

Nationwide, as many as 60 percent of ex-prisoners are unemployed one year after their release from prison.

This signals pending disaster — not only for the ex-prisoners and their families, but also for the broader community. Without a source of income, many ex-prisoners have trouble finding housing. The stress of unemployment also puts people at higher risk of alcohol and drug abuse, particularly for those who already have a history of drug problems.

Confinement in prison distances prisoners from their community. Once they return, unemployment only adds to this sense of disconnection.

Unfortunately, many ex-prisoners lack even the basic skills to start hunting for a job once they get out. Nationwide, 70 percent of prison inmates function at the low end of the literacy range — making it tough to understand a classified ad, fill out a job application, or write a business letter. With so many challenges stacked against them, re-arrests are common within the first six months of release.

By contrast, employment provides ex-prisoners with many benefits: income, of course, but also identity, healthy social interactions, a sense of purpose, and stability. These help to promote a sense of well-being as well as a connection to the community – all of which cuts down on recidivism.

As a reentry ministry volunteer, you can help increase the chances of newly-released prisoners finding a job.

Here's how to get started:

1. **Talk to your pastor or ministry leader.** Discuss your desire to help returning prisoners find employment and look for other volunteers who will join you in creating a ministry team.
2. **Plan your strategies.** Schedule a team meeting to discuss the services you will offer job-seeking ex-prisoners. Define the scope of your outreach.
3. **Select training materials/methods.** How will you help ex-prisoners improve their people skills as well as their job-hunting skills? Plan a series of classes, workshops, or seminars and allow plenty of time for role playing.
4. **Access community resources.** Collect information about local agencies and organizations that assist ex-prisoners with employment needs. Cultivate a relationship with your nearest One Stop employment center, a government agency that helps many ex-prisoners find jobs.
5. **Research benefits of hiring ex-prisoners.** Learn how the Federal Bonding Program can protect employers and how Work Opportunity Tax Credits can benefit employers.
6. **Reach out to potential employers.** Once you have a training program set up, begin contacting potential employers in your church and community. Let them know what you are doing to help ex-prisoners improve their job readiness and why you believe hiring ex-prisoners might benefit employers.
7. **Listen to employers.** Give them a meaningful role in influencing the shape and type of job-readiness training and job-search services you offer.

8. **Provide job-application assistance.** Offer workshops on how to write a resume, how to fill out job applications, and how to deal with questions about prior felonies. Invite ex-prisoners who now have jobs to visit your workshops and help encourage current job-seekers.
9. **Match ex-prisoners with mentors.** It's important that returning citizens have a loving, moral adult who will help them think through the challenges of finding and keeping a job, coaching them and praying for them all along the way.

The work you do to help ex-prisoners get and keep good jobs is vital to their successful reentry. Every paycheck boosts morale and helps provide stability for ex-offenders and their families.

Here are some additional resources for helping ex-prisoners with employment needs:

- Prison Fellowship's ***Winning at Work*** curriculum that includes two courses: ***H.O.P.E. (Helping Ourselves Prepare for Employment)*** and ***H.I.R.E. (Here Is a Responsible Employee)***. These materials are available free to Prison Fellowship volunteers. To order, contact Prison Fellowship's Program Support Center at 800-251-7411.
- ***The Ex-Offender's Quick Job Hunting Guide*** by Ron Krannich, Ph.D. (Impact Publications, Manassas Park, VA)
- ***From Prison to Paycheck*** by Pam Hogan (Community Press, San Francisco, CA)

Contact your local Prison Fellowship staff at 800-251-7411 to learn more about reentry needs in your community and to connect with others involved in reentry ministry.

