Community Reintegration for Ex-Offenders?

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Community Reintegration for Ex-Offenders?

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I was recently in an Ottawa County courtroom when a man was called to appear before a judge on a charge of non-payment of six months of past-due court costs and fines. Thinking he must owe a massive amount of money, I was stunned when the judge indicated that the total amount due was $128.

The judge asked the man what the reason was for his failure to pay. “I can’t find a job,” replied the man. “Are you actively looking for a job?” asked the judge. “Yes, sir,” replied the man, “at least four days a week.” “And you can’t find anything?” asked the judge. “No, sir,” responded the man, “Every job application asks if I have ever been convicted of a crime… so what can I say? I can’t even get a job at McDonald’s.”

The man was sentenced to spend thirty days in jail. Since time spent in jail is not free, he will face an ever bigger bill owed to Ottawa County and even bleaker prospects of either finding a job or paying off his $128-plus-more bill when he is released in thirty days.

Commission of a crime can include a range of possibilities, from driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs to failure to maintain automobile insurance (or lapse in maintaining it?) to issuing bad checks, criminal mischief, violations of the communications fraud act, falsifying government records, custodial interference, furnishing or permitting minors to use tobacco or alcohol, and even violations of wildlife laws. While I don’t know what the man did to warrant his $128 in court costs and fines owed to Ottawa County, it strikes me that based on the dollar amount alone, whatever he did must have been fairly “minor,” in the larger scheme of things. Yet, how tragic it is that the seemingly paltry sum of $128 will disrupt not only his life, but that of his family… all because, while he admittedly committed some type of crime initially, he was subsequently apparently unable to find gainful employment locally.

Interestingly, encouraging “reentry initiatives at local levels” was one recommendation made by Governor Granholm’s appointed task force to tackle the problem of jail and prison overcrowding within the State. In fact, the goal of the Michigan Department of Corrections’ (MDOC) Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative (MPRI) is to implement “a seamless system of services for offenders from the time of their entry to prison through their transition, community reintegration and aftercare in their communities.” (More information can be found about MPRI at: http://www.michigan.gov/corrections/)

Indeed, it seems as though a major component of community reintegration would be finding a place to work…and live. Yet the same have-you-ever-been-convicted-of-a-crime question that appears on employment applications is also on many apartment rental agreements. If a truthful, positive response generates an automatic dismissal of the applicant from any further consideration by the prospective employer (or lessor), where can the applicant work or live?

On the other hand, employers have a duty to protect their employees from possible risk or injury if they hire individuals they know, or should have known, pose a risk to others…and can be liable for damages under the tort of negligent hiring if there are breaches in demonstrating reasonable care. A full background investigation, including a criminal record check and reference checking, may be crucial in situations where the job is safety- or security-related. (For example, a bank would not want to hire a person previously convicted of an armed robbery for a teller’s position.) Yet, for other positions in which there may be no such opportunity to do harm to others (or a nexus of liability), should the prior commission of a crime necessarily preclude the applicant from being considered for a job…or place to live?

Quite recently, Chef Jeff Henderson published a book titled, Cooked: From the Streets to the Stove, from Cocaine to Foie Gras, in which he describes his journey from cocaine addiction (and a twenty-year prison sentence) to executive chef at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. As told by Henderson, this was only made possible because a small restaurant owner took a chance on him and hired him as a dishwasher. He worked his way up from there, having garnered experience as a cook in prison kitchens. A central theme in his book is redemption.

I have been told that the Quakers (Religious Society of Friends) have an active outreach program in terms of welcoming convicted felons into their homes and communities, dating back to their eighteenth century protests over prison brutality in the colonies, which ultimately resulted in reforms in punitive laws and prison codes and a Nobel Peace Prize award in 1947. The organization continues to advocate for the rights of prisoners throughout the world.

While there could certainly be risks, the MPRI Quarterly Status Report issued in April 2007 indicated that 1,876 prisoners have been released to date as part of the MPRI ReEntry pilot program in eight Michigan counties (the only in West Michigan is Muskegon County). Of these 1,876 people, 172 (9.2 percent) have returned to prison, with a majority of these cases associated with prior parole failure. So, one might view the MPRI ReEntry pilot program, at least in its initial stages, as having a 91.8 percent “success” rate, if success can be measured in terms of reduced recidivism, which has occurred. While this is not (yet) at the six-sigma level, these appear to be good betting odds.
individual businesses may not be experiencing strong growth. Most have not borrowed money commercially, suggesting they have limited experience dealing with commercial banks, and probably no credit history. In addition, many businesses are in high risk industries, such as retail. This can make it difficult for them to obtain commercial loans for legitimate expenses such as long-term assets. Jorge González of Macatawa Bank says traditional banking practices may ignore the fast-growing Hispanic market. “There is a need for more flexible banking guidelines so we can serve these companies,” he said. “We have to educate our banks about the unique characteristics of these potential customers.” On the other hand, Hispanic businesses are not likely to use accounting, marketing, legal, and other business support services. Owners often do not look for help in these areas: they may be unaware of what is available, feel intimidated by professionals, or not know how to find the right consultant or specialist.

Frank Coronado, past president of the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, thinks more research is needed to determine how successful these businesses are, because they are important to business growth in the region. “We need to help Hispanic business owners grow their businesses more aggressively, leverage their assets, and look for expert help when they need it,” he said. Tom Almonte, City of Grand Rapids’ Supplier Diversity officer, agrees. “The City can change its policies and practices. If we know what services people use most often, we’ll work to improve them,” he remarked.

“Suppose Hispanic business owners need special help on zoning matters, but that most help is available only in English. We can then justify an effort to deliver services in Spanish.” Coronado notes, “Hispanic businesses are the foundation of the Hispanic community in West Michigan. People are learning that Hispanic business owners are significant and positive contributors to our community.”

References

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Consequently, one might ask the question, what would be the impact on the man’s life described above if just one West Michigan business that espoused humanitarian values took a chance on hiring him? For those businesses interested in exploring the possibilities of hiring ex-offenders, the Reentry Roundtable of Kent County is a local collaboration of area businesses, human services, and governmental organizations focused on job placement, retention and career development for ex-offenders. Modeled after Cascade Engineering’s Welfare-to-Career program, the group recently received a $120,000 grant from the Grand Rapids Community Foundation to provide workforce development services for 50 MPRI participants and 50 Kent County ex-offenders. Additionally, the Michigan Department of Corrections’ website offers links to an array of support resources, publications, and searching mechanisms through the Michigan Talent Bank, a collaborative endeavor between the MDOC and the Michigan Department of Career Development.