

## UTEC re-entry grant to give troubled kids a second chance

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LOWELL — Jamel Bonilla was just 17 when he faced three felony charges. After dabbling in drugs, getting involved in gang activity and being incarcerated, Bonilla finally decided to go to UTEC. The mother of his daughter also went to UTEC, which helped her earn her GED.

"I fight for a better future for her," Bonilla said of his daughter. "I don't want her to fall in that path."

UTEC is looking to serve more people like Bonilla with a new grant the organization has received to help provide employment opportunities to those previously incarcerated.

Ronald Walker, state secretary of Labor and Workforce Development, spoke about the grant program at UTEC Monday. Walker chaired the Task Force on Economic Opportunity for Populations Facing Chronically High Rates of employment, where the Re-Entry Workforce Development Demonstration Program originated.

"We have a program here at UTEC that's proven itself," Walker said. "Proven it most importantly to the folks in the street, in the neigh-



UTEC Executive Director Gregg Croteau, left, presents an engraved piece of slate to Labor and Workforce Development Secretary Ronald Walker at UTEC Monday. The "Secretary Ron Walker Thanks for helping provide a clean slate for so many." The secretary was delivering a grant to help UTEC members' re-entry into society after incarceration. **Watch video at [lowellsun.com](http://lowellsun.com).**

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borhoods, in the communities and to business, that this model works — wrap around services, one-on-one direct contact with individuals, partnering with businesses, partnering with government.

"Everyone needs those services. With this partic-

ular population, the success speaks for itself."

The total grant is worth \$250,000 and UTEC will be receiving \$118,000 of that money to support its pre- and post-release work. Agencies elsewhere in the state received the balance.

Andrea Leverentz, a sociology professor at UMass Boston, evaluated the re-entry program.

"In order for a workforce development program to be successful, it needs to also be aware of other issues that are happening in people's lives

and help to address those issues," said Leverentz, who attended Monday's ceremony. "Another benefit of wrap around services is that they can begin early before people are released from prison to help sort of lay the framework and get some of the

issues and relationship building underway before people are released."

This is just a pilot program and UTEC Executive Director Gregg Croteau said he is hoping the program will continue in the future.

"This grant provides young people to have their next step as a clean slate," Croteau said.

Others officials present at the event included City Councilor Corey Belanger, state Reps. Tom Golden and Rady Mom, and representatives from the Middlesex and Essex Sheriff's Departments.

On behalf of UTEC, Croteau presented two gifts to Walker, who will be leaving his role as secretary at the end of the month, as tokens of appreciation for his support: a UTEC hoodie featuring the number 33 to pay homage to his football background, as well as an engraved piece of slate for his desk which read: "Secretary Ron Walker Thanks for helping provide a clean slate for so many."

"There's nothing more important than to sit here and hear how this model assists them and how this model will help them," Walker said of the event. "It makes it all worthwhile."