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Locked out

Jobs can turn tide in city's crime fight, experts say

By Will Higgins
will.
higgins@indystar.com
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Keith Brown spent 23 years in prison for armed robbery. He was released in October, landed a temporary job paying \$7.50 an hour, lives with a relative and sells his blood plasma for extra money.

Brown's greatest fear is that when his job ends in April, he won't be able to find another one.

But Brown's worry is not a problem only for ex-offenders. If recidivism rates hold true, nearly 2,800 of the 4,400 felons who returned to the Indianapolis area from prisons last year will rob, steal and commit more of the crimes that have sullied the city's image, victimized residents and cost taxpayers millions.

Key to turning that tide are jobs. Studies show ex-offenders with jobs are more likely to stay out of trouble.

But most employers aren't willing to hire ex-cons. The public sector doesn't provide enough in tax incentives for that purpose, some observers say. And the state is one of the most restrictive in the country when it comes to laws and policies dealing with ex-offenders.

"We either help them make a living or they'll continue to take a living," said Indianapolis Public Safety Director Earl Morgan. "The more barriers removed, the less recidivism you'll see."

Barriers are plentiful

Indiana law makes it difficult for ex-offenders to work in a variety of fields, including childcare, education, nursing and home health care. Rules may also limit an ex-con's ability to get a license to practice such things as barbering, cosmetology and real estate.

Ex-offenders have difficulty getting public housing and other public assistance such as food stamps.

Many can't obtain a driver's license or car insurance.

Federal laws bar ex-offenders from jobs at airports and prohibit drug offenders from receiving student loans and grants that could help them become more employable.

In the private sector, landlords don't want to rent to them. Unions don't want them to join, cutting them off from better-paying skilled trade jobs. The stigma is debilitating.

Perhaps one of the most important government commitments that could help ex-offenders would be financial, according to studies and members of a task force formed by Mayor Bart Peterson. Not only should financial help be made available to help ex-offenders get back on their feet, it is also needed by employers expected to give them a chance at a job.

Brown, the ex-con who may be looking for new work soon, says he wants to impress his bosses so that his temporary job becomes permanent. He wants to score grant money to pay for truck driving school. He wants a future.

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"No way I'm going back" to prison, said Brown, 50. "So for now I've just got to be patient and have discipline."

Jobs are the answer

Nationally, more than 70 percent of ex-offenders commit another crime and return to prison within three years of their release, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

But ex-offenders who have jobs are less likely to commit crimes, according to a 2006 study by the Urban Institute, a research firm and think tank.

Peterson's task force suggested last fall that the city make it a priority to help ex-offenders find work. With no money to enact the task force's proposals, Peterson has suggested a tax increase might be needed.

One suggestion was to create a team of "employment specialists" who persuade companies to hire ex-offenders. The team would pitch an existing benefit, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which provides a tax credit of up to \$6,000 for each ex-offender hired. But few employers use it.

The task force also suggested federal insurance for bonding, worth up to \$25,000. Bonding, which is tough to obtain for ex-offenders, protects companies against theft and liability.

Steve Russell, CEO of Indianapolis-based Celadon Trucking and a member of Peterson's task force, says those inducements need sweetening.

"These incentives aren't enough," he said.

Russell's company has hired ex-offenders to work on loading docks, but not as truck drivers, because he worries about the liability.

"If there was an accident, imagine a plaintiff's trial lawyer: 'This person had been in jail, and these people knew it all along, and now he's done this.' "

To remove other employment barriers, federal law would have to be changed.

Bob Palmer, local FedEx Corp. vice president and a member of Peterson's task force, said FedEx had a longtime policy of conducting a seven-year background check on an applicant. Even if a felony conviction came up, the local manager would have some discretion.

But under post-Sept. 11 rules about who can work at airports, an ex-felon has no chance at FedEx. With a hub at the Indianapolis International Airport, FedEx has 4,000 jobs locally, most in the \$11-an-hour range.

J.T. Ferguson, executive director of Public Action in Correction Effort and Offender Aid and Restoration, a program that helps ex-offenders, said that a few years ago only 10 companies in the Indianapolis area were willing to hire ex-offenders. Now 50 companies employ a few hundred.

But Ferguson said far more employers are needed.

A study out of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis shows 65 percent of employers will not hire ex-offenders.

"They still believe once a felon, always a felon," Ferguson said.

Other challenges

Even if they find employment, ex-offenders face other roadblocks.

People convicted of drug charges -- about 24 percent of ex-felons - are barred from living in public housing, under state and federal rules. Private landlords can also turn them

away, and often do.

Leonard Kirk, 46, was lucky enough to find a job and a place to live after being released from prison in July. He served 27 years for robbery, rape and criminal deviate conduct.

But he's struggling to pay for his court-ordered anger management classes. Fees for the classes pose a burden for some ex-offenders that may cause them to re-offend.

Kirk's therapy cost him \$40 a week.

"And you got rent and light bills, and I'm making \$7.50 an hour," he said. "I'm already \$700 in debt. This whole process is a setup for failure, is what it is."

Most ex-offenders are ordered to receive some kind of therapy - for anger management, conflict resolution, drug or alcohol addiction, or mental illness. They are ordered to pay fees for the therapy so taxpayers won't have to.

Ex-offenders also have to pay probation and home detention fees that can exceed \$100 a month.

If monthly payments are missed, the ex-offender could be sent back to prison.

"People getting out of prison usually have no money, but there are all these fees on their backs," said Gregg Keesling, president of Workforce Inc., an agency that finds work for ex-offenders.

"I've heard of guys selling drugs to pay for their drug classes," he said.

Ex-offenders may face other obligations as well, such as back child support.

Failing to pay child support triggers an arrest warrant if the child is on public assistance. The warrant leads to a driver's license suspension.

Often the warrant is issued and the license suspended before the offender is even released from prison.

Change is coming

A study of Indiana employment opportunities for ex-offenders by two IUPUI professors -Crystal Garcia and Sheila Suess Kennedy, former head of the Indiana Civil Liberties Union- found a willingness in the general public to do something to improve re-entry for exoffenders .

. Because of the change in attitudes, some barriers have been slowly eroding.

Last year, the Indiana General Assembly approved a measure that allows counties to decide whether to make public assistance available to drug offenders.

So far, two counties -- Marion and Allen, which includes Fort Wayne -- have made some assistance available.

The Indiana Department of Correction opened a re-entry facility at its Plainfield prison last year, where soon-to-be-released prisoners can work toward getting a driver's license or gain access to other resources.

The department spends more than \$4 million a year for community corrections, which allows offenders to be out of prisons and in home detention and work release while receiving counseling and other services meant to monitor their behavior and help them ease back into productive life.

The department also plans to bring prospective employers to the prison for job fairs.

On a federal level, two Hoosier U.S. representatives have sponsored a proposal that would

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give ex-offenders a second chance.

U.S. Reps. Mike Pence, a Republican from Columbus, and Julia Carson, a Democrat from Indianapolis, signed the Second Chance Act of 2006 with a few dozen other co-sponsors.

The proposal addresses recidivism and public safety by focusing federal resources on jobs, housing, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and strengthening families.

Second Chance would provide \$100 million over two years to help ex-offenders.

"It's not a lot of money," Pence said. "But it could get states thinking about doing something different, thinking long-term."

The proposal failed last year when U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., tabled the bill, saying that states should provide resources for the measure, not the federal government.

But Pence said he would back the bill again. "They re-offend because they are not in a community of people who trust and support them. They are not around people who give them a second chance."