

Solano's GEO Reentry Helps Local Man Gain Employment and New Start



Shawn Viramontes has started a new life and says, 'If you want something better, you have to do things that are better.'
Photo by Joel Rosenbaum

by Anne Stokes

Shawn Ray Viramontes admits that he's made some big mistakes. He's also the first to own up to his responsibility in getting his life back on track.

"If you make a mistake, you're required to figure it out," he says. "It's hard to swallow your pride, ... but if you have to, then that's what it requires."

From his early teens, Viramontes says he struggled with substance abuse, but didn't get into legal trouble until his 20s when his addictions landed him in prison. Like so many others coming out of the legal system, he had a hard time reintegrating back into the community, particularly finding a job.

"It would always come to the point where, 'We're going to do a background check,' and then I wouldn't hear anything back from them. ... At one point, I had 25 different applications pending at the same time," he says. "For more than half of them, I didn't even get a response back."

"Trying to survive on one income, as anyone with a family knows, it's almost impossible these days.," he adds. "Having a job and being able to cover at least half of the rent and groceries, ... having money to pay child support

and help out with my daughter; there's a lot of benefits to being able to provide (for your family). Everybody's happier."

Viramontes found help and support from **GEO Reentry Services**, which was able to refer him to an employment agency through which he found his current job. They were also able to connect him with a program that's helping him go back to school and start a new career.

Based in Fairfield, GEO Reentry Services also is a partner of the Workforce Development Board of Solano County in its efforts to connect local employers with job seekers, including those who have been justice involved.

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*Shawn Ray Viramontes
GEO Reentry Services client*

GEO Reentry Services provides evidence-based programming and community connections to reduce recidivism, enhance public safety, and ultimately change the lives of adult probationers, parolees, and pretrial defendants. At the core of GEO Reentry's treatment and training is cognitive-behavioral treatment that is intended to change criminal attitudes, enhance social skills, and encourage interpersonal problem-solving.

"The majority of incarcerated individuals are released back to their communities," said Amanda Lightfoote, the Northern California Area Manager for GEO Reentry Services. "We have chosen to be part of the solution and help those returning citizens lead a healthier, crime-free lifestyle." "We're happy to partner with agencies such as the Solano Workforce Development Board. Together we can help strengthen communities and advocate for second chances for individuals like Shawn."

While his transition back into the community hasn't been easy, Viramontes says the hard work is worth it.

"You've really got to stop feeling sorry for yourself and get busy because if you're expecting everything to fall into place, it's not going to happen. You're going to get what you put into it; if you want something better, you have to do things that are better," he says. "Otherwise, you're going to be left behind and you're going to fall back into the same trap."

Viramontes says employers open to giving workers like him a second chance can go a long way in helping people rebuild their lives and keep them from re-offending.

“There are a lot of people, really good people, who have made stupid mistakes,” he says. “That’s not really going to do anything for society as a whole if we keep this mindset that just because somebody’s made a mistake that they’re not worthy of decent employment. ... I see us as a nation that’s been founded upon opportunity and working hard. If you can find that in somebody who’s made some mistakes, who cares?”

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