

Don't punish all ex-cons

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It was like opening a faucet when first one, then another, and finally half a dozen ex-cons were found to be on public payrolls around North Jersey.

And then the floodgates opened a few weeks ago with the revelation that 1,800 felony offenders were employed all over the state in taxpayer-funded agencies.

They're in the schools, in law enforcement and corrections, to name just a few.

In a few instances, like the case of Paterson's Javier Nuñez the employees had slipped through the cracks during standard pre-employment screening.

Nuñez, 40, has been charged with conspiracy and with taking money under the table as a Section 8 housing program employee. A former DYFS case worker convicted for using drugs in front of a child and warning a friend about a caseworker's visit, Nuñez got the job with Paterson after being paroled from state prison.

Nuñez was an exception in some ways. He got a good job after leaving state prison. And he stayed out of jail five years, much longer than most in this state, where 62 percent return to jail within three years.

Just when it seemed like things are about to turn around in the way ex-offenders are generally received in the workplace, a scandal like this one threatens the reentry momentum.

My concern is that as major national initiatives like the Second Chance Act under consideration by Congress are being launched to help ex-offenders, cases like Nuñez's may be cited as proof that ex-offenders are not a good risk.

And while New Jersey has no laws to restrict the hiring of ex-offenders at the municipal level, when "ex-con in trouble" hits the headlines, it's likely to turn the clock back on progress that has been made through long painful battles.

Receptive cities

Jersey City and Paterson have both been receptive to hiring ex-offenders in public works jobs. That's certainly a model others could follow.

State law doesn't restrict the hiring of ex-offenders in certain public positions. Teachers are an exception. To protect the health and safety of children, prospective employees are barred from classroom assignments if they've been convicted of drug offenses, child endangerment, or gun-related crimes. Caregivers who serve the elderly, another vulnerable group, also require background checks. That's the way it should be.

The Rev. Joseph Robinson, who runs ex-offender programs through Pilgrimage Outreach Ministries in Paterson,



sees the job issue as only one of the components for successful reintegration into society. But a job is the key to stability, self-sufficiency and a sense of self-confidence.

A job makes a person feel like a useful member of society. Lax screening or some other breakdown of procedure might have allowed people like Nu••to slip through the cracks.

For several years, the state Parole Board and other agencies in the criminal justice system have taken the lead in promoting re-entry programs by holding community forums around the state. They promote the important role communities must play in re-entry by providing job training, counseling, housing and programs supporting mental health and drug treatment.

Peter J.Barnes, Jr. the state Parole Board chairman, said it's up to each business and industry to develop screening procedures for potential employees. At the same time, he said, federal tax credits of \$2,400 per person are available to encourage more hiring of ex-offenders by the private sector.

New Jersey officials should remain open-minded about allowing opportunities for ex-offenders to make a way for themselves once they are released. Only a small fraction of the 1,800 public sector employees were discovered to have committed additional felonies after they got a job.

After many years of prodding employers to hire men and women with felony records, it would be a grave mistake to turn back the clock because of a few people with city jobs who continue a life of crime.

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