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# CORRECTIONS

*Today*

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Magazine

## Eco-Friendly Corrections



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## Eco-Friendly Corrections

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# Entrepreneurship: Catalyst for Successful Reentry

By Bobby Clark and Kim Potter-Blair

**F**or some ex-offenders, entrepreneurship offers new opportunities for successful reentry to the community and positive outcomes for the individuals and their families. Reducing recidivism and empowering ex-offenders to start their own businesses is a great strategy that is being well received across the U.S. Entrepreneurship provides a means to create jobs for ex-offenders, empowering them to earn a living wage more than capable of sustaining a family.

## Stating the Facts

In March 2009, the Pew Center on the States released *One in 31, the Long Reach of American Corrections*, which concluded that “the sentencing and release laws passed in the 1980s and 1990s put so many more people behind bars that last year the incarcerated population reached 2.3 million and, for the first time, one in 100 adults was in prison or jail.” The report also revealed that more than 5 million people are on probation or parole, up from 1.6 million 25 years ago. This means that one in 45 U.S. adults is under criminal justice supervision, and combined with those in correctional facilities, one in every 31 adults, or 3.2 percent, is under some form of correctional control.

Research has documented entrepreneurship and self-employment as benefits to disadvantaged and hard-to-serve individuals. The John Jay College’s Prison Reentry Institute (PRI) 2007 report *Venturing Beyond the Gates: Facilitating Successful Reentry with Entrepreneurship* summarized the benefits of entrepreneurship for ex-offenders, describing it as “a viable alternative to traditional employment opportunities for disadvantaged and marginalized individuals all over the world.” The report goes on to explain that “as more and more people return from prison ... entrepreneurship may represent a means of capitalizing on an underutilized pool of human resources.”

While researchers agree that self-employment may not be a viable option for many individuals leaving prison, the mere fact of the exposure to entrepreneurship training can factor in successful reentry to the community. PRI examined opportunities arising from understanding small business operations: “A small percentage may have the resources and mindset to use entrepreneurship as the key to their successful reintegration, either as their sole form of employment, or in addition to a traditional job. Others will open a business once they have achieved reentry stability through other forms of employment.”

Even with entrepreneur training received in prison or jail, the ex-offender’s first need is finding a job. Most ex-offenders do not return to a waiting job or business, but they still face the average financial obligations, including housing, transportation, child support, other debts, and perhaps even tax problems, so the initial focus should be on finding a job. Self-employment and starting a business requires planning, networking and resources. Low-cost, low-risk start-ups, such as a cleaning, house painting or lawn-mowing business whose services can be provided after work hours and on weekends, can be excellent options to supplement minimum wage or low-wage income that often results from lower-level skills and a criminal record.



**GREEN  
ENTREPRENEUR  
PROGRAM**



PEP participant “John” presents his business plan for an electrical and lighting business that would provide custom and innovative design, installation and servicing of accent lighting and alternative power sources during the PEP Business Plan Competition held Dec. 2-3, 2010.

In its 2007 report, PRI described the empowerment potential of self-employment in a variety of ways, some of which do not necessarily lead to small business ownership. For example, since the concept of empowerment is inherent to entrepreneurial thinking, “exposure to entrepreneurial training will reshape their perspective on their role in society. These individuals may never become entrepreneurs themselves, but can use their entrepreneurship training to improve their performance as employees and to proactively engage with their families and communities.” Entrepreneurship training teaches problem-solving, critical thinking and teamwork skills, which are highly valuable in any job. Research also suggests that many individuals with criminal records possess high entrepreneurial aptitude and share common traits ascribed to successful entrepreneurs such as risk taking.

## One-of-a Kind Green Entrepreneur Program

The Green Entrepreneur Program in Kentucky is one example of an innovative entrepreneurship training program adapted for inmates and ex-offenders. The program was established in early 2010 by Sustainable Business Ventures, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Lexington, Ky. The eight-week program serves low-income 18- to 24-year-olds with a combination of entrepreneur and business plan training and work placement. Many of these at-risk young adults had already been involved with the criminal justice system.

“The biggest impact of my ‘green’ training is it made me realize that especially as a mom, that I have to make this an OK world for my son,” said Green Entrepreneur participant Kim Baker. Kim was 19 years old at the time of the training with a three-year-old child. She is now a freshman at Berea College living in its Ecovillage and is planning a minor in environmental studies.

The Green Entrepreneur Program was funded by the Bluegrass Workforce Investment Board (BGWIB) using federal stimulus dollars. BGWIB manages the Central Kentucky Job Centers, which is the one-stop system for work force support in the 17-county Bluegrass region.



Volunteers Kim Potter-Blair (left) Davis Rushing (center) and Phil Rundle (right) listen to business plan presentations and provide feedback during the PEP business plan competition June 10-11, 2010.

At the core of this entrepreneurial program is a 10-day entrepreneur training program that starts with the basics: life skills/financial literacy; idea generation, business concept and elevator pitch; accounting, bookkeeping and financials; introduction to business operations; legal and people resources; and business plan development and orientation.

Participants are placed in work assignments for 12 days to provide valuable job skills. The program has proved to be a success, with 10 of 23 graduates getting full-time jobs and each participant receiving a scholarship for post-secondary education and training.

BGWIB, Kentucky Department of Corrections officials and nonprofits Sustainable Business Ventures and Jubilee Jobs of Lexington have developed a plan and are seeking funding to pilot an additional entrepreneur program at Blackburn Correction Complex, a minimum-security prison in Lexington. BGWIB serves low-income, long-term unemployed and other target groups in the Workforce Investment Act. Ex-offenders are one of the hardest to serve groups because of their criminal records.

“Training ex-offenders to be entrepreneurs is probably the best way to prevent them from re-offending,” said Lenny Stoltz, executive director of BGWIB. “It puts them in control of their future.”

In August 2010, Kentucky leaders from all three branches of government announced a new partnership with the Pew Center on the States to develop strategies for reducing recidivism while holding offenders accountable and controlling corrections spending. “We are pleased to support an innovative program that teaches inmates and ex-offenders how to start their own businesses in order for them to be able to be successful in their lives after incarceration. We expect their success will also impact their rate of recidivism in a positive manner,” said DOC Commissioner LaDonna H. Thompson.

## Prison Entrepreneurship Program

Another entrepreneur program outside of Houston, Texas, provides training to inmates while in prison and supports them after release. Recidivism for graduates is less than 10 percent. The successful Prison Entrepreneurship Program



PEP Class 13 participants listen to speakers at their graduation ceremony on June 11, 2010, and for many this is the first time they have worn a cap and gown.

(PEP) was started in 2004. More than 600 inmates have graduated from the five-month, life-transforming program. Inmates are recruited to participate from more than 60 Texas prisons. Approximately 100 inmates are selected every five months. “Our mission is to stimulate positive life transformation for executives and inmates, uniting them through entrepreneurial passion, education and mentoring,” said Bert Smith, CEO of PEP.

PEP combines intensive business skill development with stringent character building. The broad business curriculum covers professional writing; written and oral presentations; accounting and financial analysis; sales and marketing; interviewing; computer literacy; personal finance; and business etiquette. The program’s 10 driving values (including Fresh Start Attitude, Innovation, Integrity and Accountability) shape the character-building components. Each participant gains confidence and self-esteem by conceiving, writing and presenting his own business plan.

PEP operates within the Cleveland Correctional Center north of Houston and maintains reentry support networks in Houston and Dallas. Twenty program staff members work with more than 1,300 volunteers each year and an annual budget of \$1.5 million, which is all funded through private donations.

One key to success is the involvement of many volunteers including business owners, entrepreneurs and MBA students. Six events are held during each program leading up to a business plan competition and graduation. For many inmates, this is the first graduation ceremony in which they have participated.

“Green” business plans are not uncommon. The winning business plan of Class 14 in December 2010 was submitted by “John.” His business, Aurora Electrical & Lighting, would provide custom and innovative design, installation and servicing of accent lighting and alternative power sources. He told the judges he would implement a “going green” policy that would help his clients reduce their carbon footprints — and differentiate his business. “Clint,” a Class 12 finalist, was a licensed plumber before going to prison. His PEP business plan was to start an irrigation business; he would plant a tree in every customer’s yard as a way to give back and help the environment.

A critical part of PEP is its post-release support. Graduates are met at the gate by a PEP graduate and presented a duffle bag of toiletries, clothes and other essentials. The just-released graduate is taken to the restaurant of his choice for his first meal, then to a PEP-managed transitional home. PEP also provides computer access, help with resumes, job leads, social activities and weekly classes on entrepreneurship and life skills. Many graduates choose to be paired with mentors. Nearly 100 percent of graduates find jobs within 90 days of release. Since inception, graduates have started 75 businesses, 50 of which are still operational despite the economy.

## National “Green Focus” Business Model

Imagine combining green entrepreneur training, green job skills training and asset building through individual development accounts (IDAs) to serve inmates,

ex-offenders and families of the incarcerated. This new national business model concept was presented at the annual Asset Learning Conference in September 2010, sponsored by the Corporation for Enterprise Development. IDAs are savings programs for low-income individuals, like most ex-offenders and their families. There are organizations that will match up to \$2,000 in personal savings, with \$4,000 or more that can be used for a down payment for a home, training and education or seed money to start a business.

IDAs, with accompanying financial literacy training and counseling, have emerged as valuable tools for supporting asset building among low- to moderate-income households. Small business development using entrepreneurial training strategies has also demonstrated relevance to enabling low- to moderate-income households achieve greater economic self-sufficiency. This business model would emphasize green business development, but the program would be applicable to other types of businesses.

With recidivism rates continuing to escalate, the growth in consumer interest and commercial opportunities in green business presents ex-offenders with opportunities to chart new paths. Accordingly, this conceptual model would combine elements of success from all three programmatic areas to test enhanced synergy among them. The United Way of the Bluegrass was awarded \$1 million for an IDA program that will include ex-offenders in their target groups to serve. The United Way will provide up to 85 individuals/families each year for five years with a \$4,000 match to their \$2,000 in savings.

## Green Job Skills Training

*The Clean Energy Economy: Repowering Jobs, Businesses and Investments Across America* is a groundbreaking analysis and report issued by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The June 2009 report reveals that “jobs and businesses in the emerging clean energy economy have grown at a faster rate than U.S. jobs overall.” The report gave strong support for jobs in this modern arena based upon the conclusion that this industry is “poised for even greater growth, driven by increasing consumer demand, venture capital infusions by investors eager to capitalize on new market opportunities, and policy reforms by federal and state lawmakers seeking to spur America’s fiscal recovery, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and protect the environment.”

According to the report, examples of low- and moderate-skilled green jobs that can be included in training inmates and ex-offenders in green job skills are:

- Weatherization;
- Building retrofit component parts;
- Manufacturing;
- Landscaping;
- Solar panel assembly and installation;
- Plumbing and electrical helpers and apprentices; and
- Cleaning business using environmentally friendly products.

The green corrections team at the University of Kentucky is working toward a pilot program that would involve a state correctional facility in Kentucky. The



Prison Entrepreneurship Program CEO Bert Smith (left) and Blackburn Correctional Complex (Lexington, Ky.) Warden Don Bottom (right) between sessions at the Business Plan Competition held at the Cleveland Unit north of Houston June 10-11, 2010.

proposed project would focus on designing and retrofitting state correctional facilities in a manner that would promote sustainability-oriented advances in energy, water and agriculture within the prison site. This program also seeks to develop an offender green collar jobs training program on site that would allow inmates to gain green building and maintenance skills that can be employed both during their incarceration and upon their return to the community. The university team includes teachers, administrators and researchers with expertise in passive and active solar architecture, energy efficiency and resource conservation, training program development and sustainable agricultural practices.

Recently, Henkels & McCoy, one of the largest privately held engineering, project management, construction and training firms in the United States, was granted a substantial monetary award by the Central Ohio Workforce Investment Corp. to design and implement the Re-entry/Universal Customer Access Center. This will allow the firm to provide training services as well as core and intensive services to the reentry population, their families and the at-risk, dislocated community at large. The universal customer component has the ability to act as a diversion program for those who are on the path to incarceration, or are still facing the multiple barriers against them as an ex-offender, by engaging, supporting and training them to be fierce competitors in the labor market. Sustainable Business Ventures will be working with Henkels & McCoy to roll out this program April 4, 2011, in Columbus, Ohio, and leveraging monies awarded to raise additional funds to implement more comprehensive in-prison entrepreneur training programs that focus on community-based models.

In conclusion, transcending poverty through business start-up and development has a demonstrated success assisting the hard-to-employ individuals such as welfare recipients, people with disabilities, immigrants and refugees — and ex-offenders returning to their families and communities after a term of imprisonment.

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