

Program/Initiative Title: Workforce Shortage Solution: Hiring Past Offenders Looking for Re-entry  
WDA Name: Winona Workforce Development Board/Winona WorkForce Center

**Overview describing the innovative practice**

Creation and coordination of an employer event that educates employers on hiring those with criminal backgrounds – supporting the employment of a population with barriers, and supporting employers during this time of a workforce shortage. The purpose is for employers to learn about the statistics, myths, and legalities around hiring individuals with criminal backgrounds, hear from employers about their experiences, challenges, and successes, hear from those affiliated in the criminal justice system about their experiences returning to employment, and learn about the various resources available to employers and past offenders to aid in successful employment. This is a win/win/win initiative for employers, those with criminal backgrounds seeking employment, and the community organizations that support them.

**Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)**

Improved ability to seek and obtain employment - opens the door and helps remove the barriers for individuals with criminal backgrounds. Educates job seekers with criminal backgrounds on what employers are looking for, fearful of, and their processes.

**Employer/Community impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for non-jobseekers)**

Employers can address the workforce shortage with an untapped applicant pool and learn more about hiring past offenders and the resources that are available to them. Remove the fears, stigma, and perceptions.

**Identification of those involved, including collaborators**

Led by the Winona WorkForce Center in partnership and collaboration with the following organizations: Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), Winona County Attorney's Office, Winona Area SHRM, Minnesota State College - Southeast, Winona Area Chamber of Commerce.

**Leveraging/alignment of outside resources**

Outside speakers and panelists are involved, such as an employment attorney skilled in this area, resource professionals in DOC, DEED, MINNCOR, TC Rise, local probation office, and drug court, employers who have a solid history of hiring individuals with criminal backgrounds, and past offenders.

The event builds employer understanding and interest in the services offered at the WorkForce Centers. The more employers see the value of the Centers, the more engagement there is. More employers seek services now from the Winona WorkForce Center than just posting a job or having a job fair. Partnerships have grown with the local SHRM group, the Chamber, Project FINE, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, and the regional 7 Rivers Alliance because of this and other efforts like the workforce survey. These efforts supporting employers have a positive effect on job seekers, specifically those individuals with criminal backgrounds in this case.

**Ideas for replication/lessons learned**

This takes a lot of coordination with multiple people and organizations, and involves a lot of communication. A committed working group of key partners is helpful. There is a strong interest from community partners on this topic/action. You will need someone who is connected and able to work with and engage both community partners and employers.