

Missouri Connections to Success Program Expands

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Kathy Lambert's success as co-founder and CEO of [Connections to Success](#) began with dedication and the loan of a pair of shoes. Years ago, Lambert provided interview-appropriate attire to women living in poverty. A young woman, who we'll call Doris, was referred to the program. They had sized and selected all of her clothing, but Doris was missing the shoes. Lambert asked her what size she wore. When Lambert learned they wore the same size, she removed her shoes, gave them to Doris, and sent her on her way. Two hours later, Doris called with great news. She landed the job!

Changing lives since 2001

Connections to Success is a Missouri-based organization that helps individuals like Doris living in poverty move to self-sufficiency. Kathy and her husband, Brad, founded Connections to Success after combining two existing non-profits: Dress for Success Midwest and Wheels for Success. These programs filled specific needs such as interview-appropriate clothing and donated transportation. By adding a curriculum focused on workforce readiness, healthy parenting and relationship skills development, and education and employment skills training, they've evolved into one holistic and comprehensive program that has helped over 25,000 men and women.

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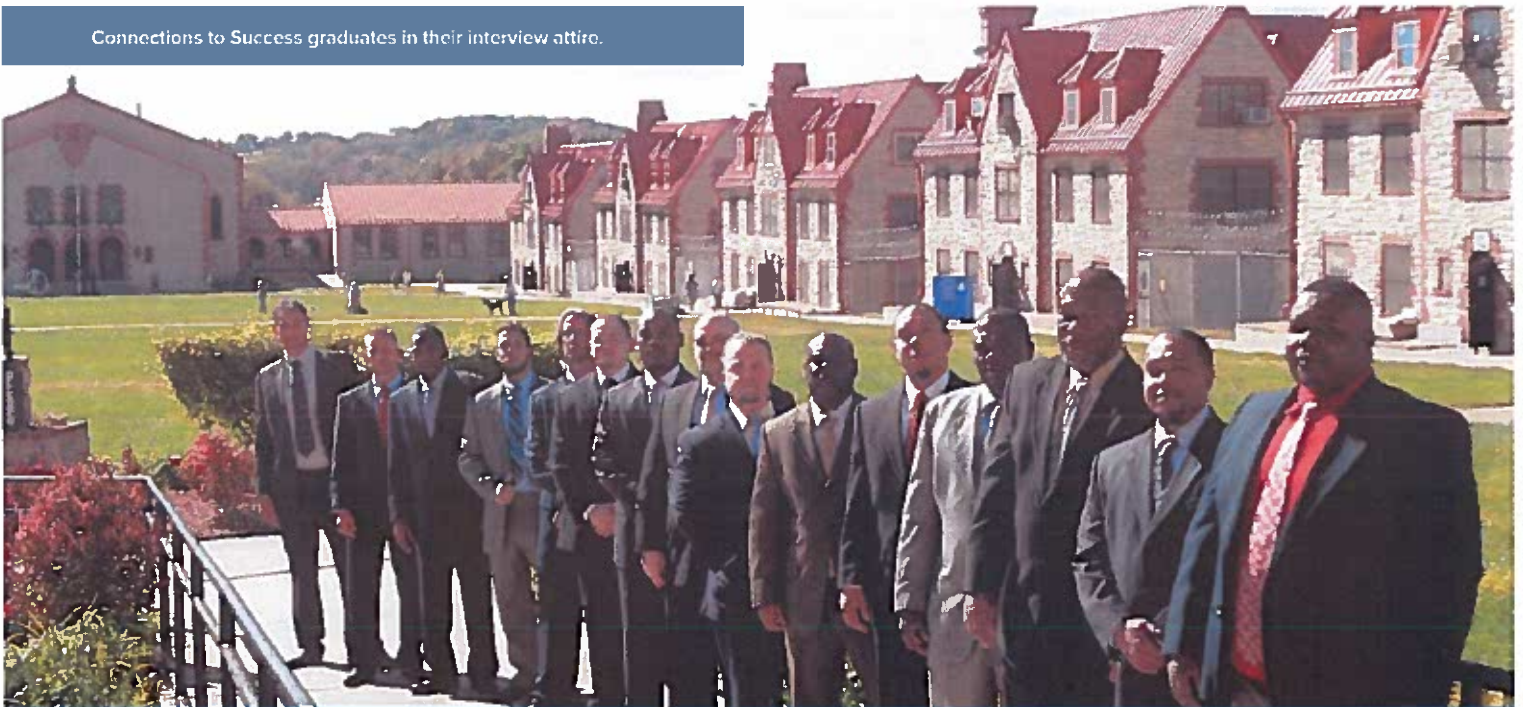
Fulfilling Needs beyond Employment

During Connections to Success, the men can meet with representatives from Missouri social service agencies such as child support, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and housing to set up services as quickly as possible. "The sooner we can get them these benefits, the sooner we can get them *[to be self-sufficient]*," Lambert offered. The program attempts to have SNAP benefits available as soon as the inmates leave the facility.

Missouri's child support agency, the Family Support Division (FSD), offers an opportunity for men with child support cases to meet with caseworkers for a one-on-one case review. For many, child support has been an issue in their past. When appropriate, caseworkers remove license sanctions and offer other pre-release help such as order modifications. They consider this partnership invaluable.

Child Support Enforcement Deputy Director John Ginwright shared, "FSD is proud to be a part of this groundbreaking project. Individuals reentering society often face child support barriers prior to release. This distinctive approach allows those reentering society to get a head start on a successful reentry process. FSD is expanding its collaboration efforts with agencies like Connections to Success to meet individuals where they are to provide our services. This is what success looks like."

Connections to Success graduates in their interview attire.





A program representative (left) talks with a participant about his future.

A recent graduate takes his children to the zoo.

After being appointed to the Missouri State Workforce Development Board, Lambert recognized the importance of developing the talent and skills of inmates who'd eventually be released back into their communities. "For employers wanting to grow, they need people," Lambert said. "They can't find people." With 19,000 adults released from prisons in Missouri every year, working to develop these men and women was a response to a need.

July 2018 — taking services to inmates

With strong partners from the Missouri Central Region Workforce Investment Board and state departments of Corrections and Social Services, they launched a pilot program at the Algoa Correctional Center in Jefferson City using core Connections to Success curriculum focused on personal and professional development. "Rather than wait until an individual is released to provide workforce development support, we've started working with individuals who are still incarcerated," Lambert said.

After inmates saw how successful the first group was, over 70 men were eager to volunteer for a future class.

The program is intensive, so participation is voluntary. Inmates must be within 30-60 days of release and remain free of any disciplinary actions while they're enrolled. A group of 15 men participated in the first 10-day, 60-hour program. The Algoa facility provided Lambert with a classroom-style meeting space and modified its check-in and meal policy to allow inmates to remain with the group for the full six hours per day.

The initial part of the course focuses on 'cognitive restructuring' and offers skills development to navigate interpersonal relationships in healthy ways, including parenting. "They really want to take care of their kids,"

Lambert said. The group then goes through a skills assessment to determine their strengths to help match the individual with the right type of job.

Finally, the men complete a resume workshop and are fitted with interview-appropriate business suits, which they keep when released. "I thought the only time I would wear a suit was at my funeral," said one class participant. "You can see how their posture changes when they see themselves in a suit," said Lambert. The men can then participate in a mock interview with actual central Missouri employers, many of whom say they would hire the men after their interview.

Success rate

Connections to Success has offered the course twice and had 29 men complete the full curriculum. The one individual who had to leave the course because of disciplinary issues sought out Connections to Success once he was released and completed the curriculum voluntarily. Of the 26 graduates who've been released from prison, 20 are earning an average wage over \$12 per hour.

After inmates saw how successful the first group was, over 70 men were eager to volunteer for a future class. "The warden told us he is seeing a new calmness in the prison because of people wanting to get into the class," Lambert said.

The men who graduate have a new approach to their lives, new skills, and new opportunities. They leave the facility wearing the suit the program provided along with a plan to be better. Connections to Success is still changing lives, one garment at a time.

For more information about Connections to Success, contact the staff at info@connectionstosuccess.org.