Development. Thank you.