

The California Workforce Development Board helps job seekers get state jobs



A job seeker is interviewed by CalTrans for a job upon release. Photo courtesy of the California Workforce Development Board, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, California Prison Industry Authority & California Department of Transportation - District 4

by Anne Stokes

A job with the State of California is nice work if you can get it: Workers get a generous retirement plan, health insurance, paid leave, on-the-job training and opportunities for advancement. Many positions are unionized and not all require a college degree. The catch is the complicated application and hiring process, which can seem like an insurmountable obstacle for those coming out of the prison system.

But there is help. Funded in part by the Prison to Employment Initiative, the California Workforce Development Board has collaborated with a multitude of state agencies to help incarcerated individuals secure a state job before their release. In 2021, the agency held a civil service workshop and hiring event at the California State Prison, Solano, which resulted in 23 conditional job offers from Caltrans.

"In an organization like Caltrans, you can promote up if you're the hardest worker. If you work for (the Department of General Services), you can start off as Maintenance Worker 1, but in no time you can be a manager," says Joe Flores, lead representative of the state workforce board for the Prison to Employment Initiative. "The state system is cumbersome to get in, but once you're in, you're in. ... that's our goal."

The Prison to Employment Initiative

Flores notes that California spends \$80,000 a year for every incarcerated individual in the state. In an effort to reduce recidivism, the \$37 million Prison to Employment Initiative was created to help formerly incarcerated people successfully return to the labor market. It provides for direct services like job training and certifications, as well as supportive services like food vouchers, transportation and clothing.

The program combines and streamlines the efforts and resources of multiple state agencies, including the state workforce board, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the California Department of Human Resources, the California Prison Industry Authority, and the California Government Operations Agency.

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Civil service workshop and hiring event

In the pilot program, 50 individuals were offered the opportunity to take the civil service tests for Caltrans' highway maintenance and landscape maintenance positions based on their expected parole dates and release in the East Bay Area. Through the prison's education center, they got help with their state applications, mock testing and practice interviewing in preparation for the hiring process.

Out of the 34 individuals who took the tests:

- 33 passed at least one exam
- 26 passed both exams
- 27 received an in-person interview
- 23 applicants received conditional offers of employment

According to Nel Sweet Davis, employability specialist and case worker of the Workforce Development Board of Solano County, connecting incarcerated job seekers with hiring agencies goes a long way in helping them rebuild their lives after being released.

“They know these employers are not looking at where they are, they’re looking at how they can help them to benefit in the future moving forward,” Davis says. “These types of job fairs give them the opportunity to talk to them and not be judged. When someone says, ‘I did have a short stint in (prison),’ everybody tenses up and it becomes an elephant in the room. You don’t get that in these types of events because these employers are coming to see you.”

Going forward

Based on the success of the workshop in Solano, Flores says more agencies and departments throughout the state are looking at implementing more Prison to Employment hiring programs.

“That’s the goal, to try to scale up what we do by adding more nonprofits and more agencies that serve second chancers in regions like Los Angeles, San Joaquin Valley, all across the state,” he says. “We created a blueprint of how it worked in Solano in a real-case scenario.”

And it’s not just job seekers that benefit from such programs: Studies have found that being employed lowers recidivism risks by 68.5% and enables formerly incarcerated people to pay back into their communities.

“They’re a tax payer, ... they’re a positive member of society, shopping at local shops, ... (and) the money they’re earning goes directly back into the community,” Flores says. “That’s how an individual who’s receiving all these services becomes a Californian at the end of the day, with a quality, unionized, represented job in any community they go home to.”

To learn more, visit <https://www.solanoemployment.org/>

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