

The executive director of the Workforce Development Board of Solano County discusses why hiring justice-involved workers is a win-win



With more jobs than workers, many employers are beginning to appreciate the talented and loyal participants in the Prison to Employment program.

by Anne Stokes

N&R Publications recently sat down with Heather Henry, the director of the Workforce Development Board of Solano County, who talked about the benefits to employers from participating in the Prison to Employment Initiative.

Why should employers consider hiring justice-involved workers?

Especially in a time when there are more jobs available than workers, hiring justice-involved individuals makes good economic sense. Justice-involved workers tend to be eager to learn and work and get their lives back on track. They tend to have higher retention rates, lower turnover, and tend to be more loyal to their employers.

What are some common concerns employers have when hiring formerly-incarcerated job candidates?



Heather Henry,
director of Workforce
Development Board of
Solano County

Employers often approach criminal backgrounds with an abundance of caution. Some job duties and employment sites directly relate to criminal charges and exclude individuals; however, more often than not, employers apply hiring decisions without looking at the individual charges. Many employers believe that hiring formerly incarcerated job candidates will be a liability, or create an unsafe working environment for their other employees.

What kinds of obstacles do many formerly incarcerated job seekers face?

Oftentimes their background can create obstacles such as obtaining housing, employment, or loans. In addition, significant debt can be accrued as a result of incarceration including child support arrears and required restitution payments. The unemployment rate for justice-involved individuals is consistently considerably higher than the average unemployment rate. The stigma of hiring an individual who has a criminal background keeps many from being able to take positive steps towards a new future for themselves. Unfortunately, Black and Latino men are particularly susceptible to this bias.

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Heather Henry, director of the Workforce Development Board of Solano County

What can employers do to create more inclusive hiring practices?

The first step is to ensure that employers are following state laws on ban-the-box on job applications. Take a critical look at any bias in the hiring process: Over 70% of employers conduct a background check on employees. Without a good understanding, managers' sense of caution might inadvertently turn into illegal discrimination. To avoid this, employers should consider whether a specific charge truly impacts the candidate's ability to do the job. Employers should also understand that over 50% of federal background checks contain inaccurate information. If a background check is warranted by the job, give the individual an opportunity to validate the information and consider an individual's efforts to lead a different lifestyle after incarceration.

How does hiring justice-involved workers benefit the local economy and community at large?

Joblessness is the (biggest) contributing factor to whether or not a justice-involved individual will return to incarceration. Increasing the hiring rate of justice-involved workers expands the talent pool, reduces incarceration costs, and increases public safety.

Are there any resources for employers looking to include more justice-involved workers in their workforce?

The Employment Development Department provides federal bonding to protect an employer against potential risk in hiring a justice-involved worker. In addition, hiring an individual with a criminal background may also be eligible for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit that employers can take advantage of. The local workforce entity can support employers in understanding the benefits of hiring justice-involved workers and connect employers to potential candidates.

For more information, visit <https://sonomawib.org/>

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