

Ministers and Employers Luncheon
Partners for a Prosperous Athens
8-28-06

Clay Gilbert, PPA Steering Committee chaired meeting

Recap: at last meeting ministers and employers discussed race and employability issues with a focus on creating a second chance for people with felony records who were unable to get jobs. Ministers held meeting to discuss next steps. Rev. Washington and Rev. Bolen provided an update from that meeting.

Rev. Bolen announced that the steering committee of ministers would meet again on September 20th and that October 9th would be a large PPA meeting for all area ministers and faith leaders.

Rev. Washington said that the ministers had identified partners and programs to assist in the process of supporting/mentoring people with a felony record to get and keep at job. There are some gaps in existing services, but we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Ministers don't want the employers to see them as the saviors, must have partnership to make this work. People need a "family" and the ministers want to partner with programs and employers to create this support system. Ministers would want to be able to have weekly or bi-weekly contact with the employers- it would be a two way street.

Also, wanted to address that this is not a selfish pursuit- ministers are not interested in this because it would mean more money in their offering plates, this effort would serve everyone, it won't just serve people in on congregation.

Red Petrovs helped define a felony and pointed out that many of the crimes considered felony offenses are not at all what people imagine. There was also discussion of 1st Offender status which appears on a person's record but does not count as a conviction. There is so much misunderstanding- could this group serve as a forum to educate the employers on these issues?

Someone asked- how do HR people look at criminal background reports and determine what they're seeing? Some HRs said they went in-depth and would go to the courthouse for the public records. The use Choice Point and GCIC. All appreciated when an applicant was upfront and honest.

David Sweat pointed out that some police departments can go into a record and change a 1st Offender status to a conviction administratively even when the person has not been found guilty legally.

Could this 1st Offender designation be removed from the record after a certain period of time? It would require a change in the legislation.

Many times public defenders will encourage people not to chose the 1st Offender deal because they're told that if the commit another crime it will be worse for them and of course this advise is usually given to minority youth.

Rev. Washington- this is why I want employers to work with the ministers. We can't change what the record says so we need to be able to work with people on a case by case basis.

Shropshire- we are so anxious to have someone make a recommendation on an applicant that we would set the circumstances aside.

Rev. Bolen- 1) I think education is critical. Many of the large companies have H.R. staff with good systems in place to take in new information, but what about the small and medium businesses. We need to work with them on this. 2) We also need to create this referral network, this "family."

UGA's Board of Regents policy dictates that it cannot hire a convicted felon, but because it's hiring is decentralized to each department, H.R. does not do a background check. UGA gets so many applications that the departments that finding a felony on the record weeds out some of the applications. And if they do get hired, as soon as someone doesn't like someone and they are reported and a record is found, then the employee has to be let go.

Athens Justice Project's Deborah Gowen- one person she worked with thought she didn't have a conviction but it turned out that she did, employers must not assume that they are being lied to, in many cases the person has been misinformed about their status.

Tammy Mize- Athens' Felony Drug Court works with people and has a very hard time helping people get jobs- good jobs. Another big factor is not having a GED or High School Diploma.

Many people do have training from the prison system and are very motivated since they know what is at stake.

Stanley Johnson- Dept. of Labor- We have seen examples of a company being bought out and the new owner, not looking at 3yr work history, but just doing background checks and firing people.

Also, prisons are overfilled so education is not guaranteed- you can go in without a GED and come out 10 years later without a GED.

Tony Sanchez- people need a chance, we're opening a cleaning business for ex-offenders to build self-esteem. It's an entry level job, but they can get a year or 18 months under their belt and can move on to a better job. Not everyone will meet the challenge, but they need to have the chance.

What do H.R. people need to try something like this?

Maybe something written out for their legal department.

What exactly do employers need?

What about Federal Bonding program and the prisoner release program that would give financial security to employers who were willing to employ ex-offenders.

Planned Curriculum

A wish list of what the employers want- skills

Many things could help, but an applicant still needs a GED.

Maybe we could work with Goodwill- they've attended the workforce committee meetings.

Athens Justice Project, TOPPSTEP, Drug Court- programs in place

Noramco- we are not allowed to hire felons, but we are very interested in the education piece. Even if we couldn't hire someone, we want to help them get the education they need to get a good job.

Delene Porter- Don't get too narrowly focused on just serving felons. This committee is uniquely positioned to address several of the underlying causes of poverty. The recommendations that come out of the PPA committees will fall on the churches, employers, and the service providers for implementation and they will include childcare, healthcare, transportation, and education. Make sure that you are getting organized and programming to impact many of these issues.

Rev. Washington- I agree that we must not just look at the felon population, I'm very concerned about education. We don't want to lose any partners at the table today either.

Mathis- Chestnut Grove Baptist- Need to educate youth about the consequences of life's choices- many do not know the consequences of their actions

Red Petrovs- Two items that we can discuss later:

Earned Income Tax Credit- there is a way to pass this tax credit on to your employees up front- it increases their take home pay and does not cost you anything

Work Keys- Athens Tech offers assessments; helps match applicants with the right skill levels with your business tasks. Athens Tech will do a job profile. Helps with new hires, reducing turnover, and increasing efficiency by showing you where employees need support. Clarke County School District is starting to use these and they have been shown to improve SAT scores. Also, EEOC approved.

Next meeting- September 25 from 11:30-1pm at DFCS