

**Transcript of Interview of Tony Lewis, CSOSA
By Guy Lambert, 95.5 WPGC, Community Focus
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GUY: And we're back. You're listening to Community Focus right here on 95.5 PGC. Hey, thanks to Justine Love for sitting in for me during the first half of the show. And now the show must go on.

GUY: Well, I want to tell you about the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. It was certified on August 4th, 2000, as an independent agency in the Executive branch of the Federal government. The mission of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, better known as CSOSA, is to increase public safety, prevent crime, and support the fair administration of justice in close collaboration with the community.

GUY: Here to tell us all about it is Mr. Tony Lewis. Mr. Lewis is a job developer and a vocational development specialist. He's here to join us this morning and talk about the good things they have in store. Mr. Lewis, truly a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for coming on the show this morning. I got to tell you, I'm truly excited that you are here this morning. Of course, we're talking about something that's rather unique, but not unique. We're talking about ex-offenders. First and foremost you heard me touch on what the program is all about or what you guys are all about, but folks hearing about you for the first time on the radio, could you elaborate by chance?

TONY: The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency is basically a Federal agency with a local mission which is very unique. That local mission is the community supervision of approximately 15,000 offenders on parole or probation in and around the District of Columbia.

GUY: Wow. Yeah, so and just like every other major organization and/or company, I take it that you all have probably been hit pretty hard by the recession. How has it affected you?

TONY: Absolutely. Part of our mission is to increase public safety and to reduce recidivism and we have linked employment as one of the key tools to doing ... accomplishing that mission. And so with the current recession and economic climate being what it is, it has been extremely hard for a lot of the offenders that is under CSOSA supervision to identify gainful employment. Prior to the recession this same issue persisted, but this current state of the economy has sort of exacerbated that issue. So it's been extremely, extremely hard to link the ex-offender population with viable and gainful employment opportunities.

GUY: Yeah, correct me if I'm wrong, but the last time I checked the unemployment rate hovered around 10 percent. That's astronomical...

TONY: Well...

GUY: ...and I can only imagine...I take it it's higher in D.C., huh?

TONY: Oh, yeah, it's 11.4 percent...

GUY: Wow.

TONY: ...in the District of Columbia and I won't elaborate on the stat or take a guess about the stat amongst the ex-offender population...

GUY: Yeah.

TONY: ...but it's probably three times what the average unemployment rate is in the District of Columbia for the ex-offender population. You see, in Ward 8 the unemployment rate is 28.3 percent, in Ward 7 the unemployment rate is hovering around 20 percent and there is a large proportion of the ex-offender population in D.C. that resides in those wards.

GUY: Yeah, well, after you just touched on that, I guess it's fair to say that, or we can assume that most employers will think twice probably about hiring an ex-offender before they do, let's say, someone who hasn't committed a crime.

TONY: Absolutely. And for certain offenses, to me, it makes a lot of sense for an employer to do that. But what we want to insure the employers is that there is a really untapped into resource within the ex-offender community. There are highly skilled and educated ex-offenders, there are people who have paid their debt to society and that are ready to go into the workforce and make an impact. And what we've seen is a lot of times the people that's under our supervision are so determined and so focused and they want to change their lives and they're ready to do something different that they actually work harder than somebody who has not committed an offense. But a lot of times, in terms a lot of the precautions or, you know, with the business community being a little reluctant to deal with this population, that's when we come in. For offenders that's under the community supervision we do assessments. They're under supervision, meaning that they have a community supervision officer that's hands on and that can take out some of the precautions or...or any of those things that an employer may feel like they don't want to deal with the ex-offender. All we're asking for is a fair chance. If a person meets your criteria, I think they should be given an opportunity. Because, you know, if you hire somebody off the street or just a normal person, "normal person," you don't know how that person is going to respond just like you don't know how an ex-offender is going to respond.

GUY: Right, right.

TONY: And I think those generalizations and stereotypes about ex-offenders is what causes a lot of people to not be hired.

GUY: You made a statement saying that a lot of the ex-offenders are somewhat determined. I would add probably optimistic as well. But do you find that that optimism

begins to fade as they go to job interview after job interview after job interview and are turned away?

TONY: Absolutely. But that's part of the reason our agency has created the VOTEE unit, which is the unit that I'm representing, the Vocational Opportunities Training, Education and Employment unit. And we do pre-employment training. We talk about patience and interviewing techniques and we kind of try to...we put a focus on getting people ready to go to work prior to referring them to employment opportunities. And we...patience is one of the key things that we talk about because we know that it's not just going to be you're going to go and apply for a job and get the job the next day. That's not how it works for anyone, in particular the ex-offender population. People do get discouraged. And that's part of the reason that our expert staff steps in and...and kind of counsels and coaches people through what I would say is borderline depression...

GUY: Yeah.

TONY: A lot of times with a lot of this population because some of them never have pursued employment and so they don't understand the job market and how it works, but that's our job to educate them on what the job market truly entails.

GUY: Out of curiosity, how does a typical conversation unfold in regard to, let's say, keeping that ex-offender...keeping him or her happy or keeping him or her positive, keeping him or her motivated to really move on. What do you say to that person?

TONY: Well, first of all, we talk about what is it they want to do? What...what is it that they can do? And we set realistic goals.

GUY: Hmm.

TONY: And I encourage people to apply for jobs that they qualify for and, you know, kind of go for the low hanging fruit initially and talk to them about that it's a process.

GUY: Wow.

TONY: I often use a Shakespeare quote that...Shakespeare said that shame were those that have no patience, for what wound do you know healed without degrees?

GUY: Hmm.

TONY: And know that...that there's stages to everything. And so normally after those types of conversations people seem to, you know, kind of be more optimistic, understanding that, you know, well, it's not going to happen overnight, but at the end of the day I cannot resort back to the things that I used to do. And that's the thing that we try to drill through and make clear that the criminal lifestyle thing, committing crimes, that's no longer an option. Employment is the way that you survive. Employment is the way that you take care of your family and employment is the way that you stay out here with your family and freedom. So after having those types of discussions people tend to kind of, you know, reassess their negative thoughts and start to refocus on, you know, continuing their fight to find employment.

GUY: You sited Shakespeare, I'm going to site the street dude and that is, yo, man, just get your foot in the door, homie.

TONY: Yeah. And, but you know, interesting enough, that's...that's kind of why I'm here to encourage the business community to let people get their foot in the door, but not people that's not ready. And...and a lot of times I think people in my position have often tried to palliate the severity of what the...the offender population has done and also, in my mind, asked for handouts. And that's not what CSOSA is about. We're not asking for handouts. We're asking the business community to partner with us to make their businesses better with us referring people that are ready and people that can actually make an impact.

GUY: Folks, if you're just joining us, you're listening to Community Focus right here on 95.5 PGC. I'm your host, News Affairs Director Guy Lambert, pleased to say once again that I'm joined during this segment by Mr. Tony Lewis. Mr. Lewis is a job developer and a vocational develop specialist, or I should say, development specialist. He's also a part of the organization known as CSOSA, which stands for the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, and he's kind enough to share with us all the good they have going on.

GUY: What do you think is the primary reason most businesses really don't reach out to this population? We're talking about the ex-offender population.

TONY: Unfortunately, I would say that it's really generalizations and stereotypes. I think businesses in the past have had a bad experience with maybe one or two persons that fit...or fell into the ex-offender category. From that there...there is the stereotype that all ex-offenders act the same.

GUY: Hmm.

TONY: Unfortunately, in...in our society as a whole people often stereotype, whether it be you being a woman or African American or a homosexual, anything. People tend to take an experience with one person from a particular culture or subculture and make a blanket statement...

GUY: Right.

TONY: ...make blanket judgments about that entire population. And I think that's the primary reason why people or businesses don't reach out and I think businesses see ex-offenders as a liability. And I think that's where CSOSA comes in again to be able to take away that. We can assure businesses that we will support not only the offender, but we will support the business from a safety standpoint. And also businesses are able to be...the offender is able to be federally bonded, the businesses can receive a tax credit

when dealing with people from this population. So there are also benefits to dealing with the ex-offender population.

GUY: An ex-offender that's listening to this program right now, he or she may be down and out on their luck, want to get a job. What should he or she do immediately?

TONY: First of all, an ex-offender should assess what it is that they truly want to do and pursue any form of education or training opportunities. The beauty of being an ex-offender or returning citizen in the District of Columbia that there are many programs, non-profit and government programs set up to address this population. And I would say, please, if you don't have a G.E.D., acquire your G.E.D. There's tons of free programs. Education is essential to employment, especially in the job market in the District of Columbia. I would say network. O.K.? And...and it's the little things. When you go on job interviews or you go in stores pursuing employment, smile, be articulate.

GUY: Dress the part probably as well.

TONY: Dress appropriately. O.K.? And for the record, you know, is Goodwill and Salvation Army. You can go to a lot of places and get a pair of slacks and...and a collared shirt and a tie. These are the things that a lot of people aren't aware of that make a difference. These are the little nuances that...especially when you're coming from an ex-offender background, you have to present yourself as...in the most conservative fashion as possible. And so sometimes we think it's about being an ex-offender when it's not. We didn't speak. We didn't say good morning. We didn't shake hands or we, instead of shaking a hand, we gave a pound.

GUY: Right.

TONY: Those are the differences. And also, Guy, if I may, a lot of our population, they're not computer savvy.

GUY: Hmm. Thus the digital divide as they call it.

TONY: The digital divide amongst the ex-offender population is so vital and you see it. It's because 90 percent of employment is found via the internet. So if we're saying you have to apply online and the person doesn't know what that means or he has to wait for his girlfriend or his sister or his child to get home to do that for him, he or she, and that's where a lot of the problem also comes in.

GUY: Hmm.

TONY: So take free computer classes. Places like Martin Luther King Library, Catholic Charities, offer free computer classes where you can learn how to apply online and get an email address.

GUY: Alright. Sounds real good, man. I'm so glad you came on the show this morning to talk about it. Folks looking for more information, let's say they are an ex-offender or maybe an employer is listening and saying, "You know what? I'm going to give that person a second chance." How can they go about to get into contact with you?

TONY: O.K. My number is 202-442-1056.* You can reach me via email at Tony.Lewis@csosa.gov.

GUY: Alright. And that telephone number one more time.

TONY: 202-442-1056*

GUY: Alright. Mr. Tony Lewis, once again, job developer and a vocational development specialist with the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. Truly a pleasure to meet you, sir. Thank you so much for coming on the show this morning.

TONY: Thanks for having me, Guy. I really appreciate it.

GUY: Alright, folks. That will just about wrap up another edition of Community Focus. I'd like to say thanks to all of my guests this morning, also thanks to Justine Love for filling in for me for the first half of the show and thank you for listening. God willing, we'll do this again next week. Until then, I'm Guy Lambert. Make it a great day. You're listening to 95.5 PGC.

***Note:** Tony Lewis' telephone number has changed since this interview aired. His current telephone numbers are: (202) 442-1886 (Office) and (202) 369-0775 (Cell).