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Bridgeport gives ex cons shot at jobs

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*Brian A. Pounds/ Staff Photographer
Carlton Hamilton of Bridgeport searches through jobs...*

BRIDGEPORT -- Imagine being shackled with a criminal conviction and sitting in a packed room of applicants competing for one or two openings.

That's a near hopeless proposition.

And that's what the expected 2,000 ex-prisoners who will be released back into Bridgeport society this year could face as competition for jobs becomes even more difficult, but on Tuesday, Career Resources Inc., unveiled a new job placement program to help those men and women get a second shot at living decent lives.

The new program, called ReEntry Works, is housed in Career Resources Bridgeport office and is funded with a \$300,000 U.S. Department of Labor grant. Career Resources and the state Labor Department run the program with support from at least five other nonprofits that provide help with job training, anger management, substance abuse and teaching basic skills such as reading and writing. Employers will receive a tax credit of up to \$2,400 per hire, with additional credits dependent upon how many hours the employer keeps the person on the payroll. Those hired through this program will also be bonded to cover any kind of theft.

"Every single person in this room needed a second chance," said Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch, with many of the dignitaries, ex-convicts and workers attending the open house nodding in affirmation. "These are people who need a second chance."

The program is limited to non-violent offenders, who have been released from prison within the last 180 days. They must be a resident of Bridgeport or a neighboring town. They cannot have committed a sexual offense. Those still on probation must receive a referral.

Within minutes of opening, four ex-offenders were looking through the job openings with employers willing to hire people with conviction records. One man was just two days from being released, another had been out a couple of weeks and said it's tough out there. The jobs were for food preparers, warehouse workers and other entry level positions.

Finch said it's clear the mood in the country is to get America back on its feet, and that will require everyone doing his or her part, and that includes former prisoners who have answered for their crimes.

It's not going to be an easy road for these men and women, and the backers of the program and its new staff understand that. They hope employers will understand giving a job to ex-prisoners benefits the community.

"Employment is a significant factor in avoiding rearrest," said William Carbone, executive director of Court Support Services Division of state Judicial Branch, who was on hand for the ReEntry opening. Carbone's division oversees probation.

Carbone said about 35 people a month come out of prison and are placed on probation in Bridgeport. That doesn't include those who complete their sentences in prison and are turned loose. Those people do not have any supervision. Either way, it's a difficult transition, he said.

"After a person has been incarcerated for a while, they need help," he said. They often need help finding medical care, sometimes getting a driver's license or alternative transportation, even a home. The lack of any of these things can impede a person's ability to get a job, he said.

That's why probation officers start working with prisoners within 90 days of release, to start preparing them for the outside and finding out what services they will need.

Carbone said ReEntry works will be part of that assessment, so the workers there will be able to lay out a plan to help a person get a job. The staff serving on the front lines of that effort understand it's not going to be easy, and while there's plenty of work to be done to bring an ex-offender's skills up to par with other applicants, the real challenge is getting employers to provide opportunities.

"A lot of employers are reluctant about talking to these guys, let alone giving them a shot at a job," said Eric Rey, manager for ReEntry Works.

Ryan Balis' job is to get employers to open their doors to former prisoners. He has been recruiting employers since Career Resources won the grant in February. It's difficult out

there, he admitted, because there are hiring freezes and big applicant pools filled with people who haven't been convicted of a crime. But he said he's had some success and there are jobs available.

Liz Dupont-Diehl, Career Resources spokeswoman and vice president of development, said ultimately, ReEntry Works has a simple but lofty goal for its clients, "We want them to find good jobs, fulfilling careers."

ReEntry program facts Available to non violent offenders living Bridgeport or bordering towns who were not convicted of a sexual offense. Those on probation or out on parole, must receive referral from the appropriate supervising agency. Must have been released within the last 180 days. Services available at 350 Fairfield Ave., Third Floor, Bridgeport Ex offenders can call 610-6209 Employers can call 610-6212.

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