

Justice in America - Looking out for the Lost

Article by: Robert Paisola

In a small, white collar suburban community just outside of Salt Lake City, Utah the ex-offender we spoke with (he asked us to keep his identity confidential) had been a model citizen, receiving promotion after promotion at work, avoiding all negative influences from his prior life, and even started his own foundation to assist in the rehabilitation of fellow Federal and State offenders. He was released from probation, had moved on in a world where he would finally be able to be productive and could use the skills and tools that he learned to assist the less fortunate. Life was good..

His success hasn't come easily. The light haired 38-year-old is an ex-offender who had served in the Federal System for filing a false statement with a federal bank (lying on a credit application) and for possessing "more than four pictures" of pornography, that in 1998 was considered illegal. Did we mention that it is still illegal in Utah to have conjugal relations with your spouse that involve any type of "oral interactions"..... or more easily defined as oral sex.

Walking out of the famed "Club Fed" as members of the media have called this place of supposed rehabilitation, he says that he "made a pact with god, to use all of his talents for the good of mankind" and since being released from prison over three years ago, he has struggled with basic necessities that we take for granted, such as finding affordable housing and getting a valid state ID card.

A single non-custodial parent with a steady paying job, he would normally be considered a prime candidate for public-housing assistance, but he knows the odds are against him. Local housing rules bar ex-felons from living in public housing for six years after completing their sentence. But this offender is one of the few that we have spoken to that have the support of a family. "So many ex-offenders have no knowledge that the life of crime that they know CAN come to an end, said Sheila Demarco, a substance abuse advisor in Salt Lake City. "But having the support of a family who cares is becoming a rare commodity" said Demarco.

"In prison, you learn the value of being your word, being respectful and staying inside the lines" he said, and I really got clear on how important family is in ones life" he said. So, in keeping with the commitment that he made to keep his family first he decided to do whatever it took to "make it" this time.

Now, every month, he makes the hour-long trek to the local airport, ready to board a plane, so that he can visit with his child that lives out of state. "I have been going to visit my ex and my child for almost a year now, he said. "And I love the way that I feel when I know that I am doing the right things in life.

"I have to admit, it's one battle after the next -- trying to obtain housing, trying to obtain employment," he says. "I want a second chance. I want people to see that yes, I have made mistakes, but I am making it right." "I know that I can do this, but it is not easy", he stated

Our subject is one of more than 630,000 people released each year from correctional institutions in the U.S. Not surprisingly, people who have been locked up for many years, often poorly educated and lacking in financial support, face a range of obstacles to re-entering society. Yet some of the biggest are put there by federal, state and local governments, including hurdles to getting student loans, public housing and other forms of government assistance.

For years, the thinking among law-enforcement officials and politicians was that this was the price people should pay for breaking the law. Now there is an emerging belief that the larger price is being borne by society, since the practical barriers facing ex-prisoners make it more likely that they will slip back into a life of crime.

National Statistics indicate that two-thirds of ex-felons return to police custody within three years of their release for new crimes or for probation or parole violations, according to Justice Department studies. U.S. taxpayers spent \$60 billion on corrections in 2002 at the local, state and federal levels, up from \$9 billion two decades earlier. Over that same time frame, corrections (including private prison programs) have been the second fastest growing government spending category after health care.

Aside from public-housing restrictions, many former felons find they need special waivers to get licensed in vocations they learned while serving time. Some find their attempts to get an education are stymied by laws barring loans to those convicted of a crime. Still others can stumble into technical violations that send them back to prison, such as reporting late for a meeting with a probation officer, submitting a dirty urine sample or failing to pay a fine or restitution as required. For those who have completed lengthy sentences, the most frustrating barrier is also the most basic -- getting a legitimate ID card, such as a driver's license.

"Having one barrier may not be considered that big a deal," says Anthony Gerry, director of the prisoner re-entry institute at the Washington Institute of Criminal Justice in Washington DC. Usually, though, offenders face several barriers, he says, adding: "You can't get housing, you have child support" payments to make, "you can't get ID and no one will hire you. When looked at in full, that sends a signal: You're not wanted." said Gerry

After years of pushing for tougher sentences, politicians in Washington are now starting to rethink their approach. The Second Chance Act, hammered out by a bipartisan group of lawmakers and introduced in Congress last year, would

have provided more than \$80 million in grants for programs to help ex-offenders re-enter society.

Lacie Mitchell might have benefited from a key part of the legislation: a provision ensuring that ex-offenders can be licensed in occupations they trained for in prison.

Ms. Mitchell was determined to learn a skill so that she could get a job when she left the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Federal Correctional Institution, in West Virginia, a women's prison made famous recently for housing Martha Stewart.

In 1993, Ms. Mitchell, who had just finished her sophomore year at Santa Rosa Junior College in Northern California, obtained LSD for her ex-boyfriend and mailed it to him in Georgia. He was caught and cooperated with authorities against those he had enlisted to secure drugs. He was sentenced to two years while she received 10.

Ms. Mitchell, now 32 years old, joined the prison's all-women fire-fighting team, a group that provides fire protection for the prison and backup for other local fire squads. She figured it would position her well for a decent job. For more than five years, she roughed it through classes and endless trainings, entering smoke-filled rooms with her oxygen mask blackened to simulate rescue situations and navigating the Appalachian mountain roads near the prison in a yellow fire truck.

"Any of the physical requirements that you had to do" for state licensing, "we were required to do in our classes when we were in Federal Custody," says Ms. Owens.

She eventually rose to the fire team's top rank of lieutenant, garnering 300 hours of training and 100 hours at the scenes of actual fires in the towns outside the prison.

In January 2001, President Clinton granted her clemency on his last day in office after receiving her name from Families Against Mandatory Minimums, a group that advocates changes in sentencing laws. See www.famm.org

After eight years in prison, she left Alderson to stay at her parents' home in Alpharetta, Ga., confident a fire department in one of Atlanta's booming suburbs would hire her. She filled out each job application truthfully, noting she was a felon. But state law bars hiring former felons.

Ms. Mitchell says she offered to "clean hoses, flush the truck, even clean the mess hall" anything to get her foot in the door -- all to no avail.

Eventually, she was able to land a job with an organization that trains service dogs for people with debilitating diseases and injuries. Last year, she moved to Utah and started a catering business with her husband, who she had met back in high school. The business didn't take off so they are planning to try again next year in her husband's home town of Rigby, Idaho.

Many ex-convicts leave prison wanting to start anew, and the first step is often trying to get an education. But while 63% of all undergraduates receive some form of financial aid, money isn't easy to come by for ex-felons.

Federal law states that first-time offenders convicted on federal or state drug-possession or drug-trafficking charges are ineligible to receive financial assistance for as long as two years after their convictions. Completing drug rehabilitation can cut that time, but such programs can be expensive.

"I understand their concern. A college campus is a perfect place to sell drugs, but I also know I can't move forward in my life without an education and a good job," says Ms. Wheeler, a former offender we spoke to who was released last year. She now earns \$6 an hour at a The Training Table, a fast-food restaurant, trying to make ends meet to help support her 1-year-old.

For our first subject, finding housing has been the toughest challenge. Upon being released in 2004 from federal prison, he then headed for a halfway house in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Like many prisoners released before their sentence is completed, he was required to find a job in 15 days or face the possibility and constant threat of being returned to prison to finish his last six months. But to get a job, he needed valid identification from the Department of Motor Vehicles. In Utah, residents need a combination of documentation such as bills and voter registration cards that each add up to enough cumulative "points" to qualify for a driver's license or nondriver ID.

The ex-inmate we spoke to says that he had a federal prisoner ID, a birth certificate and a Social Security card. Those were not enough. Motor-vehicle personnel asked if he had a passport, a bill with his name on it, any additional identifiers. "I kept telling them that I'd been in prison the last 3 years and didn't have any other identification." Eventually he found a sympathetic supervisor who issued him the card.

He found a job quickly at a local telemarketing firm, but switched after a few months to work for a large painting company, where he could use the construction certificate he'd earned in training on the inside.

Still, he struggled to find a cheap yet safe place for he and his daughter. The two are now living in a home that was provided for them by a family member.

The federal government has a small number of restrictions against ex-felons living in public housing, such as sex offenders and those who have manufactured methamphetamine in a housing complex. However, local housing authorities are able to impose their own restrictions on ex-felons living in public housing, and those can be expansive, based upon the local attitude of State Agencies who impose such rules.

Howard Harder, spokesman for the Los Angeles City Housing Authority, says there are virtually no vacancies in the city in public housing and with about 136,000 applications pending it is unlikely that someone with a felony record will get in. Besides, ex-felons are ineligible for public housing for six years after the completion of their sentence, including probation.

Until something else comes along, he says he'll keep pushing for promotions at work. Returning to a life of crime and risking a return to prison is not an option, he says: "I don't have another 3 years to give to anyone."

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The Author, Robert Paisola, donates his time and resources on a worldwide basis to support the reformation of criminal offenders and to ease the re-entry process for ex offenders. He established a foundation to assist in this effort. His work and dedication to this cause have resulted in many forms of recognition, however, as Robert put's it "It is not about me" It is about the thousands of inmates that we assist each year around the world, to end the revolving door of recidivism.

If you are in need of specialized motivational training to the inmates, former inmates or drug rehabilitation patients that you supervise, Robert Paisola is the person to bring in to visit with your clients. He will PROVE that there CAN BE and IS a different way of living. Seminars are also available for a nominal fee to work with Supervising Staff, Jail Personnel and Federal Agencies including the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Does This Work? email bookings@prisonpartners.com for additional booking information Robert Paisola is driven by a passion for people--motivating them to reach for the highest standards of success. As founder and president of many International Corporations, Robert trains sales and marketing professionals who want to strive to get to the top...and stay there.

Routinely Distinguished by The National Speakers Forum, Robert is also a regular contributor to Business Week Magazine, CNN, CNNFN, XM Satellite Radio, The Wall Street Journal, Telemundo International, National Public Radio and many other organizations.

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