

Second chance: Former prisoners face bumpy road into workforce

By David Dagan
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The job applications never ask, "Have you been clean for six and a half years?"

Or, "Did you take classes and learn how to cook for hundreds of people in prison?"

The applications simply ask, "Have you been convicted of a crime?"

Maurecia "Reesie" Radford always checks "yes" and adds: "Will discuss in interview."

If there is an interview.

Radford, 43, is among the growing number of people in the labor pool who have criminal backgrounds and have done prison time. The state and national prison populations have boomed since the early 1980s. That means that each year, more people have also come out of prison.

For employers, a criminal background raises obvious red flags about an applicant's trustworthiness and reliability. Many ex-offenders just re-entering the workforce also struggle with problems that make them less appealing candidates, from kicking addictions to finding transportation. But even people who are on track or whose crimes lie in the distant past do not get a fair shake at many jobs, researchers and advocates say.

Radford said not enough employers give people with criminal backgrounds a chance.

"See where we're coming from," she said. "Talk to us. Find out what we're about. Don't just look at the application and say 'no.'"

If Radford walked into your office, would you hire her?



Kicked in the teeth

Barry Bailets is not fazed by job applicants with criminal backgrounds. In fact, he welcomes referrals from parole officers.

“That’s a recommendation to me,” Bailets said. A former cop and drug-court official in York County, he is now safety and loss-control manager at Penn Waste Inc., a trash-collection firm based in East Manchester Township.

People on parole are guaranteed to be drug-free, Bailets said — a rarity in today’s workforce.

“The other advantage is that most of them have been kicked in the teeth pretty hard,” Bailets said.

They’re tough. They’re willing to work.

“What we hire (ex-offenders) for, typically, is to load trash,” Bailets said. “Not the most glamorous job in the world, but it, without a doubt, has job security.”

To many willing employers, hiring people out of prison is not purely a business decision. It’s about giving people another shot.

“I guess I just believe in giving someone a second chance,” said Carol Hammond, human-resources manager at Kegel’s Produce in Lancaster County.

Kegel’s has at least a dozen parolees or work-release inmates on its payroll. They are hired through the Lancaster County Job Court (see “Lancaster County tries Job Court experiment”).

A criminal background should not shut a person out of a job, said Daniel Burchstead, president of York Sheet Metal Inc. in Manchester Township.

“I don’t think we have the right to hold that against them,” he said.

Bailets said he sees these hiring decisions as part of a bigger picture.

“Who can be successful without a job? No such thing,” he said. “There (have) to be some employers who will take the chance and hire some of these people. It’s a societal problem, and somebody has to do it.”

Bailets declined to provide specific numbers, but he said in his three years at Penn Waste, he has hired fewer than 10 ex-offenders. About half of those people became successful employees. Bailets said the sample was too small to draw conclusions from it.

‘Can you live off of it?’

Lancaster County Judge David Workman deals with many people who are in trouble for failing to pay child support and court fines. They often tell him that their criminal records make it hard to work.

“I think they are right,” Workman said. “It’s a huge problem.”

Lancaster County officials are trying to wrap their arms around that problem with the new Job Court, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation.

Some Job Court participants have as much as \$60,000 in court-related debt.

“A minimum-wage job with a lot of these individuals just isn’t gonna cut it,” Workman said. “We’re looking to get somebody more of a permanent kind, career kind of a job.”

It’s particularly tough for ex-offenders to find relatively high-paying jobs, said Juanita Grant, founder and chief executive officer of Christian Recovery Aftercare Ministry Inc., a Harrisburg nonprofit that serves ex-offenders.

“You can find (a job), but can you live off of it?” she said.

Researchers have studied whether having a criminal record is a disadvantage in the job search.