

“Expanding Employment Opportunities for Former Offenders”

Roundtable Discussion and Continental Breakfast with Employers

Friday, October 25, 2002

Hosted by the Woods Fund of Chicago

Convened by the Chicago Jobs Council

Purpose:

The Chicago Jobs Council organized this roundtable discussion to learn from employers who have experience hiring former offenders about what type of public programs have supported their hiring efforts, what policy change is needed in order to support former offenders in becoming productive citizens, and if they were willing to talk with other peer employers about their experiences. This discussion preceded a daylong conference organized by the Chicago Urban League in partnership with the Chicago Jobs Council and other organizations. Conference organizers intended to bring together policymakers and community groups to discuss ways to improve support for former offenders as they re-enter their communities and attempt to secure employment.

Attendance:

Four employers representing three Chicago small and mid-sized companies attended the roundtable. Additionally, other companies provided input through phone interviews.

Discussion Summary:

IN GENERAL, the employers we spoke to saw themselves as part of the communities where they reside and therefore saw hiring community residents as a responsibility. They also believed everyone should have an opportunity to earn a living. One said, “Once they are released, they are *former* offenders.” They said they cared less about the type of offense committed than they cared about the person’s attitude about working.

ON HIRING, more than one employer said having the former offender receive additional support from a community-based organization made a difference. Other important considerations cited by employers were how the former offender spent his/her time in prison, his/her honesty and follow through. None of the employers who participated did formal screening of records.

ON HAVING A FORMER OFFENDER ON THE TEAM, more than one employer said that former offenders make for the “best employees” because they tend to appreciate the opportunity that’s been given to them. One employer did describe a bad experience with a former offender,

but felt that it wouldn't prevent him from hiring another as long as all future candidates were first screened and then recommended by an intermediary workforce organization. There were mixed thoughts about whether it was incumbent on the employer to tell the rest of the company about those past offenses of employees. On one hand, there seemed to be agreement that it was not good to stigmatize the person with the criminal record. On the other hand, employers need to be careful about their own liability at the workplace. One employer said that he has asked the staff's permission and gotten their buy-in before hiring a former offender. Another said that his company was currently working with lawyers to develop a policy related to this.

ON SUPPORTIVE POLICIES, not one employer knew tax credits were available for having hired a former offender nor had they gotten a bond through the federal bonding program. Most however were familiar with the public agency funding available to support workforce initiatives. They didn't think that a Certificate of Rehabilitation, like those used in New York, would make a difference in their willingness to hire a former offender. They did however see value in providing more occupational training programs and certificates to inmates and releasees. One employer asked for our help in advocating that companies who employ former offenders be allowed to work unionized buildings downtown. Much of the downtown business is closed to nonunion companies, yet nonunion companies hire the majority of former offenders.

Next Steps:

The participating employers were all willing to talk to their employer peers or accompany CJC on a "road show" to talk about their experiences with this population. They also agreed to give feedback on a draft brochure that is currently being developed to market "hiring former offenders" to employers.