

Opinion | Helping ex-offenders become current employees

Bill Gibbons, Guest columnist Published 12:00 p.m. CT June 7, 2018

Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland estimates there are approximately 15,000 job vacancies in the greater Memphis area, with about 9,000 paying \$12 or more per hour. There are citizens in our community with the technical and life skills necessary to fill many of those jobs. Many of them just happen to be ex-offenders.

On Thursday, June 14, the Tennessee Department of Correction, the University of Memphis Public Safety Institute, and the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission will co-host a [symposium](#) to provide an opportunity for Memphis area employers to learn more about how they can tap into sources of skilled, qualified workers while at the same time expand opportunities for ex-offenders and create a pathway for their success in our community.

The Tennessee Department of Correction is placing major emphasis on education and training programs for individuals who are still incarcerated to help prepare them for work once they return home. At the symposium, Commissioner Tony Parker and other department officials will be sharing information about these programs.

For some 25 years, [HopeWorks](#) has been providing a holistic approach to help individuals break the cycle of crime and poverty. And through an arrangement with the Shelby County Division of Corrections and the support of Memphis business leader Brad Martin, Hope Works is now working with county-housed inmates through Hope2Hire. This effort is providing specific training in jobs for which there is a demand in our community.

[Lifeline to Success](#) has existed since 2009 and works with serious ex-offenders to help them become productive members of our community. Executive Director DeAndre Brown is an ex-offender himself and has a passion for helping other ex-offenders re-enter the community successfully.

The Center for Employment Opportunities ([CEO Works](#)) is a nationwide operation with a strong track record of successfully providing employment services to individuals returning to their communities from incarceration. CEO Works has a contract with Workforce Investment Network (WIN), a city agency, to provide transitional work for ex-offenders, with the goal of moving them into permanent employment.

[Economic Opportunities](#) Memphis (EcOp) helps move individuals in the Memphis community who have made some poor choices in the past to more purposeful, meaningful lives.

[The Memphis Shelby County Office of Re-Entry](#) is an umbrella entity funded by state, county, and city governments. It works to connect ex-offenders with needed services, such as those mentioned above.

The upcoming symposium offers Memphis area employers a chance to find out more about all of these local efforts and how to connect with them to consider job applicants who are ex-offenders.

With a growing economy, many companies are looking for skilled, reliable workers. The symposium is designed to help employers know how to reach ex-offenders for employment who have benefited from special training and skills development, as well as learn about tax benefits available to employers who hire ex-offenders.

Providing job training, life skills, and support programs for ex-offenders is a key part of the local Operation: Safe Community plan, the development of which was spearheaded by the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission. The commission is coordinating implementation of the plan, and the Public Safety Institute is charged with independently evaluating certain training efforts geared toward ex-offenders in the community, including some of the efforts mentioned above.

Given the labor shortage we are facing in many areas of our economy, considering qualified ex-offenders for employment is a good investment for many local businesses. In addition, it is an investment in individuals who, given a chance, can become productive citizens. Finally, it is an investment in our city that can result in fewer repeat offenders and, therefore, less crime.

For more information and to register for the upcoming symposium, visit the Public Safety Institute website at memphis.edu/psi/events.

Bill Gibbons serves as president of the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission and executive director of the [University of Memphis Public Safety Institute](http://memphis.edu/psi).



Bill Gibbons (Photo: University of Memphis)

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Opinion | Prison education turns hard time into productive time

With more than 6 million Americans under correctional supervision, including 2.2 million people incarcerated in our nation's prisons, prisons have become one of our nation's most critical public institutions.

Our success as a nation depends upon our collective ability to rekindle ambition, desist cynicism and end alienation in order to promote fairness and improvements in all areas of the justice system.

Correctional officials and incarcerated individuals have long shared the belief that our achievements can be defined by our collective ability to foster public safety through rehabilitation and reintegration into society through successful employment. The future of our democracy depends on it.

The context for this change is clear. Education in prison changes the landscape of justice. Research has continually shown that prison education programs can significantly improve the outcomes for returning citizens by ensuring that educational programs focus on future employment.

This is accomplished by intentionally shifting program offerings toward employment skills and certificate programs for in demand fields that are predicated on literacy, high school equivalency, and post-secondary education programs.

Research has also shown that crime and unemployment are linked and that strong ties to meaningful employment lead to lower recidivism. Work is therefore a buffer against crime and recidivism.

Recidivism has been the main outcome measured in most evaluations of prison and post release employment programs. But research shows that work release participants who begin employment education while in prison, followed by transitional work release while still incarcerated, and later by employment retention services upon release, received many benefits beyond what can be captured in the recidivism rate.

Inmates who took part in the aforementioned work-specific programming experienced much higher employment rates, greater retention and increased overall earnings than other employment programs for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Programs that provide this continuum of service delivery from institution to community yield better recidivism, employment, and return on investment.

While no single agency can meet all of the work force development needs of returning citizens, an integrated systems approach has been shown to greatly expand the criminal justice network to ensure maximum employment outcomes for justice involved individuals.

In this vein, the Tennessee Department of Correction has developed partnerships and interagency collaboration with a number of agencies including the Memphis Shelby County Office of Reentry, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, and the Tennessee Department of Transportation to develop training programs tailored to successful work outcomes with broad employment options.

This investment in the knowledge economy, aligning education and employment within the justice system in Tennessee, is strongly indicative of the success of coordinated interagency partnerships.

Recognizing the critical role of correctional education to reform, rehabilitate and promote successful reentry is an important first step in aligning agency goals to achieve effective and positive outcomes for post release employment.

Collaborating across education, employment and corrections ensures effective access, delivery and continuity of services during and after incarceration. Recognizing that each component must work collectively through partnerships and policy coordination, limits systemic barriers to education and employment.

A systems approach that builds strong inter-agency partnerships and support networks, as well as a continuum of services fostering public safety through rehabilitation and reintegration, is key to Tennessee's future success.

Tony Parker is commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Correction.



Tony Parker (Photo: Tenn. Dept. of Corrections)

Opinion | Employment breaks the cycle of crime, poverty

Henry Lewis, Guest columnist Published 4:00 p.m. CT June 7, 2018

We are all too familiar with the breaking crime news of the day in our community.

Immediately, behind the scenes, our dedicated law enforcement officers begin an investigation and prosecutors and the courts serve justice on behalf of the community. Families are torn and in disarray from the effects of the crime on the victim and the perpetrator.

The perpetrator is sentenced and incarcerated. After serving time, the offender is released back to his or her community to proceed with life -- or not.

In the most recent statewide study of recidivism by the [Tennessee Governor's Task Force on Sentencing and Recidivism](#), the percentage of people released from prison or jail in Tennessee who were re-incarcerated within three years was 46 percent.

Employment is the answer to breaking the cycle of crime and poverty in Memphis.

There are several ongoing initiatives here in Memphis and Shelby County to help ex-offenders find employment.

That includes the [Hope 2 Hire](#) Program, operated by [HopeWorks](#) at the Shelby County Mark Luttrell Center. In April, the program graduated its first class of soon-to-be ex-offenders who will have skills in logistics, building trades, masonry, and basic electricity.

The [Workforce Investment Network](#) (WIN), a division of the City of Memphis, recently initiated a transitional jobs program for ex-offenders. The grant was awarded and is being operated by the Centers for Employment Opportunities. WIN is looking to expand its reentry work in the transitional jobs space.

The Tennessee Department of Corrections is seeking funding to host a machining program in collaboration with Southwest Tennessee Community College, WIN and other partners. Economic Community Opportunity Program and the Memphis Shelby County Office of Re-entry are other partners in the community to assist ex-offenders in finding gainful employment.

And Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland has raised private dollars to pay for expungements of records for nonviolent offenders. This helps more people clear hurdles to return to the workforce.

On any day in Memphis, it is reported that employers are seeking workers to fill vacant jobs. Programs have been developed for those who lack a high school diploma. Other bridge-building initiatives include training in interviewing skills, soft skills training, and occupational skills training.

Now is the time for employers to think "outside of the box" of ways to fill their unfilled jobs with this untapped pool of available workers.

Employers and ex-offenders have something in common: They both have a need. The employers need workers and the ex-offenders need a job. It is just that simple.

Employment of trained, skilled ex-offenders will give employers access to an additional pool of workers. Ex-offenders will have jobs that will allow them to proceed with their lives by supporting their families and reducing their chance of returning to crime or re-incarceration.

On June 14, we will co-host a [symposium on enhancing job opportunities](#) for skilled, qualified ex-offenders in Memphis and Shelby County. For more information visit memphis.edu/psi/events/.

We hope to begin the dialogue with employers and help them find qualified workers. By doing so, we will take another step toward making Memphis a better place.

Henry Lewis is interim executive director of the Workforce Investment Network.



Henry Lewis (Photo: Angie & Ike Photography)

Opinion | Incarceration must lead to rehabilitation

The Shelby County Division of Corrections, formerly referred to as the Penal Farm, has grown from an average of 571 inmates in 1985 to an average of 2,050 today.

The DOC addresses many different inmate needs such as housing, transportation, health care, family reunification, state identification and social security cards, employment and so on.

To better address the change and growth in the prison population, innovative methods of rehabilitation and correction are in place.

The Division of Corrections has made great strides with the use of evidence-based programming and evidence-based assessments. This allows correctional professional an opportunity to offer individualized services to the inmate population. Appropriate programming and assessments contributes to lowering recidivism rates.

Attention is given to life skills. That includes our Adult Educational and Vocational programming. The classroom education programming includes Special Educatin instruction offered through Shelby County Schools and HiSET (High School Equivalency Testing), offered by Division of Corrections teachers and HopeWorks.

Through our assessment process, we realize there may be factors preventing the acquisition of a high school equivalency. In those cases, the objective is to improve the reading, writing, and math skills.

Vocational training is another preparatory path for inmates. Our current career paths through the Division of Corrections include pre-electrical apprenticeship and forklift certification.

Prior to participation, inmates are enrolled in a Job Readiness program. Approximately half of our inmates have not been gainfully employed, and have not acquired the skills to maintain a job, if hired.

[Hope 2 Hire](#) (H2H) is a program created to offer technical job training to qualified inmates at the Division of Corrections during the six-month period prior to release from incarceration.

The program was conceived by Brad Martin and developed in consultation and partnership with the Shelby County Division of Corrections, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT), Workforce Investment Network (WIN), HopeWorks, the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce, and the University of Memphis.

H2H will deliver technical job training for approximately 144 participants a year. The career paths include Building Construction Technology, Masonry, and Certified Logistics Technicians.

Upon admission into H2H, participants will be required to complete the System for Assessment and Group Evaluation (SAGE) tool delivered by the Division of Corrections. Participants will receive 13 weeks of intense technical instruction delivered by TCAT.

Graduates will obtain a higher education certificate in his/her specialty. This certification will improve their ability to be hired. During training, WIN will enlist employers to visit the training site at the Division of Corrections.

Upon release, HopeWorks will provide starter kits (work tools, work attire, bus passes, birth certificates, and state ids).

This level of programming is necessary to ensure that the incarcerated population returns to our communities prepared, thus promoting safer communities for the citizens of Memphis and Shelby County.



Patricia Melton is manager of Grants, Education, & Vocational Services for the Shelby County Division of Corrections.

Opinion | Help others help your company, community

Ron Wade, Guest columnist Published 3:00 p.m. CT June 7, 2018

What do a graphic design and marketing company, an industrial services company and an electrical business have in common? All are leaders in their industries, boast about having excellent employees who make their business extremely successful, and have hired individuals leaving prison.

[HopeWorks](#) has relied on the compassion of employers to give people leaving prison a second chance to re-engage with society and become productive citizens. In the past, employers willing to give these opportunities were limited.

Today's low employment rates mean employers do not have enough workers to fill the large number of available jobs. Individuals recently released from prison can fill those roles but haven't been considered a viable option. Now, some of the largest companies in our city are wisely reconsidering this population as they look to hire new employees.

Jack made a common mistake coming out of generational poverty. He dropped out of school and spent the next two years at the Shelby County Division of Corrections. While there, he received his high school degree and enrolled in a HopeWorks' Personal and Career Development class. Upon release, he interviewed for a job and began a career where he will earn more than a living wage.

Jack is a model employee. His crew leader said it best: "He's the first at the truck ready to work every morning, pays attention to what you show him and catches on real quick and he's a good listener. All around he's a good contributor to the company and the crew."

Though finding a job is difficult, for many coming out of prison, keeping a job is more challenging. Adequate housing, reliable transportation and positive support are crucial to one's ability to keep a job.

Mary also participated in a HopeWorks class at Shelby County Division of Corrections. Like Jack, Mary found this class offered a holistic approach to job training, working as a team and understanding the value of mentors to walk with her through hard parts of transition. After a year of working full-time and becoming stable, with the help of HopeWorks, she applied for a job with better growth opportunities. Within six months she received a significant promotion.

Recently, her attendance started slipping and her employer reached out to HopeWorks. We created an open channel of communication to ensure this did not become a pattern.

This process is something HopeWorks does often, as it dramatically reduces turnover by providing additional counseling and job coaching to solve the core problem. Sometimes,

transportation issues or lack of access to stable childcare are perceived as a lack of dedication to the job and leads to employee termination. With regular communication and employee support, we can solve the problem and help people retain employment.

William received electrical, masonry and building construction training through Hope 2 Hire while incarcerated. This provided him marketable job skills. Because of the demand for trained laborers in the construction industry, William stepped into immediate employment with a commercial electrical company.

After two weeks on the job, a visit to the employer resulted in strong reviews for the man freshly released from prison. He is eager to learn and is competently trained in soft and technical skills, and has the potential to build a career and new life.

The Public Safety Institute at the University of Memphis is sponsoring a symposium June 14 titled “[Helping Others Helps Your Company](#).” It’s an opportunity for companies to learn about the often-overlooked resource of talent reentering society. These people are eagerly looking for an opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. They could be the employees your company is looking for.

Ron Wade is executive director of HopeWorks. For more information, visit whyhopeworks.org.



June 9, 2016 - Ron Wade, Executive Director of HopeWorks. (Stan Carroll/The Commercial Appeal) (Photo: Stan Carroll)

Opinion | Providing felons a lifeline of hope, change

DeAndre Brown, Guest columnist Published 8:19 a.m. CT June 7, 2018

People with LifeLine to Success, Freedom From Unnecessary Negatives (F.F.U.N.), and others marched in Downtown Memphis during the second annual LifeLine to Success 1,000 Fathers March on Saturday. Yalonda M. James/The Commercial Appeal

How do you reduce crime in a meaningful, lasting way? It's simple. You change the behavior of the individuals who commit crime and you create a new culture that treats criminal behavior as taboo, as opposed to an expected way of living. That is the [LifeLine to Success](#) way.

Almost nine years ago, I saw a need to assist other individuals who had experienced contact with the criminal justice system that resulted in a felony conviction. I realized that the deck of life was systematically stacked against them.

The punishment for their bad behavior was literally a life sentence of collateral consequences of a felony conviction, and no one, to my knowledge, was doing anything about it. At that time, my wife, Vinessa, and I decided to create a space that would only target convicted felons.

Memphis has been known as a violent city, plagued with crime. That could not be our destiny. LifeLine was created to change that paradigm and we hit the ground running.

We took a group of "felons" and began equipping them to become change agents, agents of goodwill. With that training, they were charged to use the power of their existing relationships to intentionally dismantle the criminal culture.

It worked. In no time, the team began fighting blight on a voluntary basis, which served several purposes that outsiders doubted and didn't understand.

As a former criminal, I understood the drive of the criminal mind. I understood the motivation and the allure. I used that, coupled with a sense of a new morality (which the team assisted in creating) to provide a new drive, determination and motivation.

I began to create and share hope with hopeless people. The team began to take pride in their new way of thinking. That new thinking led to better behavior. The results are tangible.

Memphis has an improved method of maintaining vacant and blighted properties, in large part, due to the relationship with LifeLine's [BLIGHT PATROL](#). Not only has the city begun to look better, the crime in our neighborhood (Frayser) has been significantly reduced.

Today, LifeLine and its members enjoy healthy relationships with the City of Memphis, the school system, the District Attorney's office, the community and, ironically with the Memphis

Police Department through a collaboration with Playback Memphis. And that is not an exhaustive list.

We have been successful at our mission because of our faith. Our faith causes us to show unconditional love to our members, something many of them have never experienced. In return, our members express their love for themselves through their interactions and intentional efforts to KEEP MEMPHIS CLEAN AND SAFE.

Rev. DeAndre Brown is co-founder of LifeLine to Success.



Rev. DeAndre Brown (Photo: DeAndre Brown)

Opinion | Hope 2 Hire building a prison to work pipeline

Brad and Daniel Martin, Guest columnists Published 2:00 p.m. CT June 7, 2018

When asked about the obstacles Memphis must overcome to ensure a better future, most respondents cite crime, education, and poverty. The inter-relationship of these factors is clear, but can also be overwhelming.

[Hope 2 Hire](#) attempts to address all three factors for some members of our community who must not be forgotten.

We have thousands of people currently incarcerated in Memphis and Shelby County. Many more have previously been incarcerated. A vast majority of these individuals are in prison for some form of drug-related offense.

As our country starts to understand the public health epidemic of drug and alcohol addiction, we realize that in many respects, this society has outsourced treatment of addiction issues to our corrections systems.

Absent significant changes in the approach to this epidemic, we are merely compounding the cost on society.

Upon release from prison, an ex-offender immediately requires two things for a chance to make it on the outside -- a place to live and a job. The obstacles for obtaining each are significant. Hope 2 Hire helps to address the need for a job.

Shelby County Correctional Center inmates received a certificate of completion for Personal and Career Development that will help them overcome their difficult struggles and offer hope for the future. Mark Weber/The Commercial Appeal

In a partnership with HopeWorks, the Shelby County Corrections Department, and the Tennessee College of Applied Technology, [Hope 2 Hire delivers higher-education training](#) at the Shelby County Corrections Center in specific career disciplines for which there is enormous demand in Memphis and Shelby County.

We have learned that while employers might prefer not to hire an ex-offender, they must have talented, reliable trades workers such as masons and carpenters. Hope 2 Hire provides them.

H2H uses the time one spends in prison to teach a marketable skill for which there is massive demand and insufficient supply in this employment market. By doing so, ex-offenders have a chance upon release to earn a livable wage, restore their dignity, and support a family.

Hope 2 Hire students are in the corrections system because they have made mistakes. Who hasn't? The consequences of the mistakes of these individuals have been severe.

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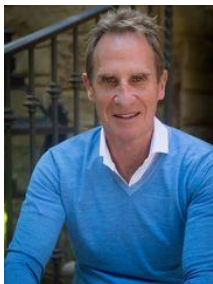
Shelby County Correctional Center inmates (left to right) LaMiya Morrisey, Denearia Frazier, Jessica Flourney celebrate after certificate of completion for Personal and Career Development from HopeWorks graduation. (Photo: Mark Weber/The Commercial Appeal)

Three partners have joined with our private resources to fund a program that will produce 500 educated, skilled, committed graduates over the next three years. As one of our partners has noted, our graduates must be willing to bring 51 percent of what's necessary to prepare themselves for a sustained successful life upon release. Hope 2 Hire offers the other 49 percent.

In the Gospel, Jesus says: "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." Every employer in this community can help produce more workers by eliminating unnecessary policies prohibiting the hiring of ex-offenders, by giving H2H graduates and other skilled ex-offenders a chance, and by designing their own training programs to take advantage of a vast pool of workers who can help meet the need for a trained 21st century workforce.

We hope you will do so. It only requires your 49 percent.

Brad Martin and Daniel Martin of the [Martin Family Foundation](#) are Founding Partners of H2H.



Brad Martin (Photo: Martin Family Foundation)



Daniel Martin (Photo: Martin Family Foundation)

