

# READY 4 WORK:

## *Business Perspectives on Ex-Offender Reentry*

*A Business, Faith, Community and Criminal Justice Partnership*



**CENTER FOR FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES**



U.S. Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20210



## Message from the Secretary



*In this brochure, you will find valuable information about the Ready4Work program, the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) prisoner reentry initiative that brings together businesses, faith-based and community organizations, and the criminal justice system to help ex-offenders transition back into their communities and local workforce.*

*In 2002, the DOL Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives conducted three roundtables with business leaders in an effort to better understand how employers view hiring ex-offenders. The Center found that businesses, for a number of reasons, are more willing to hire ex-offenders if they are part of a prisoner reentry program run by a faith-based or community organization. The resulting program, Ready4Work, is designed around building cooperative networks of businesses, faith-based and community organizations, and the criminal justice system to reduce the cycle of recidivism plaguing so many communities across America.*

*We are very proud of the work that the Department of Labor and its Center have done to empower faith-based and community organizations. I congratulate you on your interest in learning more about the Ready4Work program and how you can use that information to serve those in need in your communities. With your compassion and commitment, we can make a real difference for America.*

*-Elaine L. Chao,  
United States Secretary of Labor*

# "Analyze your needs when hiring, and look at all avenues and resources"



## 1. Positive Experiences

*"One of the ex-offenders we hired is now a store manager, and another is an assistant manager. Each has excellent management skills and both are great mentors to other ex-offenders we've hired."*

In the focus groups and interviews, those employers who had hired ex-offenders related mostly positive experiences. Often business executives stressed the point that a "good or bad employee is not a direct reflection of a past criminal record." Workplace offenses occur every day among non-offenders—there are risks when hiring anyone. Most criminal justice experts agree that employment is the key to successfully reintegrating prisoners into society.

With *Ready4Work*, ex-offenders:

- ◆ Build self-respect, which results in lifestyle changes that lead to long-term job retention and reduced recidivism
- ◆ Benefit from jobs that provide income to support themselves and their families
- ◆ Help improve community stability through gainful employment

## 2. Labor Shortages

*"Give me an employee with good basic skills, and who is serious about having a positive future, and we will train him or her to do the job."*

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, total employment is projected to increase by 21.3 million between 2002-12, adding about 600,000 more jobs than were added in the previous decade. Many employers consider it their number one challenge to identify, attract, and retain employees. To address these needs, *Ready4Work* provides the following:

- ◆ Qualified, skilled labor
- ◆ Job training and placement
- ◆ References
- ◆ Job matching and coaching
- ◆ Mentoring of job candidates
- ◆ Job skills and educational assessments
- ◆ Soft-skills development
- ◆ Support services
- ◆ Background checks/candidate screening

# What Employers Had to Say About Hiring Ex-Offenders

s for applicants to fill those needs. If you find someone with the right skill

### 3. Case-by-Case Hiring Decisions



*“There are many misconceptions out there about ex-offenders. We try to look beyond that label and consider each person on his or her merits—on a case-by-case basis.”*

When knowingly hiring an ex-offender, employers indicated that it is important for them to have as much information as possible about the individual. To consider a candidate for employment, employers want to know:

- ◆ The type of offense committed
- ◆ Whether the offense was a one-time occurrence or whether the applicant was a repeat offender
- ◆ What kind of training or rehabilitation they received in prison
- ◆ What kind of work experience they had before incarceration



*Ready4Work* ex-offender participants are screened by criminal justice officials and trained mentors to meet the following eligibility requirements. Participants must:

- ◆ Be within six months to one year of release from municipal confinement, and from federal and state facilities
- ◆ Have no record of violent or sexual crimes
- ◆ Have clear conduct for one year prior to enrollment in the program (less for misdemeanants)
- ◆ Volunteer to participate in the program
- ◆ Arrange to pay applicable fines, restitution or child support assessments
- ◆ Participate in pre- and post-release mentoring
- ◆ Be endorsed in writing by the case manager or chaplain, and a member of the referring institution's executive staff

What Employers Had to Say About Hiring Ex-Offenders

set, go for it. Don't let the label of ex-offender be an automatic 'no'."

#### 4. Faith-Based and Community Organizations as Mediating Institutions

*"We find that working with faith-based organizations gives the level of support essential for success with ex-offenders. We wouldn't have been as successful in this endeavor without their assistance."*

Employers recognize that ex-offenders need the full support of mediating institutions to help them meet their basic, practical needs. These needs are foundational for living and working, but go beyond the reach of most employers. Congregations, faith-based organizations, and grassroots groups serve as mediating institutions. They are trusted pillars of their communities and constitute a gateway to members of diverse socioeconomic groups, including disadvantaged and underserved populations. The study of participants' enthusiasm for the involvement of faith-based and community organizations to provide human and social services is based on:

- ◆ Credibility in distressed communities
- ◆ Organizational flexibility and responsiveness
- ◆ Passionate commitment and leadership
- ◆ Grassroots delivery systems

*Ready4Work*, through its national partners, mobilizes local coalitions of religious leaders, faith-based and community nonprofit organizations, along with corrections, parole and probation officials to work together for sustainable ex-prisoner reentry. *Ready4Work* partners receive mentor training, technical assistance, and skills development to help prepare faith-based and community organizations to meet the challenge of preparing ex-offenders to re-enter the marketplace.

#### 5. Hiring Incentives

*"I think that the employer would want services that benefit the ex-offender rather than benefit the employer—because if you come out with a good employee, you have benefited."*

The majority of employers were not interested in a tax credit as an incentive for hiring ex-offenders. Instead, employers considered the most appealing incentive a tax credit that can be used for the purpose of ex-offenders' skill development and training. Employers considered the development of communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills as a first priority.



## What Employers Had to Say About Hiring Ex-Offenders

## Worker shortages! Low employee retention! Lack of qualified, skilled labor!

Employers across the country identify these critical issues as motivating factors for considering hiring ex-offenders and other under-employed populations. In 2002, employers in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Illinois and Jacksonville, Florida participated in a series of six focus groups conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (CFBCI). CFBCI, in cooperation with the Center for Workforce Preparation of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, conducted personal interviews with national corporations to gauge their perception of and experience with hiring ex-offenders. That research became the basis for CFBCI's development of *Ready4Work* an ex-offender workforce development initiative. As part of President George W. Bush's faith-based and community initiative, *Ready4Work* mobilizes local coalitions to work together for sustainable ex-offender reentry, to improve outcomes for ex-offenders and the communities in which they live and to expand the American workforce.

### Employer focus group participants were

- ◆ Employers with 50 employees or less
- ◆ Pre-screened to be open to hiring ex-offenders

### Corporate interviews

- ◆ 25 executives of national corporations
- ◆ Numbers of employees range from 6 to 300,000

### Five Major Findings

- ◆ Most employers who had hired ex-offenders in the past experienced positive results with them as employees.
- ◆ Employers are motivated by skills and labor shortages when they consider hiring ex-offenders.
- ◆ Smaller businesses make hiring decisions on a local case-by-case basis, whereas larger companies make hiring decisions at a regional level.
- ◆ Most study participants favored mediating or liaison-type involvement by faith-based or community groups and would not hire ex-offenders without that close participation.
- ◆ Employers prefer a tax credit for providing soft- or hard-skills training over other types of hiring incentives.