

Employers Urged to Take a Chance on Former Inmates

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If Gail Arnall could do one thing to help jail inmates return to productive lives, she would get rid of "the box."

No, not the solitary-confinement area, but the part of every employment application that asks candidates if they've ever been arrested or convicted on felony charges.

"If they check the box, [interviewers] ask no other questions," said Arnall, executive director of Offender Aid and Restoration (OAR) of Arlington County. "Felons run the gamut. It can be stealing \$200 worth of clothing at Macy's and you're a felon."

OAR of Arlington County, a non-profit founded in 1974, also serves the cities of Alexandria and Falls Church. Last year, 2,340 people took advantage of the organization's programs.

The organization in January implemented a new program to help clients prepare for their General Educational Development (GED) exams.

"Not only are students passing various portions of the exam, the program is reducing recidivism," said John Pettiford, OAR's board chairman. "Of the 65 OAR enrolled in the [program], only three have re-offended in the past six months - a 4.4-percent recidivism rate."

U.S. recidivism rates are terrible, ranging from between 50 and 80 percent, depending on the community and circumstances, said U.S. Rep. James Moran (D-8th), who visited OAR's headquarters on Sept. 21.

"We are wasting our human resources when we incarcerate people and then we don't prepare them to integrate into the outside world," Moran said.

Moran thanked Arlington County Sheriff Beth Arthur for implementing OAR's programs at the county jail. Arthur views inmates' time spent in jail as an opportunity to access education and learn life skills, he said.

"That's the thing we ought to be doing all over the country," Moran said.

Arthur pioneered a first-in-the-nation program that allows inmates access to a Web-delivered education system in a strict, Internet-prohibited, secure environment, said Thomas Sawner, CEO of EdOptions, the Arlington-based firm providing the services.

"This is one of the big, big problems nationwide for education in secure facilities: How do you provide certified teachers so that not only GEDs, but more importantly the potential for high-school graduates, can happen while folks are incarcerated?" Sawner asked. "Pun intended, it's a captive audience. And it makes such a big difference to be able to provide [those services]."

Sawner said he hopes Arlington's programs can be expanded to include high-school diplomas, and said the company would form partnerships with accredited education organizations to bring this about.



Offender Aid and Restoration board chairman John Pettiford listens as U.S. Rep. James Moran (D-8th) extolls the group's achievements during a visit to OAR headquarters in Arlington on Sept. 21. (Photo by Brian Trompeter)

EdOptions' programs custom-fit education curricula to clients' demonstrated abilities, and can transfer electronic records of academic progress they've made while in jail, Sawner said.

"I've yet to find someone who doesn't want to be successful," he said.

The federal government has provided about \$600,000 for OAR in Fairfax County and \$100,000 in Arlington - a mere fraction of the cost of keeping people in prison, Moran said.

"They aren't allowed back into society. People are scared of them," Moran said of the inmates. "But also, they don't have the skills. They are put out on the streets with very little money and very little community and family support."

OAR practices restorative justice, in which inmates accept responsibility for their criminal actions and attempt to make amends in the community. While doing so, they learn problem-solving skills to help them overcome future challenges, officials said.

Ex-offenders, looking professional in business suits donated by Men's Wearhouse, must persuade potential employers to trust them, Arnall said.

"You want to be real honest about what the offense was," she said. "And then you simply say, 'Look. This is what I did and I can't tell you how sorry I am. And I have gone to prison and paid dearly for that. I'm back, I'm putting my life together and if you will take a chance on me, I'll be incredibly loyal.'"