



Ex-Offenders Are Closing the Gap

By Kahryn Riley

Summary

Michigan's in-prison trade school set to expand, building bridges for offender re-entry and meeting the growing demand for technical talent.

Main text word count: 671

The Michigan Department of Corrections plans to expand its unique Vocational Village, an in-prison, skilled trades program that's had remarkable success in helping ex-offenders land jobs. That's good news for the pool of inmates who are on a waiting list for the program. But it's also good news for Michigan residents in general, as steady employment is a key factor in reducing an ex-offender's likelihood of relapsing into criminal behavior. Michigan, in fact, should do more to help inmates so that they will be able to earn an honest living after they serve their time.

The Vocational Village is a specialty housing unit and training facility located at the Hanlon Correctional Facility in Ionia. It's touted by the Corrections Department as an in-prison career and technical education program, the first of its kind. The goal is to create a place for prisoners who are serious about improving their lives. Participants must meet certain criteria, such as getting a GED, maintaining a record of good behavior and being eligible for parole in the near future. The program's 224 participants live and work together and learn in-demand job skills.

Word of the program's success is spreading. Companies that hire parolees report that they make talented, motivated employees, and these employers frequently become advocates of the program.

The department is working on creating another Vocational Village in Jackson, using some of the \$2 million that the Legislature added to its budget last year. The new facility will have new career tracks, including auto tech and robotics. The department wants to open a third village, this time at the women's prison in Ypsilanti.

The state of Michigan incarcerates over 45,000 people, and, as Gov. Snyder has pointed out, most of them will someday return to society. Unfortunately, ex-offenders in Michigan return to prison at a higher rate than those elsewhere. But there's a growing interest among policymakers and the public in slowing down the revolving door of Michigan's prisons and helping ex-offenders successfully integrate into society.

A major obstacle, though, is the fact that having a criminal history can make landing a steady job extraordinarily difficult. If employers know a potential employee has been convicted of a crime, they frequently decline to hire him — sometimes even if the offense was minor and completely unrelated to the nature of the job. And if ex-offenders lie about their past to get the job, they are inevitably fired when their employer finds out.



welder

There's nothing inherently wrong with employers behaving this way. Most are operating in competitive markets and have to be mindful of the costs and risks that come with hiring employees. Nevertheless, it makes the road back to society for ex-offenders more difficult.

But that's just one part of the challenge ex-offenders have in finding gainful employment. The other pressing concern is the state's overly burdensome and arbitrary occupational licensing laws. The state requires people to get a license to work in more than 160 occupations, including skilled construction and labor jobs that are popular among ex-offenders. Not only do these laws needlessly require a number of hours of education and training and hundreds of dollars in fees, many licenses contain good character clauses, which essentially prohibit anyone with a criminal record from obtaining the license.

Occupational licensing laws need to be thoroughly reviewed and revamped. At a minimum, they should be relaxed so that people with minor offenses are not automatically banned from becoming licensed. As it stands, Michigan is shutting out a whole class of motivated employees from the state's labor market.

As the Vocational Village program expands in the coming years, there's hope that more ex-offenders will find gainful employment after their imprisonment. But the program in its current state is just a small step in the right direction. Lawmakers need to re-examine Michigan's occupational licenses and make sure they aren't creating needless barriers to earning an honest living. There are myriad benefits from reducing Michigan's recidivism rate. Providing ex-offenders with solid employment opportunities is one of the surest ways to do that.

#####

Kahryn Riley is a policy analyst at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Mackinac Center are properly cited.

There's a growing interest among policymakers and the public in slowing down the revolving door of Michigan's prisons and helping ex-offenders successfully integrate into society.

Attention Editors and Producers

Viewpoint commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available for this Viewpoint at mackinac.org/pubs/viewpoints.

Please contact:

MICHAEL VAN BEEK

Director of Research

140 West Main Street

P.O. Box 568

Midland, Mich. 48640

Phone: 989-631-0900

Fax: 989-631-0964

VanBeek@mackinac.org

Mackinac.org

Facebook.com/MackinacCenter

Twitter.com/MackinacCenter