



Regional Spotlight:
METRO Planning Region

A Second Chance for Former Offenders

Programs at Twin Cities WorkForce Centers are helping people with criminal records find and keep jobs.

Many people are struggling to get back in the workforce after losing jobs during the recession. But imagine the added difficulty of finding work for those who have criminal records. Maybe they have a gap in their work history because they were in jail, or they have no formal job training or work experience. That's the reality faced by many people in the Twin Cities and elsewhere in Minnesota.

More than 142,000 supervised offenders were in the community statewide as of July 2008, according to the Minnesota Department of Corrections.¹ Although we have limited data on the labor force participation and employment rate of former offenders, it is clear that people with felony convictions or other criminal backgrounds face significant barriers to employment.

In general, former offenders lack:

- Decision-making opportunities during incarceration

- Knowledge or observance of societal norms
- Education or work experience
- Access to job-skills training
- Positive role models when released
- Knowledge about how to find and keep a job
- Emotional support from family and friends while looking for work
- Knowledge about where they can work (because of restrictions related to their offense or parole)
- Proper documents such as a driver's license or Social Security card
- Transportation and/or child care arrangements that will enable them to look for work and stay on the job

In addition, some struggle with substance abuse or mental health problems, and others may encounter employers who are reluctant to hire former offenders.

Some industries are unwilling or unable to employ someone convicted of a particular offense. While businesses are prohibited from discriminating against former offenders, there may be business justifications — a responsibility to customer safety, for example — that prevent an otherwise qualified former offender from being hired.

Seven Minnesota statutes require employers to conduct a criminal background check prior to hiring people for jobs in education, health care, human services, child services, transportation, property management, law enforcement, gambling and currency exchange. Former offenders find few opportunities for careers in these fields or are completely excluded from them.

Programs for Former Offenders

To help former offenders find jobs, Luis Brown, a workforce development specialist at the St. Paul WorkForce Center, began

the Ex-Offender Employment Program in October 2008. The program is aimed at helping ex-offenders, as well as people with multiple legal and employment barriers, to find and retain jobs.

Participants attend a 2½-day workshop where they learn to identify and market their skills, develop job portfolios, practice interviewing skills, and learn about legal issues and resources available for ex-offenders. One-on-one case management after the workshop provides participants with positive role models and emotional support for continuing to search for work despite setbacks.

As of last spring, 21 of 40 participants in the Ex-Offender Employment Program found work at an average wage of \$14.05 per hour.

The two Minneapolis WorkForce Centers also have an employment program for former offenders.

The eight-session New Leaf Series covers issues facing former offenders and helps them explore skills, effective job hunting methods, resume writing, networking, interviewing, and budgeting and finance.

Many Twin Cities nonprofit and

community groups that offer employment training services have programs for former offenders. Check with your local Minnesota WorkForce Center for information on program availability. See www.mnwfc.org/field for a list of WorkForce Center contacts.

Two state programs are also available for employers who hire former offenders. The Minnesota Federal Bonding Service provides a fidelity bond to employers for new or current employees who may be denied coverage by a commercial carrier because of a conviction or imprisonment.

The bonding service protects employers against employee theft of money or property up to \$25,000. Additionally, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides a federal income tax credit for businesses hiring new employees in targeted groups, including ex-felons.


For more information on the Minnesota Federal Bonding Service, see www.deed.state.mn.us/bonding.

For more information on the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, see www.deed.state.mn.us/wotc.

Finally, a public safety policy

bill signed into law by Gov. Tim Pawlenty in May 2009 included two provisions that address the growing difficulty that people with criminal records have in finding employment. Minnesota public employers must wait until a job applicant is selected for a job interview before asking about the applicant's criminal record or conducting a criminal background check.

The second provision limits the admission of evidence of an employee's criminal record against an employer under certain circumstances.² With this bill, Minnesota has become the first state to adopt a "Ban the Box" law. The name of the law is a reference to job applications that contain boxes that people are asked to check if they have been convicted of felonies. Advocates of the law cite reduced discrimination and increased employment opportunities for otherwise qualified individuals as two achievements of the bill.

While employment barriers may exist for some job seekers, former offenders clearly face unique situations. Employment services, like those mentioned here, are important for helping former offenders re-enter the world of work. 

ENDNOTES:

¹ Notable Statistics Minnesota Department of Corrections, www.doc.state.mn.us/aboutdoc/stats/documents/NotableStatistics12-08.pdf.

² For a full discussion of this law, please see House File 1301 at www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/legis.asp.



A Conversation with Luis Brown

Luis Brown oversees the former offender employment workshop offered at the St. Paul WorkForce Center. Here is how he responded to some recent questions about former offenders.

What are the most significant employment barriers facing former offenders?

“The hardest barrier offenders encounter are the biases from the public and employers who think they [offenders] are just bad people who will never change.”

What is the most important piece of information or suggestion you give to former offenders about a successful job search?

“I usually tell them not to give up in their job search and to have faith, which sometimes can be depressing. To plan, take a day at a time. Be accountable and responsible for your actions. Identify your skills, do an analysis, and emphasize your transferrable skills. [They should] get a copy of their own records.”

What has most surprised you about working with former offenders?

“Offenders are human just like us, and they also have feelings. Some are very intelligent. And some are just stubborn and hard like a rock, because they do not know any better.”