

Employers are key to convicts' fresh start

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Not that many Americans - including those engaged in commerce, running companies and hiring workers - believe or care about what he says anymore, but George Bush might have done recovering drug addicts and other ex-offenders one better by taking his faith-inspired message of redemption and second chances to his ever-dwindling Republican business base.

After kickin' back with recovering addicts at the Jericho program in East Baltimore on Tuesday, Bush should have made a pitch to those in a position to give a guy a job sometime in the future - once the nation recovers from his presidency.

A lunch with business leaders in Hunt Valley maybe, a quick stop for coffee with the Maryland Chamber of Commerce - either would have been nice.

It's great for the president to get down and get real, share his story of recovery with others and pat an ex-offender on the back.

But that's not helping anyone find employment - certainly not anyone with a criminal record, such as Conrad Patterson.

I met him a couple of weeks ago, after he'd just been turned down for a housekeeping job at a Baltimore hospital. Starting when he was 25, Patterson served 11 1/2 years for burglary and assault. The Maryland Division of Correction sent him back out into free society last September. He rents a room in West Baltimore; his sister helps him pay for it. Patterson has not been able to find a job - in construction, warehousing or food services - in nearly six months of searching.

"I never sold drugs," Patterson said. "I did wild and foolish stuff, starting when I was 17, you know, taking chances and trying to be cool."

So Patterson has a record - robbery, accessory to robbery, an obstruction of justice charge - and it haunts him. "I thought I had this [hospital] job in housekeeping," he said. "But the person who interviewed me for the job told me her boss denied me."

I showed Patterson how to get to the new Our Daily Bread Employment Center, on the Fallsway near the prison complex in the city, and then directed him to Goodwill of the Chesapeake's offender re-entry program on Saratoga. He enrolled in that program and goes there each day for a couple of hours; he gets counseling on the job application process and job leads.

It is a mean daily challenge - hunting work when you have convictions on the resume.

The biggest obstacles are the many companies that refuse to hire ex-offenders. It was always difficult for the paroled population to find work; it has been a lot harder during the Bush presidency.

All of the thresholds for security went up across the nation after the Sept. 11 attacks, and it made it tougher for anyone with a criminal background - even simple drug possession convictions - to find even minimum-wage jobs. Our prisons are full, and we have the highest incarceration rate in the world. It stays that way, in part, because returning inmates cannot find work because too many businesses will not even consider hiring them.

So, if George Bush really wants to make himself useful in this arena, he should tell business leaders it's time to open up to hiring the ex-offender. (Not all of them, certainly, but at least some of them - starting with the older ones who've burned out on the life, and who may not have committed violent crimes.) It's time to stop processing every man or woman with a conviction through a computer-based screening system that just spits them back to the street.

It would be nice to see local and state leaders, Democrats, talking this up, too.

It would be the fiscally prudent thing to do.

Every year, thousands of men and women are released from Maryland prisons, and within three years half of them return.

The average daily prison population here is up 170 percent since 1980. It costs something like \$25,000 a year to keep someone in our prisons. The state's public safety secretary wants to release more low-risk offenders on parole and expand the use of home detention.

All of which is great if these guys find work, settle down and don't commit new crimes.

That doesn't happen without a change in the practices of employers.

In Baltimore, the Job Opportunities Task Force has just rolled out a marketing campaign to get businesses thinking about hiring ex-offenders. The campaign is called PastForward - I don't really get it, but then, I didn't get Fahrvenugen, either - with the phrase, "Progressive Placement."

There's a new Web site - www.pastforwardmd.org - full of information for employers, 2,500 brochures ready for distribution, 5,000 postcards going into the mail and a billboard on the Jones Falls Expressway that says, "I may be one of your best workers" and bears the face of a Baltimore ex-offender who found a job.

All of this to get employers to consider hiring the ex-offender and therefore reduce the size of that expensive human warehousing program we keep calling, erroneously, our "correction" system.

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