

Committee on Reducing Recidivism and Removing Impediments to Ex-Offender Employment

Thank you Senator and Chairperson Darling and Committee for inviting me to speak.

My wife and I purchased GenMet Corp. a 60 employee metal fabrication business in Mequon in 1999. We laser cut metal with 2 million dollar machines, form it with 200 thousand dollar presses and weld with the best welders in Wisconsin. The growth of our company is controlled by our ability to get, train and retain good people. We've had over 1850 students tour our plant to try to show them advanced manufacturing, family supporting careers and change the perception of manufacturing from dirty, dumb, dangerous and off shoring to safe, smart, sustainable and staying here.

There are so many of my competitors in Wisconsin that price has to be competitive within pennies for our work. 100% quality and On Time Delivery are assumed. Lead time is the deciding factor and if my competitor has more people than I, he can do the job quicker and he wins. With that in mind GenMet does everything we can to reach out to the community. My opinion is that my employee base should be the same ratios within my building as it is in the community. If the community ratio of male to female is 50/50 that's what it should be in my plant. If the ratio is 25% Latino, the shop should reflect that as well. Same for Russian, Middle Eastern, Hmong, African American etc. My company needs to welcome good people of all sorts who want to be trained to be fabricators. I don't care if they are ex-offenders.

If we even find out if a candidate for employment has a record our policy is that if an applicant has paid his debt to society we will interview them and hire them if they possess the traits, talents, aptitude and desire to learn we are looking for. We don't pay attention to their record.

I am an engineer, a ship builder and now a metal fabricator therefore my remarks and answers to your questions are anecdotal and only from my GenMet small business experience.

Based on this small sample size I have learned some things:

Every individual is different. Putting all people who have been incarcerated into one group is not realistic.

People new to employment don't have employment history allowing an employer to make a judgment of fit. They also haven't learned the word "responsibility" yet.

Some people make a mistake, pay for it, get out, find religion and/or a family or a job and make a life for themselves. We have a welder we are all hoping for now. He is in his late 30's and spent 19 years incarcerated. We are training him and certifying him to weld. He has been with GenMet for over a year. He is soon to get married to a lady with a child. It appears that things are working out for him.

We recently took the conviction "block" off our application that was there when we bought the business because we've never done anything differently whether a person checked the block or not.

We find out about past prison by shop floor word of mouth or by parole requirements. We've had at least 20 ex-employees with convictions and just the one welder at this time.

A person spending 4 years in prison spends the same time as a college education. Many kids from the Suburbs know during high school that they will get a college education. Some poorer young people perhaps from the inner city assume they won't live past 30 and that they'll spend much of their lives in prison. This is Liberal Arts or STEM Education versus street survival education. It can be like turning a battle ship to change the perception from looking forward to a life of incarceration and street smarts to making plans for a lifelong career. That should be a result of this committee.

Some people who have been in a long time can be angry at "the system" which can spill over to mean "the company". They can lack trust in the system – the company. The length of incarceration can lead to:

Being distrustful and combative.

Not being good team members.

Social skills not developed.

Us versus Them against employers.

I imagine that in prison people could tend to look out for themselves which can make it difficult to work as a part of a team. Our manufacturing work is not individual type of work. Everything relies on the Synergy of team members pulling their weight and helping out others.

Some people seem to need a more structured environment. We have no supervisors, just technical leads. People are expected to seek out training and to take on more and more responsibility. That's how they get paid more. We provide a system that allows a person to make the best person they can make of themselves. We have a mostly self directed system that is hurt by any non-collaborative person who doesn't want to learn. A person not wanting more certifications (we call SMART Cards) will be passed over by newer more aggressive employees and often get embarrassed and leave. This is the way we've built our culture. We like it this way. We pay for performance. People need to want to go after success. Desiring a structured environment where they are told when to breathe in and breathe out doesn't work at GenMet.

If people are jailed early in their life they have not had work force experience and they grow to learn the structured environment systems that exist within the prison. We don't baby sit our employees. We train them and expect them to work hard. If they don't they usually get embarrassed and "self select out". We spend a fortune mentoring and training and it's all wasted if the person is not a good fit.

We have an initiative now to hire veterans because we can rely that they have been taught that they have a responsibility. We have a problem with people who don't realize they have a responsibility. Many think we are "even" if they come to work and get paid. They also think we are "even" if they don't come to work and don't get paid. They miss the fact that the company made commitments to customers based on employees being at work performing their duties.

I'm not interested in the State paying wages or incentives to make me hire ex-offenders. I just want good people. If programs are established, they should create a good business case for employers to risk the extra mentoring and time it will take to hire the ex-offenders. To summarize – I don't want the money, spend it making good employees. Make them reliable like Veterans are reliable. Spend money that helps transition ex offenders to real life. Dropping them off at the corner of 6th and Pine puts them right back in the place that created the problem in the first place. Just like you should not give money to companies, nothing should be a hand out to the ex offenders either. It will dumb them down and it will be subject to teaching generations to game the system. Perhaps half way houses with mentoring services and training opportunities would help.

Develop a Hand Up not a Hand Out.

Dr. Mimi Silbert, Delancey Street's President and CEO from San Francisco has been successful for decades They say: **ENTER WITH A HISTORY, LEAVE WITH A FUTURE.**

There are some other barriers to employment that may be applicable to ex-offenders. My business is in Mequon and there is no public transportation. The nearest Bus stop is approximately 3 miles away. If a person doesn't drive a car they can't work for me.

Some people are not set up in life enough to have full time employment. They may not have a family support group. We've found that we have to be incredibly flexible with some people in these circumstances. Parole meetings, child care, transportation, all have to be worked around work. A

concern exists with my entire company culture if I put up with a poor performer. It tends to dumb down the entire group.

Some people learn how to game the system. One applicant who was an ex-offender referred to me by the District Attorney's office said he had experience running laser cutting machines. We brought him aboard and he worked only 2 days and became antagonistic that he was not allowed yet to operate the \$2 million laser machine. We have a robust training and qualification process and he needed to go through it. On day 2 he said he had a minor cut on a finger. He didn't formally report the cut however he filed a workman's compensation claim. When he wouldn't take our required drug test everything stopped and he went away.

People who are incarcerated may need more training for work skills than average people. Drug Free, On time, problem solver, team player. Jail can teach this.

Technical skills are great to teach but we still train new people. The only thing we learn from a person being exposed to a welding career via an 8 week boot camp type environment is that they may like to be a welder. They may have the aptitude to weld. We don't assume they can weld until we teach and certify them. Few people can pass the American Welding Society certification test within a month of starting to work at GenMet even those with Associates Degrees from Technical Colleges. I used to build nuclear submarines. I'm not letting an unqualified person weld for my customers. If you teach technical skills to inmates don't have the people arrogantly think they can step into an advanced technical position. They need have open eyes and be ready to learn and earn a position.

We spend a lot of time and energy trying to keep some individuals employed. It doesn't always pay off however we are still willing to give an opportunity to deserving people and it doesn't matter to me if they've been in jail.

Thank you

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