

## Second chance: Hiring offenders can be a tough job, construction company finds

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Hiring somebody who has just come out of prison can make you more than an employer.

It can make you a ride-giver, apartment-hunter, skill-teacher, mentor.



Kevin Dougherty works at an Opportunity Builders Inc. site in Hummelstown. He has worked with the company for more than two years. The Dauphin County-based construction firm focuses on hiring ex-offenders.

Photo/David Dagan

That's because people with criminal records often have other problems: drug addictions, poor work skills and trouble with housing and transportation, to name a few.

Matt Brought knows. He leads Opportunity Builders Inc., a Susquehanna Township-based construction firm focused on hiring ex-offenders.

"Sometimes it's frustrating," he said.

Brought has turned down offers to work elsewhere, though.

"Because I like the concept of what we're trying to do," he said, "giving guys a second chance.

"As long as guys are willing to move on to the rest of their lives, we're willing to help them."

Brought said the job has taught him patience. Besides the typical problems every construction manager faces – finding building lots, managing time, paying for raw materials – Brought deals with absenteeism and a host of other personnel issues.

“Even if they show up,” he said of his crew, “some days, you don’t know who’s showing up.”

Jobs often take longer than planned, but Brought insisted that quality is not sacrificed.

“The quality is there ... the guys that we’re teaching, we’re teaching the right way,” he said. His foremen understand that quality is more important than time, he said.

All customers are told about the company’s background.

Brought helped employee Kevin Dougherty find a new place to live in Middletown in 2006.

That can be difficult for people with prison records. Dougherty, a bald man with a beard, clear blue eyes and a raspy voice, recalled how one landlord turned him down.

“He said I was a liability. It don’t feel good, you know, it don’t,” Dougherty said as he pulled out a wad of chewing tobacco.

Dougherty said he can be difficult to work with.

“I was bad when I first came here. I’d yell,” he said, taking a break from working on a house Opportunity Builders was constructing in Hummelstown.

He has since blossomed into Opportunity Builders’ most reliable employee.

“He’s more dedicated to this company than anybody I’ve ever seen,” Brought said.

Opportunity Builders is not a charity. It is the for-profit subsidiary of Firm Foundation of Pennsylvania Inc., a Harrisburg

social-services nonprofit.

Making money with a crew of all ex-offenders is not easy. The company faces high liability and worker's compensation costs, for example, because most of the workers are inexperienced.

“Our profit margin's almost non-existent,” Brought said. “We cover our payroll and our expenses – most of the time.”

Sometimes, they have to borrow money from Firm Foundation. Opportunity Builders also has private investors who are willing to wait for their returns. Still, Brought does not like to fall back on those resources.

“I don't like the idea of owing somebody money,” he said.

For the employees, Opportunity Builders is a stepping stone. Many go on to other jobs after a short time. Dougherty is an exception – he has been with the company for more than two years.

The company is also a small support network.

“It's helped me stay out of jail,” said Dougherty, a recovering heroin addict.

It's good to work around other addicts, he said. They can immediately spot a problem.

The workers help each other. They also rib each other. The joke at the Hummelstown job site was “man down.” Fall, the workers said, and you might find your wallet missing when you get back up.

Brought is a religious man who used to own a remodeling business and do his own construction work, but that ended after two degenerated discs were removed from his back. He met the Opportunity Builders team as a sales agent for a building-materials supplier, and he ended up spending lots of time at the company's job sites, helping the workers. Eventually, he was asked to join them.

Working with former prisoners is tough – but it's OK with Brought.

“They're a lot of fun,” he said.