

Sunshine for Ex-Cons Looking to Work

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A Republican governor concerned about jobs for ex-cons?
Did a renegade reporter plant this story to make Jeb Bush
look soft on crime?

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On the contrary, the challenge of getting former prisoners reestablished in the community is engaging both conservative and liberal politicians. The latest example is Governor Bush's executive order mandating a top-to-bottom review of ex-offender restrictions and disqualifications for jobs in all state agencies. And Governor Bush gave his staff 60 days -- a nanosecond by bureaucratic standards -- to comply.

In Florida and most other states, large numbers of men and women are finishing their sentences and returning home to their families and communities. In fiscal 2004-05, Florida released about 31,000 adults from prison. Nationwide, about 650,000 prisoners -- almost 1,800 each day -- were released in 2004.

Unfortunately, most will be sent back to prison: across the country, about half are reincarcerated within three years.

Life after prison is hard. Obstacles include finding housing, securing health care, reestablishing family relationships and, of course, getting a job. Not surprisingly, most former prisoners have little work experience and few work skills. Many never finished high school. These deficits, coupled with a criminal record (even for a nonviolent offense), make ex-prisoners unattractive job candidates to most employers.

Over the years, many states have prohibited felons from employment in health care, financial services, transportation, and other fields. Governor Bush's executive order addresses the concern that Florida statutes and policies unduly inhibit employment opportunities for former prisoners.

The simple fiscal reality is that finding work for ex-cons can prevent crime and save states a bundle. Although estimates vary widely by state, incarcerating a person for one year costs about \$25,000, or about \$56,000 for the average term of 27 months. Employment, on the other hand, integrates former prisoners into mainstream society, provides personal and family stability, boosts self-worth, and -- most important from a state fiscal perspective -- reduces spending and adds to state revenues.

Republican and Democratic governors in Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, and Connecticut already realize that helping former prisoners get a stable job and access to other services (such as drug treatment) can reduce correctional costs. Somewhat more expensive upfront, these approaches cost much less in the long run than standard incarceration. The money saved -- from fewer new crimes, victims, arrests, prosecutions, and incarcerations -- can fund education, health care, transportation, and other state needs.

Prisoners themselves understand that work is the key to their future success. Urban Institute research shows that over 80 percent of prisoners interviewed one month before release say that a job trumps all other ways of staying out of prison. But getting a job is only half the battle. According to a Council of State Governments report, a thorough assessment of skills and job aptitude, an individual job plan, job training or skill development, and a job coach for up to a year are all needed to ensure that a former prisoner lands and keeps a job. Moreover, programs to give prisoners real work experience before they are released can jumpstart the journey from prisoner to successful wage-earner and community member.

The governor's landmark executive order follows a yearlong task force study of ways to simplify prisoner reentry and reduce recidivism. The forthcoming review of state jobs that are now off limits will likely point to many positions that could safely be open to former prisoners whose convictions are unrelated to the job requirements. Other jobs, because of public safety and other concerns, may stay closed to ex-cons. For instance, a former check forger might qualify for a job in the park service but not the records and deeds department.

A National Council on Crime and Delinquency survey found that the vast majority of likely voters feel that a lack of job training seriously handicaps former prisoners. Over three-quarters of respondents are willing to see federal dollars used to support reentry programs. The Second Chance Act, now under consideration in Congress, would provide some of that.

The stars may at last be aligning for ex-prisoners. The public supports job training and other pre-release services, former prisoners want to work, and politicians on both sides of the aisle are starting to see reentry programs' social and cost-saving benefits. Now other states and the federal government need to follow Florida's lead in identifying and removing the obstacles former prisoners face when they return home.

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