"SITE has been a tremendous resource for us. It's actually a critical resource. One of the major factors in being successful in drug court is having employment. SITE is essential to our function."

— Judge Johnny Ray Harris
Floyd County Drug Court
The Work

The Strategic Initiative for Transformational Employment (SITE) is available to individuals recovering from addiction in all of Kentucky’s 120 counties. SITE is designed to bridge the gulf between recovery and productive participation in the workforce for individuals active in their recovery by providing valuable career, training, and supportive services, while actively cultivating meaningful job opportunities. This project also provides services to Kentucky employers and partners with a full array of training, technical assistance, case management, and support services necessary to assist current employees and persons in recovery who are seeking (re)employment and training.

1,096 Clients Served

1,107 Employer Contacts

257 Clients Employed

1,174 Referrals
In early 2019 the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program (EKCEP), Inc., began a collaborative, focused effort to assist individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) overcome barriers to employment. The Strategic Initiative for Transformational Employment, or SITE, has served hundreds of Kentuckians and formed dozens of employer partnerships to date, and is poised to build upon that work in the coming months.

The Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program is staff to the Eastern Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board and administers workforce development programs in a 23-county region of Appalachian Kentucky. One of EKCEP’s primary goals with the statewide SITE program is to prove an effective recovery employment model for a sector of Kentucky’s reentry population with histories of substance use. EKCEP believes first year successes detailed here help prove the model and provide a picture of successful program development and implementation.

“I am encouraged by how our work with the recovery community is transforming the way we deliver workforce services,” said EKCEP Executive Director Jeff Whitehead. “This past year’s work was aimed at more significantly and demonstrably bringing workforce services to a very current workforce crisis and it has taught us a great deal about the needs of people in recovery and ways to pro-
vide workforce services as an important part of the treatment process and long-term recovery. Perhaps just as important, we’ve discovered a trove of vibrant and dedicated workers in recovery, and a host of partners in the treatment community that inspire us with their passion and encourage us to do better.”

SITE is designed to provide a working employment services model that effectively bridges the gap between addiction recovery and productive participation in the workforce through collaborative partnerships with a variety of stakeholders including workforce development organizations, employers, long-term treatment centers, local courts, and advocacy organizations that provide direct services to the state’s reentry population.

In the South Central Workforce Development Board’s 10-county service area, SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Meredith Hester’s role coupled with critical stakeholder partnerships are paving the way for new strategic efforts to address needs within this focused population.

“Before the Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist role, we didn’t have a real strategy for reentry, so this role kind of caused us to connect dots that we’ve had through partnerships with Goodwill, our direct service providers, other partners—the detention centers are key in this—and put together a strategy,” said Dr. Robert Boone, president and CEO of the South Central Workforce Development Board. “One of those most foundational things we’ve been able to do is get together employers that are interested in this reentry discussion, and interested in being a transformational employer. So, we have a good contact list of employers, we have good relationships with the detention centers, we have a system in place that leverages the Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist role, and I really see a lot of growth in this area for us as a focus population.”

In other areas, SITE is proving valuable in bringing together regional partners that are working to address recovery issues and developing a broad strategy to further those efforts.
“In Northern Kentucky, there are a number of partners working in the reentry and recovery space, but they all have their own workforce development strategies,” said Tara Johnson-Noem, director of the Northern Kentucky Workforce Investment Board. “We are leveraging the Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist role to bring those fragmented strategies together into a comprehensive approach for our eight-county region.”

EKCEP first sought to combine workforce and recovery as an effective tool in early 2019 with the inception of the Eastern Kentucky Recovery and Training (eKART) program, combining EKCEP’s array of workforce services with Job Entry and Retention Support Specialists, who work directly with individuals during their efforts to reenter the workforce, and Success Coaches, who assist individuals as they maintain employment while continuing their recovery. Support can range from connection with local transformational employers willing to hire individuals with histories of substance use to supportive services that assist with issues such as transportation or childcare.

The eKART initiative remains active within EKCEP’s 23-county service area, and is funded in part by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Partnership Opportunities and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative. The Kentucky Opioid Response Effort (KORE), funded entirely by federal grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), provides additional support, while EKCEP’s formula funding from the U.S. Department of Labor under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) allows eKART to provide supportive services to individual clients.

EKCEP later received contracts to administer the statewide SITE program with funding including Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Grant 1H79TI081704 and support from the Office of Drug Control Policy. eKART has since become a subset of SITE, which provides a similar model in Kentucky’s other workforce areas across the state, although without the supportive services and training components outside of EKCEP’s service area.

EKCEP views the implementation of SITE as necessary in Kentucky, a state that for more than two decades has witnessed a dramatic increase in opioid dependence and substance use. This public health crisis has resulted in a bevy of consequences and societal issues ranging from a spike in overdose deaths to an overworked criminal justice system. Kentucky’s workforce also suffered losses in participation as a result.

Initial efforts to combat the increase in drug abuse and trafficking in Kentucky centered mostly upon law enforcement measures, though in more recent years efforts have shifted to a recovery-based model that focuses on reducing recidivism and increasing treatment access.

The collective vision of the collaborative stakeholders for SITE is to bolster the state’s treatment and support systems and expand the workforce through active participation from individuals who traditionally face barriers to employment. Many of these individuals would be at least initially successful in achieving their goal of reentering the workforce.
workforce if they had access to focused workforce services.

Since its inception in early 2019, SITE has provided effective individual support and employment services to hundreds of Kentuckians in recovery from substance use as they take their first steps onto a new career path.

As of March 2020, the program’s staff has served nearly 1,000 individuals in recovery, recruited dozens of transformational employers, and formed partnerships with a number of referring agencies in a first-of-its-kind network designed solely to increase the likelihood of success for Kentuckians struggling with substance use disorder. And their efforts present encouraging results.

Richard Smith, of Bowling Green, is one of dozens of clients around the Commonwealth finding support through employment thanks to his participation in SITE, and credits his job with further helping maintain his recovery after years in active addiction.

“It’s quite a blessing to have a job in my recovery because now I’ve got something to look forward to every day instead of just where I was going to get my next fix,” Smith said, adding that the need for such programmatic support initiatives in the Commonwealth remains high.

Kentucky’s struggles with substance use, especially prescription opioids, are well documented and continue to damage households from Pikeville to Paducah. According to Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, overdose deaths in 2016 reached a record high of 33.5 per 100,000 people, the fifth highest age-adjusted rate in the nation. From 2012-2016, more people died in Kentucky from overdose deaths than highway fatalities by more than 2,000.

In terms of Kentucky’s workforce, the state’s decades-long opioid addiction crisis is not only causing detriment to individual workers and families, but for employers who report they cannot find enough drug-free workers to meet their workforce demands. Don Livingston, a business owner in Perry County in southeastern Kentucky, cited the opioid crisis as a main culprit behind the difficulty he encounters when filling open positions at his service station business.

“We go through 20 applicants before we find one that actually works,” Livingston said. “In this time and area it’s tough to find employees that are friendly, smart enough and hard working, and quite frankly, reliable.”

The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland released studies in 2018 that provide documentation for what employers report anecdotally. For instance, Working Paper 18-07 “finds evidence that opioid availability decreases labor force participation,” adding that “Individuals in areas with higher [opioid] prescription rates are less likely to participate” in the workforce.

Based on available data, initiatives such as SITE that provide employment assistance to individuals in various stages of recovery should be an imperative in Kentucky. Employment and the ability to support oneself remain effective tools to help uplift individuals facing the long road of addiction recovery. As Dr. Boone stated: “In our region, we think employment is also a form of treatment. When you look at recidivism rates, one of the number one factors for recidivism is a lack of employment, a lack of resources, so we try to combat that on a couple different scales.”

The strategies employed in SITE are aligned with the findings of the 2016 study “The Effects of Employment Interventions on Addiction Treatment Outcomes: A Review of the Literature” published in Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions that found a positive connection between employment interventions and substance use treatment outcomes. The program design also recognizes that reentry and vocational programs for recovering individuals often fail if they lack enveloping services such as targeted case management, peer support, and counseling and personal accountability measures such as drug testing, prescription monitoring, and structured transitional living.
Present outcomes for SITE are in part the result of a strategic collaboration between a number of agencies and organizations across the Commonwealth. It is this collaborative model that has led to 1,088 employer contacts and 253 clients gaining employment between October 2019 and April 2020.

Client referrals from locally established organizations also play a significant role in this model, as was intended from the outset. SITE relies heavily upon the local courts, rehabilitation centers, and other organizations for connections with potential clients.

In the Northern Kentucky workforce area, Life Learning Center (LLC) of Kenton County is a significant source of client referrals. Located in the city of Covington, LLC is a non-profit organization with a mission to “equip citizens who are at risk with the tools to obtain sustainable employment” through the removal of barriers, according to LLC Job Placement Coordinator Ashton Van Gorden.

Van Gorden works consistently with Adam Fargo, SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist, to place LCC clients in jobs with local employers. Many of those clients, up to 94 percent, have been convicted of a criminal offense, of which 97 percent are individuals with substance use disorders, according to Van Gorden, which complicates attempts for them to enter the workforce without the assistance Fargo provides.

“Many of them have lost that confidence and that spark in their ability to secure employment because of the restrictions of their backgrounds,” Van Gorden said.

Many LLC clients who enroll for services with SITE are only recently released from local jails, according to President and CEO Alecia Webb-Edgington. Because of their working relationship with Fargo and his connections with local employers, they’re able to quickly connect these clients with jobs that provide sustainable wages and first steps to reentry.

“Adam set up shop here in our building, he meets with candidates as they are being released from the Kenton County Detention Center and or other penal institutions, they go through our enrollment process here at Life Learning Center, and Adam puts them to work,” said Webb-Edgington.

The collaborative nature of their partnership with SITE provides LLC with an additional tool to assist individuals as part of the organization’s mission. Van Gorden described the process as not only job placement, but helping their clients regain a sense of dignity.
“When Adam and myself are able to work together and show [clients] that there are options out there not just for employment, but sustainable employment, I think it gives them a reinstilled sense of hope and it makes them feel like they’re contributing to society,” she said.

These tactics are also proving fruitful in less urban areas of the state. Within the South Central Workforce Development Board’s 10-county service area, Hope House Ministries of Bowling Green is seeing continued success in their partnership with SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Meredith Hester.

“Meredith has been a very self-motivated and determined person to get these guys to work,” said John Calloway, Hope House program living director. “Everybody that we’ve ever been able to bring to her she has been able to get them employed this last two months.”

Hope House is a local advocacy organization that assists individuals with barriers ranging from criminal histories to substance use disorder. Hester is providing the organization with an additional method to connect their clients with employment opportunities to increase their likelihood of successful recovery from addiction, according to Calloway, who oversees all of Hope House’s recovery efforts.

Their partnership with Hester represents the first such programmatic collaboration for Hope House, Calloway added, and in only two months has returned positive results for clients whose backgrounds largely frustrate attempts at workforce re-entry on their own.

As of April 2020, Hester has enrolled 55 clients for services through SITE in the South Central area, with 43 gaining employment. It’s a successful model that supplements what organizations such as Hope House are able to do on their own by providing clients not only with vital connections to local employers and a range of career services, but also the encouragement their clients need to take the initiative and overcome initial barriers in their recovery.

What They Do

Job Entry & Retention Support Specialist and Success Coach

The SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialists (JERSS) provide a direct link for clients with transformational employers in an effort to quickly connect clients in recovery with work opportunities and training.

Success Coaches work on-site and remotely to assist employers and employees with overcoming barriers to continued employment. They also help employers sustain a recovery-friendly workplace and develop solutions for ongoing issues.

“We’ve never worked with anybody whose singular position or function is to help guys look for work, get their résumés out, work almost as a liaison between these guys who need employment and the employers looking for quality employees,” Calloway said. “It’s working phenomenally. We could not imagine it working any better.”

Within EKCEP’s 23-county workforce area in Eastern Kentucky, the SITE program has received 578 referrals for service in less than a year, resulting in services delivered to 520 people and 64 individuals obtaining employment as of April 2020. (Many of those referred are currently in training programs or work-based learning programs and are not counted in the total employed.)

Glenda Shrum, program supervisor for the drug court in Knott and Magoffin counties, works closely with Success Coach Tesa Turner to connect clients with local employment opportunities. Shrum described the work SITE is doing within Eastern
Kentucky as a necessary branch in the overall support structure for individuals dealing with addiction recovery.

Shrum has referred clients to SITE since late 2019, which she said helps her program meet Administrative Office of the Courts regulations dictating that drug court participants obtain employment after completing the program’s first phase. And the jobs Turner has been able to connect participants with include higher wages than many positions they were able to land prior to this partnership.

“When they leave our program they’re supposed to be able to sustain a lifestyle,” Shrum said. “Then they don’t slip back into dealing dope in order to pay their electric bill or feed their kids. If they want to remain successful, they have to be able to make a living.”

“Getting them into recovery and teaching them how to live is one thing, but they’ve got to have a way to make a living,” she added. “Without that, in my opinion, you’re just setting up people to fail again, and I hate that.”

CHANGING LIVES FOR THE BETTER

Luther Nolan is standing behind the counter at Happy’s Chili Parlor, an historic eatery in Paducah just a few minutes from the Ohio River. It’s morning and a customer’s breakfast is cooking on the flat top griddle behind him as he leans forward, his gloved hands against the counter’s edge, as if he is comfortable where he is and has been working there for years. In reality, it has only been a few weeks.

Nolan watches as a few feet away the restaurant’s owner, Eugene Thomas, talks about second chances and opportunities for people who may need them—people like Nolan. Nolan is still early in his recovery, but he knows his job at Happy’s is a necessary step on a new path not only to a successful recovery, but to a career doing something he enjoys.

“I love cooking, that’s what I love to do,” Nolan said. “So I wanted to get my life back, show people out there I can do it.”

Nolan is positive about his future now, but says it wasn’t always that way. A native of Hickman, Ky., he struggled with substance use issues for years. He successfully quit using cocaine 15 years ago, and more recently stopped drinking.

“I’m doing good,” he said. “Got a job, get to see my kids. So, I love that.”

But Nolan also knows that sobriety is a long road, and that’s why he is happy to have come across an opportunity to land a new job, with help from SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Phyllis Nunn, who connected him with his current job and provides ongoing career support in his recovery. And he’ll continue to need that assistance as he progresses, Nunn said, but there isn’t any reason he can’t turn that corner if he continues to work at it.

“While Luther is progressively becoming a transformational employee, please understand, addiction has a way of challenging the best intentions,” Nunn said. “We will continue to monitor and assist in his journey towards recovery. I am hopeful the best is yet to come.”

For Nolan, it’s an opportunity that he is grateful for. Looking back now, he is ready to continue walking forward, and a career needs to be a part of that mix. It won’t be easy, he adds, but he is ready.

“I can look back on my past, how good it was or how bad it was, and I think of all the good parts I did right and I want to get that back,” he said. “As long as somebody is there to help me, I’m willing to go for it.”
A little more than 150 miles east of Paducah, Richard Smith is standing in a hallway at Hope House Ministries of Bowling Green. He is wearing his work uniform, his first name stitched in cursive on a badge on his chest. He seems at ease with where he is now, and looking forward to where he wants to be.

By his own admission, though, it wasn’t long ago that Smith’s life wasn’t going how he had imagined it would.

“I was on drugs, and having a hard time with life,” he said.

Smith steps back as one of the Hope House employees walks past; he steps back and nods in acknowledgment.

“Pretty much, if it wasn’t for these people to give me the opportunity to come here to Hope House and straighten my life up, I’d probably still be in jail today,” he added.

Smith first came to Hope House in June 2019, and after six months was required to get a job to help continue his recovery. That was when he first met Meredith Hester, who was able to quickly connect Smith with a job that has played an important role in helping him plan for his next steps.

In her role as a Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist, Hester cultivated a working partnership with Hope House to assist recovering individuals there with employment opportunities. She received Smith’s case as a referral, and was already aware of an open position that would be a good fit for him at the Bowling Green operation for Bando, a leading producer of automotive parts.

“Basically she did all the footwork. I just had to say yes, I want the job,” Smith said. “She sent them my résumé and stuff, she did all that. It was just a blessing for me.”

Those sorts of connections are important, Smith added, especially for himself and his fellow SITE participants at Hope House who may have backgrounds that could prevent some employers from considering them for open positions.

“We’re convicted felons, most of us are,” he said. “It’s kind of hard to get a job because most places of employment don’t like to look at felons.”

Smith began working full-time on Dec. 16 making serpentine belts for automobiles. It’s the first time he has had a job that offers eight hours of work per day and benefits like health insurance. It represented a big step, and one he may not have taken had he not been able to work with the SITE program. And it’s also a step several of his fellow Hope House residents are taking.

Au Sut Kahn has been enrolled at Hope House for nearly a year. A Thailand native, Kahn immigrated to the U.S. 12 years ago and is now living in Bowling Green, where he is also working.

Kahn is a machine operator for Pan Oston, a com-
pany providing grocery and retail front-end solutions including checkout lanes and self-checkout. He helps manufacture registers for major retailers. It’s a job he landed even after a stint in jail thanks to his involvement with SITE.

Kahn said his addiction to illegal narcotics was a major barrier in his life. Not only had it resulted in his incarceration, but he also lost things that he would need to help him turn his life around, such as a driver’s license. His enrollment at Hope House was a first step, and like Smith, his next step would be his involvement with SITE and assistance from Meredith Hester.

Hester’s initial support included building Kahn’s résumé, connecting him with hiring employers and job fairs, and assisting with the paperwork needed to apply for positions in Bowling Green. Kahn said he was hopeful that Hester’s support would work for him as well since he’d already seen several of his fellow Hope House clients obtain employment through SITE.

“I see people before me that went through the program, that she helped them to get a job at Bando and all kinds of places,” Kahn said. “I already saw that, so I believed that she was going to find me work somewhere.”

Now with a job and plans for school in place, Kahn said he is taking early steps and on his way to achieving his ultimate goal of obtaining his certification as a professional translator.

“I’m going to try and get a translator’s certificate, so in the future I can get another job at a hospital or do translating, because I speak three different languages,” he said, adding that having someone on his side like Hester and the SITE program has made those goals more achievable.

“She put her name in front of us to help make sure we get this job. It’s a lot of help,” he said.

Aaron Hoskins also credits SITE with his success in landing a job. At 32 years old, Hoskins is living in Bowling Green while working as a builder at Bando, manufacturing drive belts for automobile manufacturers including Ford and Toyota.

Hoskins is also in active recovery from prior years of drug abuse. He has more than a year in recovery and something new to look forward to—a career.

“I worked dead-end jobs most of the time, struggled with addiction a lot, in and out of jail,” Hoskins said. “But after I came to Hope House, Meredith came in and she actually helped me get a job.”

Hester connected Hoskins with an opportunity at Bando shortly after beginning working with him. She assisted with submitting applications, contacted the employer and the human resources department to get updates, and served as an effective liaison between him and the company.

Enrolling in the SITE program has been invaluable, Hoskins said.

“I didn’t know what to expect at first. I’d never had anybody actually want to put their neck out there for me, let alone try to do the footwork. She was proactive and enthusiastic about helping us and helping people.”

— Aaron Hoskins
Bowling Green, Ky.
for me, let a lone try to do the footwork,” Hoskins said. “She was proactive and enthusiastic about helping us and helping people.”

Hoskins now has his sights set on not just a job to support his recovery, but a career to support a family.

“I had been struggling with addiction my whole life,” he said. “I wanted to find a permanent, full-time job where I would establish myself and eventually graduate this program and get a place here in Bowling Green. It’s important to me because I’m a single father and would like to get custody of my son back.”

More than 220 miles away in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky, Ryan Smith’s story is unfolding in much the same manner. He is dressed in a hooded jacket with a baseball cap hiding his dark hair. He is seated in an office chair inside a small conference room lined with old law books inside the Knott County Judicial Center. He meets with his Drug Court advisor regularly here in Hindman, a small town of around 700 people who have nearly all been affected in some way by the same kind of substance use issues that Smith admits were behind many of the choices he has made for the past few years.

“I was staying in trouble all the time, just didn’t have nowhere to go,” he said. “I didn’t have any money. Spent it all on drugs.”

Smith, 35 and a native of Knott County, said he first tried drugs at age 12. He didn’t stop until he was well into his 30s.

In the years between that first instance and his last, Smith said his addiction led to several run-ins with law enforcement. It was an arrest for drug possession in June 2019 that led to an offer of referral to the Knott County Drug Court that would keep him out of jail, but on strict supervision.

Two months after he entered Drug Court, Smith was referred to SITE Success Coach Tesa Turner, who immediately began working to assist in a search for a job that would fit with his skillset. He was skeptical at first, but felt like this could be a last shot at turning his life around and leaving behind a lifestyle that had driven his actions for the better part of 20 years.

“I was hoping she could help,” he said. “I didn’t think she could actually get me a good job and stuff like they can. It surprised me. Every time I tried to get a job, they looked at my background and it didn’t work.”

Turner assisted Smith with building his résumé and preparing for possible interviews, and also worked with a local employer about possible job placement and work experience. Not long after, Smith began training with Hurley Electric in neighboring Perry County, where he learned how to work as part of a crew that maintains and repairs fiber-optic lines.

Though Smith was working as a general laborer prior to his training with Hurley Electric, it wasn’t a position he was eager to keep; he wanted to learn a skill that he could apply to a career as he continued in his recovery.

Fast forward to March 2020 and Smith has completed a stint of on-the-job training and works full-time on a fiber optic crew with Hurley Electric. He said he is not looking back at how things used to be, but at how they can be now and in the future, and at the role he has to play to make that happen. He believes his job is a significant step in that direction, and it’s something he doesn’t think would have happened had he not accepted a referral to Drug Court, and later with SITE.

“If it wasn’t for SITE, I don’t think I’d be in this position because of the record I have,” he said. “It’s just hard to get a good job out there on your own, especially if you’ve got any kind of record. I don’t know where I’d be without it.”

SITE is also providing much needed assistance beyond employment contacts and training. In Perry County in far southeastern Kentucky, Jeremy Yeary is keeping busy working toward a degree in human services and working full-time as a peer
Jeremy Yeary stands outside of the Rebound Center in Hazard where he works as a peer support specialist.

support specialist for Kentucky River Community Care, a non-profit offering a variety of recovery services in rural Eastern Kentucky counties.

And while Yeary assists others with substance use issues, he is also maintaining his own recovery.

“I’m an addict, and I was in active addiction for 20 years,” he said. “So it was just cycling in and out of jobs right and left and never really had anything concrete or solid.”

Yeary eventually found himself on probation as the result of a criminal charge, and knew he wanted to make a change. He requested long-term treatment as part of his probation, and was referred to Hickory Hill Recovery Center in Knott County. He spent a year recovering there before moving to a sober living facility in Hazard.

“Long-term treatment was great. It was something that I needed,” he said. “I had lost all hope in everything. I lost hope in myself. I had no will to live.”

Following treatment, Yeary set his sights on other goals, namely a job and enrolling in college to begin working toward a degree. Soon after, the Kentucky Access to Recovery program referred Yeary to SITE Success Coach Tesa Turner.

Yeary was happy to meet with Turner, who could assist with the process of having his past criminal record expunged. That process includes making initial contacts within the court system and submitting the necessary paperwork before a judge can review the record in question. Turner is currently assisting in that process, which can take up to 60 days, and is helping cover the costs associated with it, including an initial fee and additional costs for each count expunged. Getting his record expunged is required for him to successfully obtain licensed professional counseling jobs after he completes his degree.

“For me, I’m a convicted felon from a drug charge, and although that was seven and a half years ago, that follows you for the rest of your life,” Yeary said. “So getting that removed is something crucial I really wanted to do.”

Through SITE, Turner was also able to assist Yeary with a number of career and supportive services. She helped reimburse him for the cost of the books he needed for school, connect with potential job opportunities, and build his résumé.

“Jeremy is an exceptional young man and is making tremendous strides in building his career pathway,” Turner said. “He has a heart for people and I am so excited that he can now give back by serving as a peer support specialist while obtaining his human service degree. He is the perfect example of how a career pathway should work.”

Yeary says his experience with SITE has been a positive one and continues to be, and it’s an expe-
rience he would recommend for others in similar circumstances.

“If they’re given an opportunity to work with Tesa or someone like that, I would say absolutely, go for it,” he said. “Every person that you’ve got behind you helps by picking you up and building you up, pushing you in the right direction.”

EMPLOYERS PROVIDING KEY COMPONENT FOR EARLY SUCCESS

Because of the input and involvement of a number of transformational employer partners throughout the Commonwealth, the SITE model of employment and retention support has resulted in the early successes evidenced in the numbers to date, and is now poised to replicate and build upon those successes in the future.

“Without the employer component, we wouldn’t be able to assist the people who enroll for our services nearly like we would want,” said Melissa Quillen, SITE program director for EKCEP. “These individuals need these opportunities to succeed, and we’re grateful for our Kentucky businesses that are ready to play their role in overcoming addiction.”

One such business, Close the Loop in Covington, Ky., has hired more than 10 SITE participants since November 2019, according to Human Resources Manager Tom Kelly, and most with a good degree of success.

Headquartered in Australia, Close the Loop has operated in Kentucky since 2007. The company focuses on reusing or recycling waste items to reduce environmental impact. Its Covington operation represents the company’s sole North American venture, and focuses on recycling ink and toner cartridges, with a goal of zero waste to landfill.

Kelly, who describes Close the Loop as a company actively looking to provide opportunities for individuals to reenter the workforce, first learned of SITE through a conversation with Northern Kentucky Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Adam Fargo.

Kelly said Close the Loop is currently employing several individuals who may be best described as transformational employees with certain background issues that might prevent them from obtaining gainful employment elsewhere, and most have been “strong contributors to the company.” So when Fargo explained how SITE could benefit his workforce further, it seemed a natural fit.

“What Are Transformational Employers?

Close the Loop in Hebron, Ky. is one of several transformational employers partnering with SITE throughout Kentucky.

Transformational employers are those willing to provide meaningful employment opportunities to individuals with backgrounds of substance use disorder.
we could create a good partnership together," Kelly said.

Kelly added that since then he has “relied heavily” on Fargo and his connection with referring agencies to help fill open positions within his company’s warehouse line. And while that initial connection remains beneficial, perhaps just as beneficial is having Fargo as an extra connection who can prepare applicants for what the job entails, and ensure they’re prepared for the interview and what the employer might expect.

“Adam will contact me and say, ‘I have two people that would like whatever shift, when can we get them scheduled for an interview?’” Kelly said. “Usually, we can schedule them in a day and they’re here, and he is here to make sure that they arrive promptly. It’s fantastic. He makes my job really easy from a recruitment standpoint.”

While bigger companies like Close the Loop in Covington have already been able to offer employment to several SITE clients, small business employers are also seeing the value in offering transformational employment opportunities.

A couple of hundred miles to the west, Eugene Thomas is standing next to the counter inside Hap-py’s Chili Parlor, which Thomas’ family has owned and operated since its creation in 1929. He currently employs one SITE participant, Luther Nolan, but said he is certainly open to hiring more if needed.

Thomas said he doesn’t see these types of hires as a risk for his business, but as an opportunity to give someone else a chance to lift themselves up. It’s that opportunity, he added, that can be an effective tool to provide someone the boost needed to make changes in their life.

“Trying to save a life and get a person back on track is worth it because without the opportunity they wouldn’t have the chance,” Thomas says. “If they’re sound with what they’re doing, if they’re sound in their faith, if they’re sound in their business, then that can be effective.”

On the other end of the state, nearly 400 miles away in the mountain town of Pikeville, Appalachian Community Care (ACC) CEO Dr. Lovonne Fleming-Richardson is nearly six months into administering a peer support program for individuals in recovery at her treatment facility. Peer support was a program that hadn’t existed in-house before Fleming-Richardson’s partnership with SITE, and it has since resulted in her hiring two SITE enrollees to provide those services to local clients.

“This is the first time an outside resource has come in and we’ve worked with them to employ individuals in recovery,” said Fleming-Richardson. “It’s been a very favorable experience, for both of the individuals who came into this program have been hired full-time as soon as they were finished with the program.”

Being able to hire two people who battled addiction themselves has added a benefit to the treatment programs offered at ACC, Fleming-Richardson said. Not only did ACC not offer peer support before this partnership, but no one on staff had the same sort of backgrounds as those SITE clients who are now working full-time to support the recovery of others. And just as important, SITE is now promoting positive change in a region of Appalachia that has been hit hard by drug abuse and now is seeing generational cycles of addiction, Fleming-Richardson added. The families of these two employees are changing because they were able to break their addictions, obtain employment, and begin to support themselves and others. The younger generation, in turn, sees what recovery looks like.

“We have two women financially supporting their families, showing their kids that it can be done,” she said. “That’s an opportunity you can’t put money on.”

Don Livingston and his wife Barbara own and operate Willie’s BP in the Perry County community of Grapevine in southeastern Kentucky. Livingston describes Willie’s as a full-service convenience store serving the local community.

The Livingstons turned to SITE for a number of rea-
sons, not least of which was to help find employee candidates who are interested in a new path to employment. It is also a way to provide opportunities to residents in their local community. They hired Jessica Jones, a nearby Hazard resident and SITE participant, to begin work as a clerk in the business.

“Jessica has turned out to be a gem, just a diamond in the rough,” Livingston said.

An added bonus, Livingston said, is that SITE offers the option to participate in the federal bonding program, which covers employment for up to six months for hard-to-place jobseekers, such as those who may have substance use issues or criminal histories that may prevent them from obtaining employment otherwise.

Livingston said they would have hired Jones regardless, but the added option of being able to count on a federal bond if he felt it was needed makes it easier to work with SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Barbara Smith.

“We understand the trials and tribulations that people go through,” Livingston said. “So we’re always looking for opportunities to help people. This program seemed to be the right fit, and it’s proven that.”

In some cases, clients who have remained successful in recovery are turning to the workforce model to obtain employment in a field that provides assistance to individuals in different stages of recovery.

Pikeville resident Tenia Johnson leans against a table in a conference room at Appalachian Community Care’s treatment center located in Pike County near the West Virginia line. Like many others in the region, Johnson dealt with ongoing substance use issues that began early in her life.

“I’ve been using in some form since I was 12 years old, from marijuana to harder stuff,” said Johnson, who turned 36 in late 2019. “And of course, it built to more and more.”

Johnson’s drug use spiraled in the ensuing years, to the point that it not only cost her financially, but she lost relationships with family and friends. And she was going nowhere professionally.

“It cost me jobs,” she said. “And it wasn’t because I was messed up and couldn’t do my jobs, it was being late for work. I was calling off for a day because I didn’t have my drug. It affected every aspect of my life.”

Johnson’s addiction finally drove her to the point that “something had to give,” she said. After what she described as several failed attempts at treatment and short-term rehab stints that amounted to detox-and-release programs, she finally hit bottom and enrolled in long-term care.

It was there that Johnson found the treatment she needed and her outlook changed, as did her environment. Long months passed and she started forming new relationships and began envisioning a life without addiction. She started thinking about her future, and how a career could fit into it.

Johnson was in treatment when her counselor introduced her to SITE, a new employment program designed to support people like her who have struggled with addiction but are ready to re-enter the workforce. She met with Jimmie Wilson, a SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist. It was just what she needed.

“It cost me jobs,” she said. “And it wasn’t because I was messed up and couldn’t do my jobs, it was being late for work. I was calling off for a day because I didn’t have my drug. It affected every aspect of my life.”

“Jimmie explained the program to me, and then, in the meantime, within a week, everything somehow fell into place with me,” Johnson said.
“We need programs that don’t forget about us. We might have been bad, but we can all change. Without these types of programs, even if we want to, we have no means to get a foot in the door.”

— Tenia Johnson
Pikeville, Ky.

Wilson connected Johnson with an opportunity as a peer support specialist with Appalachian Community Care (ACC). SITE would provide work experience and cover Johnson’s salary for a time. With more than two years in recovery, Johnson was ready to begin helping others who had gone through similar experiences with addiction. She was so ready to help, in fact, that after three months on the job, ACC paid for her peer support certification and hired Johnson full-time.

Now with more than three years of sobriety behind her, Johnson credits her involvement with SITE as a “godsend” that helped her enter a career field in which she can provide assistance to people who are struggling as she once did. She is now back in school and on her way to earning a four-year degree with plans to become a counselor.

Johnson said she views this model of career assistance from SITE as one that is necessary for people in recovery. These aren’t bad people, she noted, but because of past mistakes may need a door opened slightly so they can pass through and build a life for themselves.

“We need programs that don’t forget about us,” she said. “We might have been bad, but we can all change. Without these types of programs, even if we want to, we have no means to get a foot in the door.”

Pamela Branham, Johnson’s co-worker at ACC, shares that sentiment. Branham is also working as a peer support specialist at the center after enrolling with SITE, and her story shares many of the same elements as Johnson’s.

Branham began using at 13, introduced to prescription narcotics by an older boyfriend. Her addiction lasted through college, which led to her dropping out.

“My disease progressed from then to starting harder drugs, which I’d gotten into in college,” Branham said. “A lot of cocaine use, but I still always used pain pills. That was my drug of choice.”

In her early 20s, Branham had picked up misdemeanor charges, and repeatedly received court-ordered treatment that never succeeded. She gave birth to her first daughter in 2010, but not long after that her addiction returned.

“At that time I started even with harder drugs,” she said. “I was doing heroin, that type of thing.”

And like Johnson, Branham said it would take hitting bottom before she could overcome the depths of addiction. She described what she thinks was a near death experience she had while living in Florida with her parents.

“During this incident, it was literally like I had passed out from the amount of drugs I’d done, but when I woke, it was like I was looking down on myself and I was dead,” she said. “The next thing I remember was feeling pressure on my back and my four-year-old little girl—I woke up to her face.”

Branham said that incident pushed her to begin the process of recovery. She moved back to Kentucky with her husband and entered a treatment program. She put in the work and dedicated her-
self to addressing every aspect of her life, and that included employment.

At two years in recovery, Branham had already obtained her certification as a peer support specialist when she first met Jimmie Wilson with SITE. It wasn’t long before Wilson connected Branham with a peer support opportunity at ACC, as well. And it wasn’t long after that—September 2019—Branham began working to support others facing addiction.

Employment was a big step in her recovery, Branham said, and it was that connection with SITE and having someone like Wilson in her corner who could not only provide job opportunities but also essentially vouch for her that made the difference. And it could also be the difference for many others, she added.

“Sometimes I have seen [lack of employment] force people back into an old lifestyle because they didn’t have any other option,” she said. “I was really happy that we have a program like this that is helping people with substance use disorder and is giving people a second chance at a prosperous life.”

FILLING GAPS IN SERVING LOCAL REENTRY POPULATIONS

With the increase of substance use disorders across Kentucky and employers reporting instances of substance use within their employee pools, workforce development experts are increasingly looking at ways to provide tools to local areas designed to fill gaps in service delivery models.

The South Central Workforce Development Board serves 10 counties in south central Kentucky with an array of jobseeker and employer services, with the local reentry population being one of its focuses.

Robert Boone, South Central’s president and CEO, said prior to the SITE model providing a new collaborative partnership and resource in his region, the reentry model took more of a “cobble together” approach.

“As we started to gain more resources in the reentry space, we started connecting the dots and aligning those resources so that they made more sense to our jobseekers and employers, which are our two primary customers,” Boone said.

The SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist in the South Central area became one of those resources that presented another opportunity to collaborate with new partners and assist individuals as they navigate reentry into the workforce.

“Workforce development is collaboration,” Boone said. “Our mission begins giving credence to collaboration and our involvement with other partners, working together to leverage resources so they are moving in the same direction. And resources like the Job Entry Retention and Support Specialist are in many ways the glue that holds some of those partnerships together, to act as a liaison for the efforts of EKCEP, the South Central Workforce Development Board, and other partners to really hold those partnerships together and steer them in the direction to help our jobseekers and employers.”

At the Kentucky Career Center in Bowling Green, Operations Director Amanda Pedigo said having a SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist like Hester in her area is in some ways like the missing piece of a puzzle to help tackle the issue of serving reentry populations, which she described as “one of the most untapped demographics that we have.”
“She connects the individuals with the resources and the partnerships that would eliminate the barriers that individuals may have as they try to reenter the workforce and society,” Pedigo said.

Local drug courts are finding this collaborative approach to be of benefit for their clients, as well. In Eastern Kentucky, Floyd Circuit Judge Johnny Ray Harris first began working with drug courts in Kentucky during a pilot project in Lawrence County nearly 20 years ago.

The reentry support model was introduced to his local drug court in 2019, and has since become what he describes as a “critical” component that has increased clients’ chances at successful completion of the program through exposure to GED support, job training, and supportive services and interview preparation.

None of those services are directly available through drug court otherwise, Judge Harris said, so it makes this collaboration even more vital. But perhaps the most important aspect of their relationship with SITE is that it provides a direct pipeline to transformational employers and job opportunities that clients wouldn’t normally have access to.

“SITE has been a tremendous resource for us,” Judge Harris said. “It’s actually a critical resource. One of the major factors in being successful in drug court is having employment. SITE is essential to our function.”

Through SITE, similar connections are being made across Kentucky’s 10 workforce development areas. In the Kentuckiana Works area, which includes Kentucky’s most populous city of Louisville, Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Millie Stevens has become a member of the drug court team for Oldham, Trimble, and Henry counties where she continually receives referrals for services. Stevens is also a member of the Recovery Employer Workforce to provide education to local company representatives on becoming transformational employers.

In the Bluegrass workforce area, Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Terri Hudson has formed working relationships with the Madison County Agency for Substance Abuse Policy, Madison County Opioid Response & Engagement, the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, and the Richmond Industrial Development Corporation.

In the Cumberlands region, Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Traci Wariner is partnering with Somerset Pulaski Economic Development Authority, the Pulaski County Chamber of Commerce, Malone Staffing Solutions, and Addiction Recovery Care while connecting clients with employment opportunities, including enrollments for peer support with local treatment centers.

In the Lincoln Trail area, Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Melody Ognan helped organize a transformational roundtable with participation from more than 80 companies and non-profit partners to address opioid and substance use disorders and the solutions offered through SITE. She also recently began working with the Marion County Detention Center, the local drug court, and Hamilton Ryker to develop an apprenticeship program for local residents.

In the TENCO area in northeastern Kentucky, Job Entry and Retention Support Specialist Ryan

“Workforce development is collaboration. Our mission begins giving credence to collaboration and our involvement with other partners, working together to leverage resources so they are moving in the same direction.”

— Dr. Robert Boone
President/CEO
South Central Workforce Development Board
Bowman is partnering with Edgewater Recovery in Morehead, initially teaching basic job skills, searches, résumés building, and applications every Friday. He has since transitioned into getting Adult Education and Kentucky Skills U involved and enrolling clients for GED classes.

Bowman is also working with a new employer in the region, AppHarvest, and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System and Kentucky Adult Education to develop a curriculum that AppHarvest will use for their hiring process. These are just a few examples of the many connections the SITE Job Entry and Retention Support Specialists and Success Coaches have made and continue to make throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky in the first year of their mission to support the reentry portion of the workforce. The work these men and women are completing is making for a healthier Kentucky, both economically with a stronger workforce and on a personal basis as these individuals maintain their recovery and step onto a career path that provides a means to earn a living.

**SITE INTO THE FUTURE**

SITE is now poised to not only continue focused efforts throughout the state, but to expand them into local communities by seeking additional funding to add staff and services. SITE is also working to develop the Kentucky Employer Resource Network (ERN) and has set a number of goals for each of the workforce areas to ramp up and focus on building upon established partnerships and seek out new ones with employers and referring partners alike.

“This first year really exceeded our expectations in regard to how many people we could reach throughout the state,” said SITE Director Melissa Quillen. “We want to build up this network in a second year and increase capacity to reach more people, and just as important, bring more partners into the mix who believe in this mission to expand our workforce and provide additional support for this population."

SITE is currently working to develop multiple integrated partnerships with numerous transformational employers and organizations. One such effort includes Fahe, a non-profit headquartered in Berea, Ky., and the Fletcher Group, a non-profit founded by former Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher and his wife, Glenna, to develop recovery ecosystems in rural Kentucky.

Such partnerships can leverage each partner’s ability to effect positive change at the individual level. SITE staff can work with employer partners to determine workforce needs, and through the Fletcher Group’s connections with rural recovery centers, engage those centers’ clients and identify individuals interested in specific employment opportunities. Fahe has the ability to subsidize wages for up to six months to ensure those employees are a good fit.

“All four of these groups—SITE, employers, the Fletcher Group, and Fahe—can have a part in taking someone from recovery to employment,” added Quillen. “This is the kind of collaboration we believe will be key moving forward, and the sort of team we hope to be a part of.”

Employers will continue to play an important role on that team, Quillen added, as will continued efforts to develop the Kentucky Employer Resource Network (ERN), which will utilize employer investment to pool a number of services including job-retention efforts, work support, and education and training to improve worker retention and self-sufficiency for employees.

The Kentucky ERN will also seek to further capitalize on advancements in instant communica-
tion platforms, such as Zoom or Google Hangouts, currently being used to great effect during the COVID-19 pandemic, to contact and provide success coach services to a larger number of employers.

SITE also works closely with The Kentucky Chamber Workforce Centers Opioid Response Program for Business. This team is available to help audit employers’ existing policies and make recommendations for best practices to maintain a drug-free workplace while supporting a recovery-friendly culture.

Work is also continuing to expand upon existing partnerships with organizations including Addiction Recovery Care (ARC) and Volunteers of America that will increase access to services for a number of people.

In its focus on transformational employment for individuals in recovery, EKCEP is working to offer a Peer Support Specialist Academy in partnership with ARC, which operates a network of residential and outpatient drug and alcohol abuse treatment centers in Eastern, Central, and Northern Kentucky. The Academy will be available to individuals who complete a recovery program with ARC.

SITE staff members have been trained on a web-based platform developed by ARC called “ARC Anywhere” which expands ARC’s telehealth services and includes a vocational training component. EKCEP is also partnering with ARC to develop a program that will expand work-based learning opportunities for SUD-affected youth.

Volunteers of America (VOA) offers a complete system of care ranging from long-term residential treatment and aftercare services to community outreach and retention. EKCEP is currently partnering with Volunteers of America centers in Louisville and Manchester on a project that will allow SITE staff to dedicate a portion of their time to VOA participants before they complete their treatment program. This will provide an opportunity for the necessary assessments, job readiness training, and job matching to be done so they may go directly into employment upon discharge.

Additional and ongoing funding will be an important factor in SITE’s ability to provide a full array of services to clients, including the same supportive services currently available only to SITE clients living within EKCEP’s 23-county service area. In many cases, clients require assistance with things including transportation and purchasing the necessary clothing or equipment to perform a job. At present, SITE is limited in providing that type of assistance, though eKART can include those services through Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding available to EKCEP.

At present EKCEP is exploring avenues to secure additional funding, and has recently added a grant writer and researcher to its staff to identify and apply for new opportunities for needed financial resources.

“It is paramount to SITE’s mission that we take advantage of every opportunity for new funding that we can,” said EKCEP Executive Director Jeff Whitehead. “We view Kentucky’s substance use issue as a crisis on multiple levels, and we all have to do our part to alleviate the strain it is putting on our families, our economy, and our workforce. Additional resources will expand SITE’s capabilities to get more people to work and out of the same cycle of addiction that held them back previously.”

While the good work of SITE is being done directly on the ground with front-line staff, it remains work that could not have been done without the initial and ongoing involvement from a number of collaborative partners, including critical funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission, Kentucky Opioid Response Effort (KORE) - Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, and Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy (ODCP).

The funding these agencies provide makes this work possible, but EKCEP views their contributions as more than just funds to cover costs of doing the work of workforce development. They are strategic partners that provide a window of opportunity to change the lives of Kentuckians for the better and uplift our Commonwealth, and their work is irreplaceable.