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States Help Ex-Inmates Find Jobs

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

Faced with yawning budget gaps and high unemployment, California, Michigan, New York and several other states are attacking both problems with a surprising strategy: helping ex-convicts find jobs to keep them from ending up back in prison.

The approach is backed by prisoner advocates as well as liberal and conservative government officials, who say it pays off in cold, hard numbers. Michigan, for example, spends \$35,000 a year to keep someone in prison — more than the cost of educating a [University of Michigan](#) student. Through vigorous job placement programs and prudent use of parole, state officials say they have cut the prison population by 7,500, or about 15 percent, over the last four years, yielding more than \$200 million in annual savings. Michigan spends \$56 million a year on various re-entry programs, including substance abuse treatment and job training.

“We had a \$2 billion prison budget, and if you look at the costs saved by not having the system the size it was, we save a lot of money,” said Patricia Caruso, who was Michigan’s corrections commissioner from 2003 through 2010. “If we spend some of that \$2 billion on something else — like re-entry programs — and that results in success, that’s a better approach.”

All told, the 50 states and the federal government spend \$69 billion a year to house two million

prisoners, prompting many budget cutters to see billions in potential savings by trimming the prison population. Each year, more than 600,000 inmates are released nationwide, but studies show that two-thirds are re-arrested within three years.

“An exorbitant amount of money is dedicated to incarcerating people,” said Nancy La Vigne, director of the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. “There are ways you can go about reducing the number of people incarcerated. The best way to help them successfully integrate into society and become independent, law-abiding citizens is to make sure they get a job.”

Pushed by faith-based organizations and helped by federal stimulus money, California, Michigan, New York and other states expanded jobs programs in recent years to give prisoners a second chance and to reduce recidivism. The nation’s overall jobless rate is 9.4 percent, but various studies have found unemployment rates of 50 percent or higher for former prisoners nine months or a year after their release.

Many states remain enthusiastic about the re-entry programs, but in a few states facing deficits, like Kansas, officials are cutting them back, partly because of the curtailment of federal stimulus dollars that helped finance them.

“There’s a lot of national momentum to expand strategies to reduce recidivism, and a lot of that is focusing on connecting people to jobs,” said Michael Thompson, director of the Council of State Governments Justice Center, a research organization for state policy makers. “At the same time, some states that want to accomplish those goals are concerned about cutting money where they can and are putting some of these programs on the chopping block.”

Brian Vork, executive director of 70 Times 7 Life Recovery, a faith-based nonprofit in Holland, Mich., that helped place 60 former prisoners into jobs last year, said he had seen firsthand what a difference a job can make. His organization, whose name refers to a [biblical passage](#) in which Jesus speaks of how many times to forgive sinners, has set up a construction company — part apprenticeship program, part life-skills mentor — that allows him to size up the offenders who participate.

“You get some people who really want to change, and then you get some people who want all the bad things to stop happening to them regardless of their behavior,” Mr. Vork said. “What makes it all worthwhile is when you see the light bulb go off in some people.”

Take Robert Satterfield, 46, who spent five and a half years in prison on embezzlement and other charges. After being released, he spent several fruitless months searching for work and then turned to 70 Times 7 for guidance and training. Mr. Vork recommended him to Premier Finishing, a metalworking company with 16 employees.

Premier’s owner, Andy Ribbens, said the six former inmates working for him were among his best employees. “These guys will do whatever it takes,” he said. “Maybe they had their come-to-Jesus moment in prison: ‘If I ever get out of here, I don’t want to ever go back.’ Their attitude is second to none, although it’s not every ex-offender.”

Mr. Satterfield is grateful for his second chance. He has received several raises since being hired 16 months ago, with his pay jumping to \$13 an hour from \$9.

“I feel blessed that this company is willing to give me a chance,” he said. “I’m giving back now. I’m part of the taxpaying rolls. I don’t like paying taxes, but I prefer that to being on food stamps.”

In New York, the state and city are channeling money to groups like America Works and the Center for Employment Opportunities to train and place offenders, while Illinois is sending money to the Safer Foundation in Chicago.

Assisted by federal stimulus funds, several states have provided employers with wage subsidies — up to \$2,500 in New York’s case — if they hire an offender for at least six months.

With 170,000 inmates, California is under orders from a federal judge to reduce its prison population by about 25,000 because of severe overcrowding. That has many Californians worried that a flood of newly released inmates will cause crime to spike.

Jerry Brown, the governor of California, has proposed expanding county job-placement programs for former inmates as part of a broader move to shift more state prisoners to county jails.

Meanwhile, federal support is drying up. Three years ago, under President **George W. Bush**, Congress passed the Second Chance Act in a bipartisan vote. It gave states money for re-entry programs, including \$100 million in the year that ended last September. While no **federal budget** has yet been passed for this fiscal year, the Senate Appropriations Committee has voted to cut funding to \$50 million.

“The reality is many of these programs are disappearing,” said Joan Petersilia, a Stanford law professor and an adviser to Mr. Brown on criminal justice matters.

While state officials and prisoner advocates argue that these job programs for prisoners are worth the investment, the efforts sometimes face angry resistance.

“We often hear, why on earth should we want to help these guys, and where is the help for my son and daughter who haven’t done anything wrong?” said Pat Nolan, a former Republican leader of the California State Assembly who served prison time for taking bribes and is now vice president of the Prison Fellowship, a Christian ministry to prisoners. “I don’t think there should be a preference for someone with a record, but there shouldn’t be a permanent black mark against them either, unless we want to condemn them to life on the margins of society and elicit the behavior that leads to.”

Glenn E. Martin, vice president with the Fortune Society, a Manhattan group that helps offenders find jobs, said that persistently high unemployment had made placing former inmates even more challenging. “You have many more people in the labor market who are overqualified, and that makes it much more competitive for our people,” he said.

Candice Ellison, 22, a **New Yorker** who spent two and a half years in prison for assault, has applied for scores of jobs in the last six months, to no avail. She has turned to the Fortune Society, and it has helped her buy interview clothes and coached her on how to discuss her conviction with prospective

employers.

“Some of my high school friends say it’s not that hard to get a job, but for people like me with a criminal background, it’s like 20 times harder,” she said.



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