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Helping ex-prisoners for hire Job counselors educate former inmates on how to deal with legal, racial barriers that may prevent them from finding job opportunities

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In a storefront church in Brooklyn, a half dozen people with criminal records listened intently as another ex-offender led a workshop on their rights and employer hiring practices.

Toward the end, one of them asked if it was a waste of time pursuing a civil service job.

Glenn Martin, who served six years in prison for armed robbery and is now co-director of an organization focused on helping ex-inmates find work, offered reassurance.

"Does anybody here know somebody who works with city sanitation with a conviction record?" he asked on Monday from the pulpit area of Peterson Temple Church of God in Christ in Crown Heights.

Martin, 36, of Midwood, and several supporters - including church members, workshop organizers and representatives from other groups that work with ex-prisoners - quickly raised their hands.

"Does anybody here know somebody who works for probation with a conviction record?" More raised hands. "Does anybody here know an attorney with a criminal record?" Same thing.

"You can get into these fields," Martin said. "I'm telling you, I've seen it. I've seen it. It's more difficult but it's not impossible."

Lost out on a 'good job'

Bolade Aderogba, 19, of Crown Heights, was among those hanging on Martin's every word at the workshop.

Aderogba said afterward he was released in 2005 after spending 18 months in prison for burglary and grand larceny and is currently serving 5 years' probation.

He said he's had a couple of jobs since getting out, but believes he recently lost out on a good job as a restaurant cook once the employer learned of his criminal background.

"I thought it was good," Aderogba said of the workshop. "I got a lot of information, which I didn't know, and now I can use when I go to a place to look for a job. I didn't know it was illegal for employers to tell you they can't hire you because you were arrested."

Statistics and studies show just how difficult it is for ex-prisoners to find work.

Nearly half of those leaving prison or jail earned less than \$600 per month just before being sent there, and a criminal record hinders both their employability and earning capacity, according to the Re-Entry Policy Council, a federally funded entity based in Washington created to help state governments deal with the increasing number of ex-inmates.

Nationally, as many as 700,000 inmates will be let out of prison each year for the next decade and, in New York State, 60,000 prisoners will be released during the next three years, said **Juan Cartagena, general counsel for the Community Service Society**, an anti-poverty group in Manhattan.

Getting 'Second Chance'

The policy council supports a bill - the Second Chance Act of 2005, still stalled in Congress - that would during two years provide a total of \$80 million to state and local governments and a total of \$15 million to nonprofits, all to help former inmates successfully re-enter

communities.

"Second Chance" is the name of the two-hour workshop Martin led at the church last Monday night. About 15 attended the one he led on Aug. 1 at the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, and a third workshop is planned for Tuesday at the church.

Ife Charles, the center's deputy director and the workshop's chief organizer, said she saw a need after so many former prisoners kept walking into her facility needing a job or a place to live.

"They're looking for help," Charles said in an interview. "They're looking for someone not to pass a judgment on them, not to close the door on them because they have a felony or a misdemeanor."

Charles said she also invited nonprofit organizations that work with former prisoners to the workshop, although only a few sent anyone.

"There is plenty of goodwill out there of people who want to help," she said. "But I don't think they are fully aware of what the barriers are for ex-offenders. On our end, it's about empowering and enlightening people."

At the workshop, Martin started by sharing his own story before discussing such things, among others, as how and why to get a copy of one's rap sheet, what types of licenses former inmates are barred from seeking, and the differences between convictions, violations and infractions.

His prison stint - he was the getaway driver for a jewelry store heist in Midtown - ended in 2000. Despite earning a bachelor's degree in social science from Canisius College before his release, he couldn't find work once back in New York City.

"I faced all the barriers everybody else faced," he said. Eventually, Martin landed a job answering phones and earning \$16,000 a year at the Legal Action Center, a law and policy nonprofit based in Manhattan that fights against discrimination of people with addictions, HIV/AIDS and criminal records.

"Five promotions later," he said proudly and to applause, he's co-director of the center's National HIRE Network with ambitions of moving higher in the organization and earning a law degree.

The network exists to increase the number and quality of opportunities for people with criminal records and strives to change laws for that cause and have state and local officials enforce them.

The legal barriers are plentiful.

Among the professions that ex-prisoners cannot get licenses for are barbers, security guards, private investigators and insurance and real estate brokers, school bus drivers, embalmers, tree cutters or nursing home employees. Historically, Martin said, lawmakers believe these barriers protect the public, particularly those most vulnerable and potential colleagues, as well as property from recidivists.

Issues of race

And then, there's the issue of race, and the fact that the vast majority of ex-inmates are African American and Latino, Martin said.

He served as project director to an oft-quoted study, released in 2005 and conducted by two Princeton University sociology professors, that focused on the impact of race, ethnicity and criminal records on security entry-level positions. The study found that young black men with no criminal records fared about the same as young white men with convictions.

"Criminal record-based discrimination is just nothing but a surrogate for race-based discrimination," Martin said at the workshop. "Because think about it: You don't have to say, 'I don't hire blacks.' All you have to say is, 'I don't hire people with any sort of criminal justice involvement.'"

State law bars employers from discriminating against ex-inmates, unless there's a direct relationship between the offense and job sought, or the hiring would be an unreasonable risk to property or safety.

Patricia Gatling, commissioner of the New York City Commission on Human Rights, said in an interview that her agency would go after more employers believed to be discriminating against people with criminal records, if only more ex-prisoners filed complaints.

"They may not know that they can file here and sometimes they don't even know why they've been discriminated against," Gatling said.

Michael Rosenthal, director of Good Help, a pre-employment service for the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce which helps businesses find new employees, said his experience is that fewer employers unfairly discriminate against ex-prisoners.

"Most employers want to hire the right employee," Rosenthal said. "When they have the right person, the issue becomes less important."

Job-searching after a conviction

"Second Chance," a workshop for released offenders and organizations working with them, will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Peterson Temple Church of God in Christ, 487 Ralph Ave., between Prospect Place and Park Place, in Brooklyn. The workshop on employer hiring practices and the rights of people with criminal records will be led by Glenn Martin of the National H.I.R.E. Network, which is sponsoring the event along with the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center and the Center for Employment Opportunity.

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