

Out of Prison, Out of Work

■Ex-Offenders Get Out Of Jail And Return To Work... Ideally, At Least

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By Ryan Kearney

Anyone Caught Taking Food or Drinks That Do Not Belong to Them Will Be Fired. So reads a note taped to the refrigerator in the break room at Canton Racing Products' North Branford plant.

On the surface, the sign doesn't speak well for the notion of tolerance at Canton, but when the company bills itself as an equal-opportunity employer, it means it. Since the beginning of the year, Canton, which makes parts for racing cars, has hired five ex-offenders to work on the factory floor. That's no small figure for a company with just 37 total employees.

Four of the men are sitting in the break room, mopping their brows. Some have been out of prison for years. Sherman Edwards, meanwhile, was released only in February after serving more than 14 years for manslaughter. He's been staying at a halfway house in New Haven, but says, "They don't have any way of finding you a job."

Fortunately, a relative told him about Workforce Alliance Greater New Haven, a state-funded job center on Ella T. Grasso Boulevard, which helped Edwards land a manufacturing gig at Canton.

"If it wasn't for that," says Edwards, 41, "I'd probably still be out there, confused."

Edward's one of the lucky ones. Most ex-offenders *are* still out there, confused. Many have no job skills and a minimal education, and those without a support system—a family willing to take them in, for instance—often fall back on old habits, if only to survive.

Those old habits lead to two places: back to prison, or to an early death.

On a snowy day two winters ago, a man in his thirties showed up at Freeman Holloway's office in tears. The shivering stranger, wearing a thin jacket and sneakers without socks, had been let out of prison that day and had nowhere to go.

Holloway, the transition services coordinator at Workforce Alliance, dressed the man in some donated winter clothing, "and then," he recalls, "I took him in my car and took him to Kentucky Fried Chicken."

It's not an uncommon story. "A lot of time," says Holloway, "even if you live in Waterbury, they drop you off on Whalley Avenue" (where this particular man was dropped) "or they drop you off [at the homeless shelter] on Grand Avenue and you have to find your way."

Holloway's small office is more a glorified cubicle, equipped with a door and high walls. It's sparsely decorated, an inspirational message here and there—a modest space for a man with

a monumental task: finding jobs for the thousands of ex-offenders in Greater New Haven, a number that grows by the hundreds every year. A Sisyphean task, he knows.

“I get loads of letters,” he says. “I get so many calls a month from people who just got out.”

Some days Holloway, a familiar face in the prison system, gets as many as 80 calls. He responds to every one, because if he doesn't help them, who will? Workforce Alliance's ex-offender program is one of the largest in the area (other notables being Strive/New Haven and Project MORE) and yet, it's run single-handedly by Holloway. Just in the last year, some 1,000 ex-offenders came to see him. Of those, more than half attended an information session and a minimum of two workshops, while 135 found full-time employment.

That's a drop in the bucket. Since the beginning of last year, the state has released 869 prisoners who gave New Haven as their last address, a statistic that doesn't include prisoners from surrounding towns. While some ex-offenders settle in other communities after their release, no doubt as many—and probably more—come to New Haven for social services, the promise of work or other reasons.

Now consider the 4,347 prisoners from New Haven released from 2000–04, and the countless others the decade before. Where are they now?

The answer: Some have found work, legitimate or otherwise. Many are back in prison. And a good number end up in the care of people like Wesley Thorpe.

Thorpe runs the Emergency Shelter Management Services (formerly the Immanuel Baptist Shelter) on Grand Avenue, a 75-bed facility for homeless men. Like the homeless population in general, many of his clients are ex-offenders who never landed on their feet after being released. In the past fiscal year, “prison release” was the third most-common reason his clients gave for being homeless, behind “lost job” and “drug/alcohol use.”

Thorpe, like Holloway, only has so much to work with. The shelter serves more than a thousand men each year, but with a budget in the area of \$700,000—most of it from the city—Thorpe can only afford a part-time job coordinator.

The coordinator's efforts, meanwhile, are hampered by a city-imposed limit on the length of stay: a maximum of 90 days (and only after being out of the shelter for another 90 days may the client return), which allows the coordinator little time to build trust with her clients and then find them work. Of the 194 men she served last fiscal year, only 41 found a job (another four started their own businesses, all in the building trades).

“It's real hard to take them out and find a job,” says Thorpe. “If he has a record, it's real hard to place him. In order to move out of this shelter, you need money.” So either the men keep coming back or, he says, “they fall into the same old rut, they end up back in prison.”

The state Department of Correction does have optional programs to help inmates prepare for

reentry, including adult education, substance-abuse treatment, counseling and career fairs. Some parolees, meanwhile, are transitioned via halfway houses.

Once you're out of the system, though, you're on your own. Ex-offenders are required to check in with their probation or parole officers, but with hundreds of cases on their desks, the officers aren't likely to be of much assistance—or to be lenient with anyone who misses an appointment: Many ex-offenders return to prison not for committing a new crime, but for violating a condition of their probation or parole.

Small wonder, then, that Connecticut's prisons are revolving doors: A state study this year of more than 8,000 ex-offenders since 2000 found that 39 percent of them were reconvicted.

The recidivism rate is appalling but not baffling. Criminal justice experts and caseworkers alike know exactly what ex-offenders need to lead productive lives. It's Holloway's mantra—a simplistic and not universally true mantra, but one supported by studies: People with jobs don't go back to jail.

Connecticut statute 46a-79 recognizes this fact, and continues, "It is therefore the policy of this state to encourage all employers to give favorable consideration to providing jobs to qualified individuals, including those who may have criminal conviction records."

There are times when an ex-offender isn't qualified for the job, or someone else is more qualified, but the stigma is very real. Ex-offenders frequently lose out to equal or lesser candidates who don't have a record.

"People think the worst of you," says Michael Crocker, 40, who got out of prison in 2003 after serving 13 years, and who now works for Canton. "They think you're going to cause all kinds of trouble. That's not the case. All we need is a chance."

The stigma doesn't discriminate, either. You could be a former drug dealer, or you could be Marilyn Hernandez, 35, who spent a month in jail in 1998 for failing to appear in court on a misdemeanor charge. After that, she says, "Every time I put down that I was an ex-convict, they didn't hire me."

She scraped by on odd jobs. Sometimes. She also spent two years on the streets. In April, she went to see Holloway—and came back every day for the next two months, without success. She tried other agencies, too, even biking as far as Milford.

Still, nothing.

Sitting in a conference room at Workforce Alliance last week, Hernandez recalls coming into the building in tears a month ago, ready to give up.

"I said, 'This is it,'" she recalls. Holloway convinced her to stick with it. "The next day," she says, "I got a job."

Hernandez rubs her blue-specked white pants with pride. "I'm painting the Yale Bowl," she says, beaming.

You've never seen a bigger smile in your life. •

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