mat-su Reentry Coalition
Newsletter

October 2026
Volume 6, Issue 10

Inside this issue

2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summitt: Building Bridges to Success was a Big Success (continued).....3

National Disability Employment Awareness Month.....2-3

Reentry, Knik Tribe & Chickaloon Village Events.....3

Mat-Su Job Center Update.....4

Monthly Resource Highlights..4

2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summit: Building Bridges to Success was a Big Success

We had a great turnout for our 2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summit. A total of 66 unduplicated participants attended our Summit this year.



Day 1: Dr. O'Dell Johnson presenting on Restorative Justice Healing Circle

Day One Overview

On day one, 57 people attend. Our Keynote Speaker was Ben Wright, the Director of Disability Access in Prison Education at The Community, which is a non-profit organization that connects and empowers people on all sides of the criminal legal system through its Pre-enter and Correcting the Narrative strategies. Ben is a deaf, formally incarcerated educator, researcher, writer and disability justice advocate. His Keynote session was titled "The Missing Bridge: Disability Access from Prison Education to Reentry.

We also had a Reentry Coalition Discussion Session facilitated by Michael Powell from the Alaska Department of Health. The last three sessions that day were Teri Tibbitt with an Advocacy 101: Tips for Telling Your Story and Making Your "Ask", Dr. O'Dell Johnson a psychologist from VOICES Healing Collective presenting on Restorative Justice Healing Circle: A Culture of Care Approach to Reentry Work, and Cindy Yeager, the Mat-Si Reentry Program Coordinator facilitating a Lived Experience Panel: Roads to Success.

Day Two Overview

On day two, 51 people attended. Our Keynote Speaker was Dr. Sandra Smith, a nationally recognized reentry and recovery leader, author, formally incarcerated individual, and the Senior Director of Training and Development for One World Recovery. Dr. Smith presented about the National Peer Re-Entry Certification Program.



Day 2: Joathan Pistotnik, Kristopher Black & Micheal Clark from Alaska DOC REVS presenting on Education & Training Opportunities in DOC

Our second speaker for Day 2 was Mary Moran, Mary is the DEO and President of On-Point Re-Entry Consortium in Austin, Texas. She presented on Re-Entry Case Management that Works: Relationship-Centered Strategies Proven to Reduce Recidivism.
We also had several local presenters, such as Norm Lingley from the Mat-Su Job Center, presenting on the work they were doing with reentrants both inside and outside the correctional Institutions and Tim Easterly from Project Hope providing Naloxone Administration Training.

The two sessions that ended day two of our 2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summit were Joathan Pistotnik, Kristopher Black & Micheal Clark from Alaska DOC Reentry, Education, and Vocational Services (REVS) speaking about Education & Training Opportunities in DOC, and Michael Powell from the Alaska Department of Health & Eleanor Pollo, from the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, facilitating a Harm Reduction Workshop. **(Continued on the bottom of Page 3)**

Note: For more information on the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition see page 4

National Disability Employment Awareness Month 2026: Theme, Facts, and Resources

By: The Arc / Updated Oct 7, 2026

Every October, **National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM)** recognizes the contributions of workers with disabilities and calls attention to the barriers that still keep too many people out of the workforce.

The 2026 NDEAM theme is "**Celebrating Value and Talent.**" The U.S. Department of Labor is carrying last year's theme forward in honor of America's 250th birthday, highlighting the role people with disabilities have played in shaping workplaces, communities, and the economy.

There's still a long way to go. In September 2026, **only 40.3% of working-age people with disabilities were employed, compared with 75 of people without disabilities**. For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), opportunities for competitive, integrated employment are even more limited.

At The Arc, disability employment is year-round work. We advocate for policies that expand competitive, integrated employment, challenge low expectations and discrimination, and create more opportunities for people with disabilities to build careers and earn fair wages.

NDEAM is a time to recognize the talents and contributions people with disabilities bring to the workforce and address the barriers that keep too many people from having the same opportunities to work and build careers. For employers, that starts with looking at who's missing from their workforce and why.

What Are the Biggest Employment Barriers for People with Disabilities?

People with disabilities continue to face barriers to finding jobs, staying employed, and advancing in their careers. For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), those barriers can be compounded by limited access to employment supports and too few opportunities for competitive, integrated employment.

Those barriers show up in a striking employment gap. Working-age people without disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be employed as people with disabilities. For people with IDD, the gap can be even greater. In 2024, only 16% of people receiving services from state IDD agencies were working in individual, competitive integrated jobs.

The problem isn't a lack of talent or desire to work. Employers can underestimate workers with disabilities or make assumptions about what they can do, what support they will need, or how much accommodations will cost.

Common barriers include:

- Hiring bias and low expectations
- Inaccessible applications and interviews
- Inadequate workplace accommodations
- Transportation and support barriers
- Limited opportunities for promotion and career growth
- Concerns about how earnings could affect Medicaid, SSI, or other essential benefits
- Too few opportunities for competitive, integrated employment

The Arc advocates for competitive, integrated employment, where people with disabilities work alongside people without disabilities, receive comparable wages, and have opportunities to advance in their careers.

Where can People with Disabilities Find Employment Help?

People with disabilities looking for work or trying to advance in their careers can get help with job searches, employment supports, accommodations, and questions about how working may affect disability benefits. **(Continued on Page 3)**

National Disability Employment Awareness Month 2026: Theme, Facts, and Resources (Continued from Page 2)

Depending on where you live and the type of support you need, options may include:

- State vocational rehabilitation agencies, which can help eligible people with disabilities prepare for, find, keep, or advance in employment.
- American Job Centers, which provide employment and training services to job seekers, including people with disabilities.
- **Benefits counseling**, which can help people receiving disability benefits understand how work and earnings may affect SSI, SSDI, Medicaid, or Medicare.
- The Job Accommodation Network, which provides free, confidential information about workplace accommodations and employment issues.
- Chapters of The Arc. Some chapters provide employment programs, job coaching, training, or other employment supports. Find a chapter of The Arc in your community to learn what is available locally.
- **Work and benefits resources**, which can help people understand how earnings may interact with disability benefits and programs such as ABLE.

People with disabilities deserve the same opportunities as anyone else to find work, earn fair wages, grow in their careers, and be valued for what they bring to the workplace. NDEAM puts a national spotlight on disability employment each October, but creating those opportunities takes work all year long. **(Go here for full article: https://thearc.org/blog/how-and-why-to-celebrate-national-disability-employment-awareness-month-october/)**

2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summit: Building Bridges to Success Survey Results

(Continued from Page 1)

The surveys collected after the Summit showed that 93% of those surveyed on day 1 and 100% of those surveyed on day 2 felt that the knowledge/skills and information gathered during the Reentry Summit will help them make improvement on their programs. Also, over 100% surveyed on both days stated that it was likely they would recommend/attend future Mat-Su Reentry Summit.

Some comments we received after the Reentry Summit included the following:

- "During the first day of the Summit, Ben Write, provided great insight from his professional and personal experience, ways he was supporting and providing assistance to those who are incarcerated and deaf. Ben identified strategies for reentry staff to support clients with disabilities who are incarcerated. "It was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot. And it was fun to network with old friends and meet new ones."

- "I really enjoyed the entire reentry summit. I loved meeting others helping in reentry. The speakers were very knowledgeable and the other service providers that I met were knowledgeable, warm, and willing to connect."

Conclusion

I would like to give a big thank you to all the amazing speakers, the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Steering Team Members, and volunteers that helped to make this year's Reentry Summit a success. Also, I would like to thank the Mat-Su Health Foundation for supplying the funding for our annual Mat-Su Reentry Summit.

You can go to our Reentry Website to view the filmed sessions filmed sessions of our 2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summit **(https://www.valleycharities.org/mat-su-valley-reentry-program/).**

Barbara Mongar, Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Coordinator

Mat-Su Reentry Events:

- **Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Steering Team Meeting**
  Tuesday, November 3, 2026
  9:00 to 10:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition invites you to attend their Monthly Steering Team Meeting via Zoom

- **Mat-Su Reentry Services Forum**
  Wednesday, Nov 18, 2026
  9:00 to 10:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Forum is every third Wednesday of the month. Services Providers, Field PO's, Case Managers, and any others interested in attending are welcome.

For questions, to sign up, or for zoom links to the above events please contact Barbara Mongar at: barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org

Knik Tribe Events:

- **Knik Tribe Family Culture Nights —** Bi-Weekly, Wednesdays, 5:30 - 7:30 PM; **Location:** 758 Shoreline Dr. Wasilla, AK; (Open to All) **Compact@KnikTribe.org 907-373-7991**

- **Youth Wellbriety Circle**
  Fridays, from 1 to 3PM;
  Location: MyHouse, Wasilla

Chickaloon Village Traditional Council Events:

- **Wellbriety Talking Circle**
  Wednesdays, 1 to 3PM;
  Location: Sutton Library
  More Info: 907-761-3912

Mat-Su Reentry Coalition

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition is a collaboration of individuals, community stakeholders, public and not-for-profit agencies, faith-based and business partners who are united and committed to reducing recidivism among returning citizens to the Mat-Su community.

Our Mission
To promote public safety by identifying and implementing strategies that increase former prisoners' wellbeing within the community and reduce the likelihood of their return to prison through recidivating.

We will accomplish this by:

- Improved communication and collaboration between Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) and the community.
- Building community partnerships to strengthen local services.
- Identifying barriers for those being released from incarceration and taking an active role in addressing those concerns.
- Promoting community educational and training opportunities for those releasing regarding resources.
- Work in conjunction with Alaska DOC to inform and promote reentry efforts in Alaska.

Mat-Su Job Center Update

By: **Michele Bentz**, Mat-Su Job Center Manager

The Mat-Su Job Center, located at 877 W. Commercial Drive in Wasilla, is open Monday–Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Visit us in person, call (907) 352-2500, or email matsu.jobcenter@alaska.gov for assistance.

Our staff is available to support your employment needs. The center offers two conference rooms—available at no cost to partners and community members—which can accommodate recruitment events, staff training, testing, or meetings. One classroom includes a computer lab with 15 computers.
To learn more or to schedule a visit to view the space, please call 907-352-2500.

The Department of Labor offers several employer incentives that strengthen the local labor market and support both employers and job seekers.
More information is available at: https://labor.alaska.gov/landing-pages/employers.html

Incumbent Worker Training (IWT)
This program helps businesses and workers stay competitive by ensuring employees gain the skills needed to retain employment, advance within the company, or prevent layoffs.
Details are available at: https://labor.alaska.gov/dets/iwtp.htm

On-the-Job Training (OJT)
OJT allows employers to hire candidates who are suitable for a position but may need additional training. The Department of Labor can reimburse a portion of wages for a short period while training occurs. OJT typically lasts eight months or less.
More information is available at: https://jobs.alaska.gov/forms/OjtIntro-employer.html

Registered Apprenticeship (RAP)
For occupations requiring longer training periods, Registered Apprenticeship may be appropriate. RAP programs require at least 2,000 hours of on-the-job learning and 144 hours of related technical instruction. Alaska currently has about 850 registered apprenticeship occupations. Learn more at: https://awib.alaska.gov/apprentice/index.html

Alaska's Fidelity Bonding Program
This program provides no-cost, no-deductible bonding to help at-risk job seekers overcome barriers to employment and reduce employer concerns when hiring. Contact the Mat-Su Job Center for details.
If you have questions about any employer incentive programs, contact our Business Connection Rep, Faith Woolsey, at (907) 352-2515 or Faith.Woolsey@alaska.gov

October Talaska Economic Trends: Job Projections By Industry and Occupation for 2024-2034

Monthly Highlight of Resources in the Mat-Su

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month

- **Alaska Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DLWD):** They help Alaskans with disabilities get and keep good jobs.
  Website: Vocational Rehabilitation
  Wasilla Branch Office: 913 W. Commercial Drive, Wasilla, AK 99654
  Mat-Su Phone: 800-770-4124; V/TDD: 907-352-2545
- **Access Alaska:** The encourage and promote the total integration of people who experience a disability and senior Alaskans to live independently in the community of their choice.
  Website: Access Alaska
  Mat-Su Phone: 907-357-2588**; E-Mail:** info@accessalaska.org

Note: For more information on the Reentry Coalition contact **Barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org** or go to our Webpage at **Mat-Su Valley Reentry Program | Valley Charities Inc**.