

What We Can Do to Assist Returning Citizens

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A returning citizen, commonly referred to as an ex-offender or convicted felon, is someone who is transitioning back into society as a law abiding and productive community member. During this transition, returning citizens look to family, friends and community organizations for assistance, support and direction. The transition from a previous lifestyle will have bumps and require commitment. There are ways that we can adequately provide direction and support to returning citizens to minimize the possibility of failure.

First, stop reminding returning citizens about their criminal record and incarceration. Returning citizens will never be able to progress in life when the people who are there to help them, specifically organizations and service providers, regularly remind them that they have a criminal record and have been incarcerated. This is done by constantly asking them about their criminal status and for a prison identification number every time they enter an organization to seek services. If someone is not in prison and no longer breaking the law, why do we need to know their prison status (Are you on probation or parole?) and prison identification number every time we see that person?

Second, lead by example and practice what we preach. If you are an advocate for removing the “Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” question from an employment application then it should not be on your organization’s employment application. I was in a meeting listening to someone who was going on about how his organization was advocating for the removal of questions about a criminal background from employment applications. He presented strong arguments and spoke passionately. Later that day I was at the presenter’s organization and saw their employment application, on which asked about a criminal background on the first page. If you are advocating for removing questions about a criminal background from employment applications then it should not be on your organization’s application.

Third, dispel the belief that possession of a criminal record is the major reason why returning citizens have difficulty in obtaining employment. Possession of a criminal record or not, all candidates must be qualified for the position, interview with the hiring manager and then be selected for the position. In many cases, if you remove returning citizen’s criminal record they still would have a hard time obtaining employment. There are just as many unemployed candidates without a criminal background as there are with a criminal background. Employers determine a candidate’s employability from what the candidate has been successful at recently, specifically in the workplace, at school, in a training program and volunteering. Unverifiable or old experience, poor communications skills, little or no education or training, employment gaps and job hopping are bigger barriers to employment than a criminal background. If the said are barriers delaying a returning citizen’s reintegration to society, counsel them on how to eliminate the barriers. Last and most important, provide returning citizens with better career, education and training advice. Returning citizens are commonly told to apply for jobs in the

construction, janitorial services or manufacturing industry. Furthermore, returning citizens are told to focus on positions as a construction laborer (not hiring) rather than masonry or crane operator (hiring), janitor (not hiring) rather than a maintenance technician or building engineer (hiring) and a warehouse picker/packer (not hiring) rather than a lathe operator or mechanical assembler (hiring). The construction, janitorial services and manufacturing sectors are commonly referred to as “ex-offender friendly”. There is no such thing as an “ex-offender friendly” sector. How many companies will openly state a preference for ex-offenders?) Manufacturing jobs are being off-shored, janitorial and building services are being synchronized and construction has been slow since 2008. Encourage returning citizens to target sectors that are thriving and growing: hospitality, retail and information technology. If there is a skills deficiency, encourage that person to enroll in an accredited and quality school or training program to close the gap.

Returning citizens are a part of our community and should be allowed to reintegrate into society without being reminded of their past mistakes. Returning citizens should be provided with strong advice and direction. Returning citizens should not be reminded of their past every time they enter an organization for services. Returning citizens are human beings and should be treated as such. Returning citizens should be able to receive quality services regardless of their criminal status.