

TRAINING

Building a second chance for job hunters with felony convictions

By Deborah M. Todd
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Months out of jail and several weeks into the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh's masonry training program, Ryan Kelley and Scott Snyder aren't making any excuses.

Kelley's decision to drive with a suspended license and the crash that seriously injured at least one person are burdens to be carried on his conscience and possibly his criminal record for the rest of his life. The aggravated assault, weapons and vandalism charges staining Snyder's record are accepted repercussions of his decisions.

Caked in layers of concrete and brick dust left from the training class, which pays \$50 per week over the course of 10 weeks, Kelley and Snyder weren't asking for absolution.

They only asked that, once the program ends, some employer could look beyond their felony convictions and give them second chances to earn an honest living.

The job search was horrible, said Snyder, who along with Kelley is a resident at Pittsburgh-based halfway house Renewal Inc. "All that was open was fast food. It would take forever to get out of the halfway house."

"I went to big corporations and small places," Kelley said. "Before I got (in the training program), I was just trying to get out of the (Renewal) build-



Ryan Kelley, 35, builds a "z wall" at the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh in Wilkinsburg, Pa. Kelley said he is excited for the opportunity to enter the job market. PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

ing — so I would apply for anything. It's hard."

In their cases, referrals from a Renewal counselor, a face-to-face conversation and a three-day trial period with Trade Institute founder Steve Shelton put the men back on a path toward gainful employment. But for millions with felony convictions hoping to build careers, just getting a foot in the door is often a discouragingly uphill battle.

The 2008 Urban Institute Justice Policy Center study, "Employment after Prison: A Longitudinal Study of Releasees in Three States," reported only 45 percent of participants were employed eight months after their release, despite 65 percent being hired at some point.

For a population esti-

imated at 12.3 million to 13.9 million five years ago by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a few months out of the workforce can equal years of separation in career advancement. The 2010 Pew Economic Policy report "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility" noted that a former inmate's incarceration reduces annual work time by nine weeks per year and diminishes annual earnings by 40 percent.

"People who break the law need to be held accountable and pay their debt to society. At the same time, the collateral costs of locking up 2.3 million people are piling higher and higher," said Adam Gelb, director of the Pew Center on the States Public Safety Per-

formance Project.

Beyond the hurdles of criminal background checks and felon-screening job applications, many of the formerly incarcerated had fallen behind in several demographic measures even before they went to jail. A 2005 study by University of California professor Joan Petersilia found 40 percent of state and federal prisoners lacked a high school diploma or GED, nearly one-third had a physical or mental disability, and more than half reported using drugs during the month they were arrested.

Taken all together, it's enough to solidify a lifetime of second-class citizenship, said Shelton, whose Trade Institute operates out of Hossanna House in Wilkins-

burg, Pa., and provides 10 weeks of training for 10 students at least twice per year.

"The way I look at it is these guys go to jail at a really young age — 17, 18, 19 years old. Then they get out at 26, 27, 28 years old. They don't have any education. They're a convicted felon; they don't have driver's licenses. What part of this system is set up for them to succeed?" he said.

General workplace policies surrounding individuals with felony convictions have been very guarded, but many of those barriers are slowly beginning to fall, according to Roberta Meyers, executive director of the New York-based advocacy organization National H.I.R.E. Network.

Small- to medium-size businesses that have traditionally taken the lead when it comes to hiring people with criminal backgrounds are stepping up in greater numbers, Meyers said. Large corporations are also starting to get on board by eliminating questions about criminal history on applications and by working directly with organizations designed to bring individuals with fel-

ony convictions back into the workforce.

Partially attributing the shift to a 2012 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission update of discrimination laws surrounding pre-employment inquiries for the formerly incarcerated, Meyers said the single greatest factor in helping gain employment could be skills training acquired during time in prison.