

From incarceration to career: A workforce development partner gives a Vacaville woman a pathway to full employment



Erica Kucinkas found her dream job as a carpentry apprentice. Photo by Joel Rosenbaum

by Gail Allyn Short

After five years of incarceration, Erica Kucinkas walked out of prison in January 2021. She had her freedom, but no job.

The 36-year-old Vacaville resident had learned carpentry while in prison, but says that wherever she applied for work, employers turned her down.

"I would put in seven to 10 applications a day," she recalls. "Several people called me back, loved what they heard, loved the interview and my personality and all of that. But as soon as they did the background check, I wouldn't hear anything back from them. It was super discouraging."

She needed a job fast because the court mandated her to complete an intervention class while on parole. She would, however, have to pay for the class. But with no job, she lacked money for the class.

“So my parole officer said, ‘Well, there’s a program called CEO, and if you do their program, they might pay for your classes,’” Kucinkas recalls.

CEO, which is the Center for Employment Opportunities, is a nonprofit that provides employment services for ex-offenders, and is just one of the many community partners of the Workforce Development Board of Solano County.

“It gave me the confidence that I had lost coming out of prison and getting all those rejections. Everybody needs a shot.”

Erica Kucinkas, CEO client

Marcus Mills, director of CEO’s Solano County office, says CEO maintains a close relationship with the Workforce Development Board, which provides access to grant monies to fund programs.

“Our prison-to-employment grant was through the Workforce Development Board of Solano County, and that has allowed us to offer what we call ‘earn-to-learn services,’” Mills says. The grant funds CEO services such as job readiness training and transitional employment where clients are taught how to earn a paycheck.

For example, CEO places clients on work crews where they earn \$100 a day collecting litter on roadways for local governments.

Moreover, CEO provides job coaching, job placement and retention services, Mills says.

A CEO case manager taught Kucinkas job interviewing tips and she worked on a road crew for six weeks, eight hours a day.

“I didn’t care what I was doing,” she says. “I was going to go out there and give 110 percent.”

Then, Kucinkas’ mother encouraged her to apply for work at her employer, a company that produced spiced nuts. Following a job interview, Kucinkas got the job.

Three months later, management promoted Kucinkas, putting her in charge of a seasoning machine.

Meanwhile, she continued applying for a carpentry apprenticeship with the Northern California Carpenters Union. Soon, she landed her dream job, working as a carpentry apprentice for a construction contractor.

Kucinkas credits CEO for helping her get her life on track.

“It gave me the confidence that I had lost coming out of prison and getting all those rejections,” she says.
“Everybody needs a shot.”

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