



A services fair where CSOSA and its partners explained various training and education programs.

The Struggle for Employment

A new push to convince DC businesses to hire ex-offenders

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY ALICE OLLSTEIN

Study after study shows that stable employment drastically reduces recidivism, yet barely 50 percent of those on parole or probation in DC have found work. With housing prices climbing and jobs and training scarce, ex-offenders in DC face an uphill battle to re-enter society and support their families.

“How do you begin to rebuild when you don’t have options for employment?” asked Our Place DC director Ashley McSwain, who runs a center for female ex-offenders. “All the opportunities in DC are rooted in having education and access to resources, and it’s creating a sense of hopelessness with our clients. They are disenfranchised; they are not part of all this growth.”

D.C.’s Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) hopes to tackle the problem head on. Their VOTEE program (Vocational Opportunities, Training, Education and Employment) offers assistance in everything from achieving basic lit-

eracy and English fluency to resume writing and interview skills. CSOSA also runs a faith-based mentorship program to support ex-offenders seeking work.

Lafayette Davis says the VOTEE program helped him find stable work in construction. “I had been incarcerated basically my whole life,” he said. “But this was the first time I came home and found a program that could actually help transfer me into real life. [Through VOTEE] I got my GED and good training, but they also talked to me about responsibility, life skills, and how to keep a job. Nobody had ever talked to me about that before.”

Davis’ story shows the program’s effectiveness, but the majority of the thousands under CSOSA’s supervision have not been as fortunate. Even when ex-offenders are fully trained, tested and ready to work, the job offers are not exactly pouring in. CSOSA Public Affairs Specialist Leonard Sipes is trying to find out why.

“We are having conversations

with local employers, and asking them to be brutally honest with us about whether they would hire people under our supervision,” he explained.

Some businesses described bad experiences in the past with ex-offender employees, but many, said Sipes, simply do not want to touch the issue. “Because of the high liability, and the perception within the community, most companies are reluctant to even talk about hiring ex-offenders,” said Sipes. “Their criminal history serves as a major impediment in the minds of some employers.”

To counteract this, CSOSA recently launched a campaign to reach out to government, non-profit, and private employers in D.C.—to convince them that hiring an ex-offender can benefit the individual, the company, and the greater community.

Roadblocks and Stumbling Blocks

D.C.’s job market has been touted as the best in the country, but for those with criminal backgrounds, the outlook is fairly grim.

“There are multiple barriers for ex-offenders, including prejudice,” said City Councilman Phil Mendelson, who chairs the Judiciary Committee. “As a felon, they’re barred from public housing. They can’t find a job, and it’s hard to survive without an income. Basically, as a society, we do a lousy job helping ex-offenders rehabilitate.”

CSOSA Employment Specialist Tony Lewis agrees: “Even if our clients didn’t have a criminal history, they would still struggle to find employment,” he said. “They dropped out of high school, they have mental health and addiction issues, they have few skills and resources. When you add a crime on their record, it becomes nearly impossible for them to find a job.”

CSOSA runs programs to address many of these factors, understanding that an individual is not employable if they struggle with issues such as anger management, substance abuse, or homelessness.

“Nothing is looked at in isolation,” said Sipes. “Everyone coming into the criminal justice system has problems, and unless we help them stabilize, he or she is not going to

make the best employee.”

Davis agrees, saying that a lot of ex-offenders he knows have “messed up” employment opportunities due to the destabilizing forces in their lives. “They came out of jail and they made mistakes,” he said. “They had so many problems they couldn’t focus on working.”

But many, said Davis, “want to work, want to eat, and want to live,” but still have difficulty finding a willing employer.

Sipes expressed frustration with employers who refuse to give ex-offenders a chance. “We’re not asking anyone to hire someone fresh out of prison, untested and untrusted,” he said. “We’re offering the low hanging fruit—people who are clean and skilled and obviously ready for work. It’s a bit of a tragedy when a bricklayer can’t find a job as a bricklayer, just because he has a criminal record. We need to break down those stereotypes.”

Kenneth Glover, an ex-offender who now employs ex-offenders, believes finding work depends 50 percent on the economy and 50 percent on personal drive. “I found a job the first day I got out of the halfway house,” he said. “I was determined. I was motivated. Yes, the job market is really bad right now, but we ex-offenders also make it hard for ourselves half the time.”

A Personal Connection

Though most ex-offenders in DC find work with the city government or a non-profit organization, a few private sector businesses have stepped forward and partnered with CSOSA.

Glover works in the Human Resources department of Miller and Long Construction. As an ex-offender himself, who served six years in prison, Glover knows firsthand both the difficulties and importance of finding a steady job. While most employers wait for CSOSA to select the most skilled and trustworthy people for them, Glover goes directly to halfway houses to recruit workers.

“I want them to be as successful as myself—not just in our company, but in general,” he said. “Just because they’re ex offenders doesn’t mean they can’t be productive. And if a guy



A GED class in the VOTEE job readiness program.

is working, he's less likely to be committing crimes."

Glover plans to start a support group for all of his ex-offender employees in the coming months, where he can serve as both a mentor and a role model. "I want to give them a place to vent their feelings. Most guys have low self-esteem because of the stigma of being an ex-offender," he said. "I want to tell them, 'All these doors opened for me because someone gave me a chance. Now I'm giving you a chance.' All I can do, as a HR guy, is give them an opportunity to make their lives better."

In addition to reaching out to employers, CSOSA partners with DC's faith community to find mentors for the men and women under their supervision. These mentors offer everything from practical job-hunting advice to a sympathetic ear.

Nathaniel Garvin was released from prison in December of 2009, and was paired with Metropolitan AME church administrator Anthony Hawkins through the mentorship program. With Hawkins' support and guidance, Garvin found stable employment working at a local Giant supermarket. He hopes to one day go back to school for photography—his passion. After a year of working with Hawkins, Garvin received one of the "Mentee of the Year" awards at CSOSA's Citywide Reentry Assembly.

"Nathaniel came a long way," said Hawkins. "He's a young man with dreams, and my job is to help him achieve them, and to not give up faith. Whenever he needs me,

I'm available."

Looking Forward

DC's City Council recently passed legislation making it illegal to ask for criminal history on a job application for city government jobs—a step that Mendelson says is "too controversial" for the private sector. This will certainly curb discrimination against ex-offenders, but with deep budget cuts on the horizon, CSOSA knows it needs to look beyond the local government. Sipes is hopeful that the new partnerships forged through the agency's "frank and honest conversations" with the business community will bear fruit. In his opinion, companies have every reason to want to work with CSOSA.

"Of the 16,000 ex-offenders under our supervision, there are literally thousands with marketable skills, who are years away from their last crime and last positive drug test," he said. "They're abiding by the rules and would make perfectly good employees. There's little risk in hiring them."

As an added incentive, the government offers federal tax credits for companies that hire ex-offenders. Still, all these positive factors often cannot outweigh both the stigma of a criminal record and the reality of an unemployment rate just over 10 percent in the District.

Sipes feels the urgency of the situation: "If we're ever going to come to grips with the situation and reduce the cost to society of crime and recidivism, these individuals need employment," he said. ●

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