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Second Chances: Integrating ex-offenders into the workplace

By Angela Carter, Register Staff



After five years in prison, the state Department of Correction dropped Shelton Tucker off in New Haven near the Exit 3 ramp to Interstate 91. That was in 1996.

“They said ‘good-bye’ and left. They drop you off near the highway or a jail,” said Tucker, 32, who was convicted for assault with a firearm and later violated a condition of parole.

It has taken nearly 12 years for Tucker to hit a stride with steady work, earning decent pay.

“I can’t describe how difficult it is,” he said. “I didn’t want to go back to jail. I would take a job sweeping the ground not to be on the street and to have money in my pocket.”

The turning point was when he enrolled in New Haven’s Construction Workforce Initiative, a program administered by the city’s Commission on

Equal Opportunities that offers hands-on training in the construction trades.

Tucker trained as a glazier and is in the fourth year of an apprenticeship. He has worked on construction sites for city schools including Troup Magnet Academy of Sciences and Co-op Arts & Humanities High School.

He currently sets glass in window frames for the new MGM Grand hotel set to open in May at Foxwoods Resort Casino. “Those who are lucky have a support system. But then, you’ve got to make something happen. First, you have to be given a chance. Then, you have to be determined,” he said.

Tucker’s struggles are shared by thousands.

New Haven officials estimate that 25 people per week return to the city from prisons. Mayor John DeStefano Jr. this year is seeking \$3 million in state funds and \$8 million in federal dollars to connect with inmates before they are released and provide support services as they re-enter society.

DeStefano on Feb. 28 will attend “The Mayors Summit on Reentry and Employment,” in New York, a day-long event hosted by the nonprofit Public/Private Ventures, the New York University Wagner School of Public Service, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

William Villano, executive director of Workforce Alliance, an organization that runs prisoner re-entry and other programs, said ex-offenders will become a substantial labor pool as Connecticut’s workforce ages and young people continue to leave the state in search of jobs and more affordable housing.

Ex-offenders most commonly are linked with jobs in manufacturing, warehousing and stock work, construction, lawn and tree maintenance and trades apprenticeships.

“They’ve paid their debt to society and should be given a chance,” Villano said. “Not only do people come out with the

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stigma of being an ex-offender, they come out with lower education levels, not a lot of skills and training and not a lot of connections with the workforce.”

Freeman Holloway, who coordinates re-entry services for Workforce Alliance, said having a plan before release and family support are critical to becoming successful on the outside. “Jobs and having an income is the key to cutting down crime and recidivism. They can do right, but they have to have the means,” he said.

Employers and Workforce Alliance do take into consideration the nature of a person's offense when being matched with job opportunities, Holloway said.

Rich Pfeifer, general manager of Hometown Buffet in Milford, said Workforce Alliance has provided him with a steady pool of dishwashers, cooks and even supervisors during his five years running the self-service restaurant. Because applicants have a criminal past, Pfeifer said he carefully screens everyone's background and sometimes consults with their social workers. “I won't hire somebody who was involved in an armed robbery because I have a lot of cash around,” he said.

Half-way houses keep the former offenders “on a tight leash,” Pfeifer said, in terms of reporting when they arrive and leave work. He also coordinates their work schedules with public transportation routes. “You have an unlimited labor supply. These guys are dying to work,” he said.

Workforce Alliance offers bond insurance and tax credits to businesses that hire ex-offenders using U.S. Department of Labor funding.

Pfeifer said Hometown Buffet received a \$2,000 tax credit last year. “I don't do it for that reason, but it does help,” he said. “The only way they're ever going to get a job is if somebody hires them.”

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