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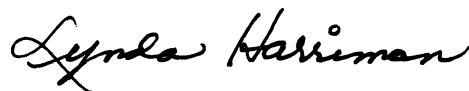
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Keys to Successful Life Choices

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University
Spring 2000

Every year approximately 6,500 offenders are released from a correctional facility in Oklahoma. About 27 percent will return to prison. Offenders experience many of the issues faced by other limited resource audiences, but often they are more pronounced. Lower educational level and an inherent deficit in decision-making skills frequently characterize the at-risk population, including but not limited to offenders. Increased knowledge provides the basis for viewing enhanced alternatives when issues need to be addressed. Seemingly increased knowledge through life skills education would ease the transition from correctional facility to community environment.

Keys to Successful Life Choices is a life skills reintegration program offered to minimum security offenders in Oklahoma who are within six months of release. The program is offered as a joint effort between the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and the Oklahoma Department of Corrections. The goal of the program is to help persons live in their families and communities more successfully, and increase their ability to live and make choices in society.



Lynda Harriman

Associate Dean/Assistant Director,
Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service



OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
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The Keys to Successful Life Choices Program

The idea of educating offenders is not a new one. The prison reform movement started in the nineteenth century and served to change the focus of prisons from punishment to rehabilitation. The motivation for the reform movement was the belief that the main cause of crime was ignorance and lack of education. Discussion, debate, and interactions with teachers and peers in an educational setting can impact values and decision making. A program that simplifies concepts in resource management into an easily understood format can increase knowledge and provide tools for better decision making. **Keys to Successful Life Choices** is such a program.

History of the Program

The **Keys to Successful Life Choices** program started in 1996 when James Saffle, current director of Oklahoma Department of Corrections, was southeast district director. Saffle became familiar with the program from a DOC educator in the southeast district and contacted Dr. Glennis Couchman, designer of the program and state specialist with the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.

James Saffle arranged for a grant of \$3,200 to conduct a pilot study in his district. In 1997 when the pilot study was completed, a statewide contract was awarded. A program director was hired and revisions were made in the curriculum to tailor it for the inmate population. Based on suggestions from instructors involved in the pilot program, changes were made in 26 lessons and three lessons were added. The **Keys** program is currently in its third year.

Program Director

The program director of the **Keys to Successful Life Choices** program combines roles involving: the mission of the Cooperative Extension Service, program goals established by the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, and the need to insure the appropriate and effective presentation

of the educational program to the offender population. The principal investigator, Dr. Glennis Couchman, and the program director, Dr. Sissy Osteen, provide in-service training to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections personnel who will conduct the program within the facilities. Dr. Osteen visits each facility in which the program is taught to insure that the instructors are able to optimize delivery of the materials and to answer questions related to the subject matter. The director serves as the point of contact for all program-related needs including training, quality assurance, program evaluation, and instruction.

Program Instructors

Over 200 Oklahoma Department of Corrections counselors, case managers, and other personnel who assist with the instruction of programs have received education to teach the **Keys** curriculum to offenders. Many aspects of program delivery are at the discretion of the instructors. They are dependent upon the amount of time available for teaching, frequency of releases, number of offenders released at any given time, and any other facility related issues, (i.e. use of volunteers). Variations in program delivery can vary from offering the class one hour per week for 29 weeks, or two-hour classes once per week for 14 weeks, to teaching all 29 lessons in 3 days.

The ODOC teachers benefit from the resources contributed by Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, which lends support by providing assistance with instruction and resource management information. Instructors are aware that Extension educators in their counties can provide programming to assist with or complement the **Keys** program. Other resource personnel from the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission, Consumer Credit Counseling Service, and the Credit Bureau assist with training and outreach to facilities.

Quotes from program instructors:

*"I find the **Keys to Successful Life Choices** a very interesting class to teach. The different class modules are simple and easy to understand. The principles learned from the different modules are very applicable in daily living because these principles deal with the basic needs of human beings. The examples used to explain each module were excellent. The video tapes helped a lot in making the **Keys** class presentation more fascinating to the participants,"* states Lolita Rodgers of the Kate Barnard Community Correctional Center.

"Good program. Some things they won't need 'til on down the line (like) buying a car, house, and (opening) a savings account. It goes by the book, asks for questions and for inmate participation," say Mike Sharpe and Arjane Alexander, Dr. Eddie Warrior Correctional Center.

Program Evaluation

The **Keys** program has been evaluated for knowledge gain, behavioral change, and program content. The goals of the program are to increase the offenders' knowledge of resource management issues and to change their behavior by increasing awareness of rights and responsibilities. In order to test for knowledge gain, a pre-survey is administered to class participants before instruction begins. After the offenders have attended 29 life skills education sessions, a post-survey is administered. All data are sent to OSU to be entered into a database and year-end statistics are generated. For the current year data from 776 offenders have been entered and analyzed. This analysis reflects that the knowledge gain was significant between pre- and post-survey administration with a mean difference of 7.76, $p < .001$. Offenders gained knowledge in 14 of 20 areas assessed including: appropriate job references, answering job interview questions, salary, home insurance, housing

costs, car insurance, and proof of identity, contracts, rent-to-own interest rates, payroll deductions, handling work issues, community resources, credit reports, consumer rights, and public housing. (preliminary data reports for 1999-2000 are presented in Figures 1 and 2). Participants are asked to sign a post-survey follow-up consent form. If they agree, OSU contacts them at 3, 6, 12, and 18 months after release to determine whether they have adopted more appropriate resource management behaviors.

One purpose of evaluation is to determine how refinements in a program have served to promote its effectiveness once they have been initiated. This program reflects a firm base of development. A “needs” assessment was conducted with 29 limited resource families for the initial development. Tailoring the program to a specialized population involved input from teachers and observers. Finally, focus groups were conducted with program participants to insure that needs were being met from the learners’ perspective. All programs can be improved through the evaluation process, but using focus groups to assess the effectiveness of programs with special populations provides insiders’ perspective on content and delivery that is invaluable for quality assurance and program building measures. The most significant

findings of the focus group evaluations concluded that the program:

- served to improve attitude and confidence among participants;
- assisted with recognition of self responsibility;
- helped to improve job seeking, budgeting, and decision making skills.

Another outcome of the focus group was a recommendation by the offenders to use videos with the program. Videos were purchased and delivered to the facilities this year.

Engagement

The 1999 Kellogg Commission report proposes that it is time for the land grant institution to go beyond traditional outreach measures and form partnerships that address mutually defined issues through shared goals and pooled resources. These collaborations benefit both partners and the communities as resources are gathered and aimed toward identified issues. The partnership between both the Cooperative Extension Service and the Oklahoma Department of Corrections represents such collaboration. As partners we have been able to address more of the issues inherent in the reintegration of offenders than either

of us could have addressed singly.

In 1999 there were 21,788 individuals in corrections facilities in the state of Oklahoma. Oklahoma has the largest per capita incarceration rate for women in the country. Offenders have been shown to experience many personal and social problems and face environmental issues due to insufficient resources. Over 6,000 offenders are released from a correctional facility in Oklahoma every year. Failure to address the needs of this population as they approach reintegration into the community leaves them facing the same deficits that may have led to incarceration in the first place.

Education can facilitate a more informed transition. The purpose of life-skills education is to help people function more successfully as members of communities, families, and work environments. The association between OCES and DOC allows greater mobilization of resources needed to teach skills to offenders. The Oklahoma Employment Security Commission, Consumer Credit Counseling Service, the Credit Bureau, and OSU county Extension educators have joined to increase the outreach that is provided. The value-added component of the program is the experience it has provided to OSU graduate students through practical, applied, and evaluative research.

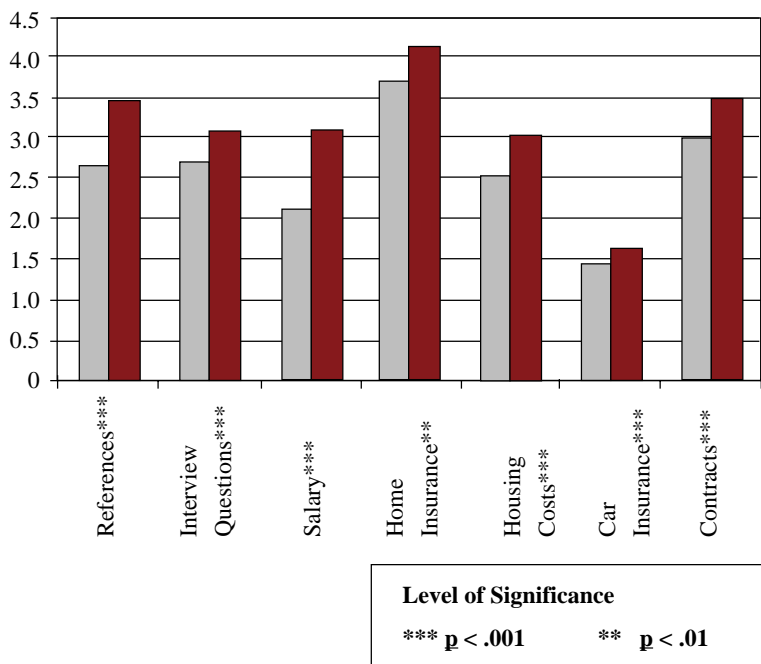


Figure 1. Mean Scores for Pre and Post Survey.

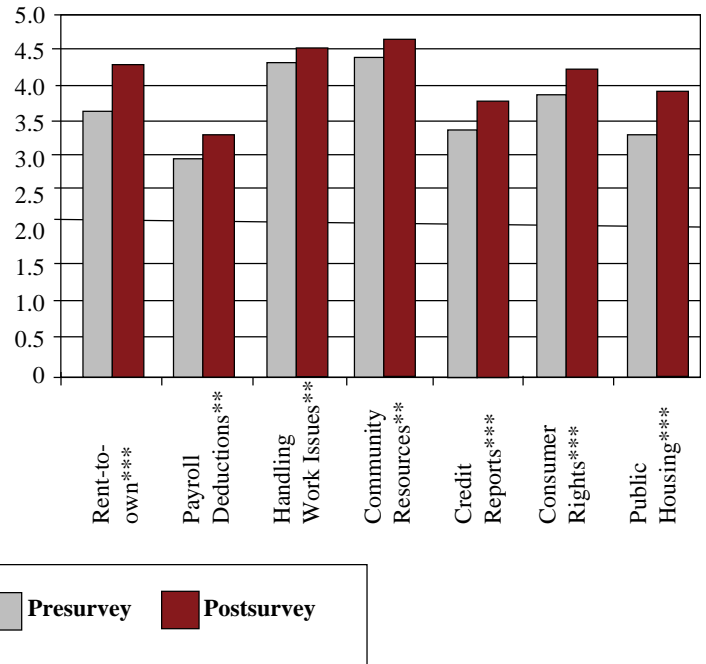
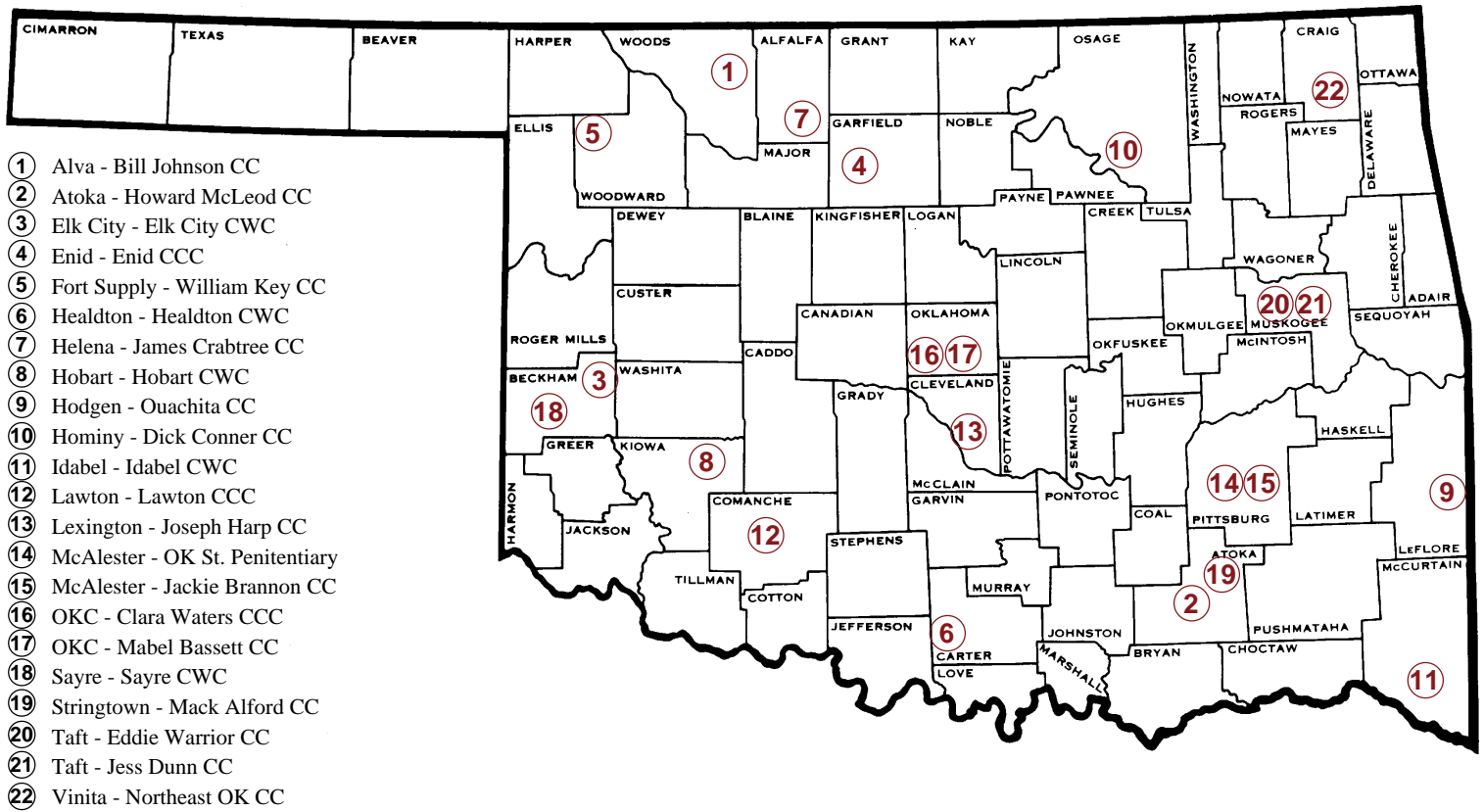


Figure 2. Mean Scores for Pre and Post Survey.



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