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Here's What It's Like For People Trying To Find A Job After They're Released From Prison



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The Fortune Society

Fortune Society teacher Rene Sing, left, instructs a student at one of the organization's job training classes for people who've been released from prison.

In the four years since he was released from prison, Richard Cobbs has applied to more than 75 jobs and gone on, by his estimate, at least 10 or 15 interviews.

On several occasions, work has appeared imminent. Employers tell him the interview was great, but they just need to do a background check — and that's where it seems, at least to him, the goodwill he's earned during the application process goes down the drain.

Cobbs, 52, has had experience doing sanitation, laundry, and catering work, and completed training in culinary arts during his most recent stint in prison. And though he has spent much of his adult life incarcerated over several convictions, he's been out for four years now, living at [The Fortune Society](#), a nonprofit organization that provides residents with food, shelter, and services ranging from substance abuse counseling to improv comedy classes.

But despite his experience and stability, hiring managers just can't seem to get past the 11-year sentence he served for attempted murder.

While it's certainly true that some of the 688,000 Americans released from prison each year have an easier time finding work, Cobbs' experience speaks to a larger point: Despite the nonprofit organizations and government agencies tasked with helping the formerly incarcerated find work after prison, doing so can be extremely difficult.

"I try to tell people, 'Listen, I made a mistake. I was young, and I'm sorry. Give me a chance,'" Cobbs tells Business Insider. "It seems like it falls on deaf ears all the time."

It's hard to overstate how important finding a job is for people first coming out of prison. It's a boost of self-confidence, a stabilizing force, and a means of supporting themselves as they work to reenter mainstream society.

In fact, studies have found that finding a job is the thing people are most worried about when they are released, even more so than housing, Michelle Alexander writes in her book on mass incarceration, "[The New Jim Crow](#)."

To that end, there are a number of organizations dedicated to helping people with their post-prison job searches.

At The Fortune Society, which has offices in Harlem and Long Island City, New York, Cobbs has been able to take an employment workshop that prepares former inmates for interviews and coaches them on how to respond when people ask about their criminal record. He's also doing an internship in The Fortune Society's kitchen.

In



Greyston Foundation

Greyston Bakery hires workers regardless of whether they have prior work experience.

In addition, there are for-profit employers dedicated to giving people jobs after they have been released from prison. These include [Greyston Bakery](#) in Yonkers, New York, which hires anyone who wants a job on a rolling basis, and [Cascade Engineering](#), a Michigan-based manufacturer [that works to hire formerly incarcerated people](#).

Nonetheless, the challenges people face are fierce. Though New York prohibits employers from using a criminal record to deny someone a job unless the offense is directly related to the position in question, this discrimination is hard to prove, and, if Cobbs' experience is any indicator, many employers still make judgments based on applicants' past convictions.

Add that discrimination to the fact that people coming out of prison are more likely to be undereducated and struggling with substance abuse issues than the general public, and it's easy to see why [a 2008 study from The Urban Institute](#) found that just 45% of Americans who had been to prison had a job eight months after being released.

"Many people released from prison have not ever had a legitimate job before — and they're not young kids anymore," says Steven Brown, president and CEO of the [Greyston Foundation](#), which operates Greyston Bakery. "We had a gentleman who had been in prison for 30 years and had never had a resume or been on a job interview."

Sensing a need to help bridge the gap for people coming out of prison, New York governor Andrew Cuomo created the [Work for Success](#) program in February of 2012 to link qualified applicants with companies looking to hire.

Presently, the program works with about 1,300 companies throughout New York State, including the restaurant chain IHOP.

Everyone deserves a second chance.

Did you know that in 2012, more than 25,000 employable men and women were released from prison in New York State?

And of those 25,000 people, almost 8,000 are already working.

Their bosses thought they deserved a chance. What about you?

Learn how the NYS **Work for Success** program can help *your* business.

Visit www.workforsuccess.ny.gov or call 1-888-469-7365

Work for Success

A promotional image for Work for Success.

Alphonso David, New York's deputy secretary for civil rights, says Work for Success has placed more than 3,700 formerly incarcerated workers in jobs in the food service, green technology, construction, and health services industries.

The program arranges for organizations like The Fortune Society to conduct an assessment of an inmate's work experience and skills when they first enter prison and follows up by giving them vocational training and information about how best to present themselves to prospective employers.

After the new employees are placed, Work for Success follows up with the companies that hired them to make sure things are going smoothly. David tells Business Insider he does not know how many people the program has attempted to place.

"We want to dispel the stigma that currently exists which is: if you commit a crime and are incarcerated, you are not only unfit to live in society but you can never be fully rehabilitated," David says. "If we do truly believe in rehabilitation, then we have to commit to it."

Perhaps the best remedy for fighting this stigma is education.

Take Byron Coles, a former inmate affiliated with the Fortune Society who was released in July after being imprisoned for two years for attempted burglary. Prior to his most recent period of incarceration, he had earned a masters degree in public administration and public affairs from Metropolitan College of New York, and had worked for over a decade in the nonprofit sector.

While he reports discrimination based on his criminal record similar to what Cobbs described, Coles was ultimately able to find a job as a case manager after three months of searching.



New York governor Andrew Cuomo was thwarted in his bid to get public funding for in-prison college education programs.

The impact of an advanced education is something the Cuomo administration is also acutely aware of. In February, the governor unveiled a plan to use public funds to pay for college courses inside New York prisons, about 20 years after such programs were defunded by federal and New York state laws.

Though studies suggest that prison education programs actually save the government money — because they help prevent the government from having to pay to lock people up a second time after they are released — Cuomo's plan faced strong opposition from Republican legislators, who circulated petitions with titles like "Hell No to Attica University."

Cuomo was ultimately forced to drop the plan, but David says the state is looking at other ways to put more college education programs in prison.

"School really told me that I was worth something, I was valued and that I was smart," says Fortune Society senior vice president Stanley Richards, who feels the college degree he earned while imprisoned for robbery laid the groundwork for his success after being released in 1991.

As for Richard Cobbs, who has a G.E.D. and took advantage of cooking classes while he was in prison, he has an interview next week for a job preparing food at FreshDirect — and he's confident that this time, things will fall into place.

"The only things I can do at this point are to pray, prepare myself for the interview, and put my best foot forward," Cobbs says. "I'm not going back to prison again. I don't care how bad things get or how frustrating things seem."

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