LOUISIANA TIMES-PICAYUNE, March 15, 2000

Job Fairs drawing firms hoping to capture new workers Felons get skills, then jobinterviews

LaVan Woodberry stood patiently in line along with the rest of applicants in a sea of denim work pants and sparkling white tennis shoes. All around him the room was full of recruiters touting solid wages in everything from shipbuilding to home construction.

Like most other job fairs, human resource managers were spouting off workplace catch phrases such as "win-win" and outlining a litany of tantalizing benefits. But this one had a twist: The job hunters were prison inmates, interviewing under the watchful eyes of a cadre of armed guards dressed in smart black and red uniforms and standing at hair-rigger attention.

"I'm interested in a good job," Woodberry, 23, of New Orleans said, introducing himself with a firm handshake to Joe Jarvis, director of work-force training and development at Litton Avondale Industries.

"Well, we have about 800, mostly steel workers, welders and shipfitters," Jarvis said.

"What's the starting pay?" Woodberry asked, sliding the interviewer a copy of his resume.

"About $7 to $8 an hour, but it depends on experience," Jarvis told him.

Experience is what Woodberry has: six months of welding class and shipfitting in The northern yard of the Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel. But he has little time. After 3 1/2 years behind bars on a cocaine possession and distribution conviction, he's headed back home in 22 days.

"I know one thing: I'm not going to be out on the streets again," Woodberry said. "I want to get out and take care of my kids the right way."

With the state's unemployment rate hovering at a near all-time low but thousands of shipbuilding and industrial manufacturing jobs to fill, employers are turning to what state labor and corrections officials say is the biggest trained, employable work force: the burgeoning population behind bars. And the state is rewarding them with tax credits as large as $2,400 per prisoner employed in work-release programs.

Nearly 20 employers collected applications at the fair Tuesday, one of the first of its kind sponsored by the state Department of Labor.

"We know 500 guys are coming out of this facility this year," state Labor Secretary Garey Forster said during a tour of Hunt's vocational training operations Tuesday. "We need to train them before they come out. When an inmate is released, he's put in a work-release program. We can ease the burden on the state, on welfare. Put money in their pockets, place them in training for work, keep them in jobs for six months. It sure as heck beats the $10 and a bus ticket they typically get."

Coupled with inventive on-site vocational training, prison officials say job fairs help ease inmates -- many with stunted educations as well as the burden of a rap sheet - back into the community. The prisoners are funneled to restrictive work-release centers such as the one run by Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff Charles Foti, which pays the convicts room and board and buses them to and from their jobs.

"They have been trained to become productive citizens who no longer are a drain on the state," Hunt's Deputy Warden Cornel Hubert said. "They have to worry about filling out applications saying they're convicted felons who've done some time. This way everything's up front."

Most of the applicants Tuesday were nonviolent felons with garden-variety drug convictions. All are set for release from the prison in the next year. But some, such as Albert Harris of New Orleans, convicted 10 years ago of attempted murder, conceded he faces an uphill battle in finding a job, though most employers did not probe applicants about their crimes -- yet.

"I just want a job," said Harris, 53. " I've done my time. I've paid my dues."

"There are a lot of jobs vacant out there," said Randy Patrick, a recruiter for St. James Stevedoring in Convent. "Everyone now wants to go into computer jobs, and nobody wants the jobs anymore like crane operators or deckhands. People with limited educations and the will to work can do these jobs and move up."

Forster and Hunt Warden Marty Lensing led Raymond Uhalde, deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, on a tour of the prison's pioneering welding, carpentry and heating and air-conditioning repair shops.

With similarly cresting prison populations nationwide, President Clinton wants to pour about $200 million from next year's federal Labor and Justice department budgets into programs like those at Hunt, Uhalde said. Currently, Louisiana is using a creative Band-Aid fix, bleeding extra money -- about $200,000 -- from job-training programs for disadvantaged workers.

"We don't have a good system of releasing offenders back into the community," Uhalde said. "The Justice Department and the Labor Department need to work

together. It's the first time this is being formally recognized. I like what I see here. Louisiana is being very aggressive about addressing this."

Uhalde was most impressed with Hunt's Project Impact, an inventive but intensive incarceration program in which nonviolent first offenders serve six-month sentences in a boot camp complete with drill sergeants, crack-of-dawn exercise routines and exhaustive daily job training in welding and other fields.

Tavalyn Session, 23, of Destrehan, who is serving a sentence for cocaine distribution at the nearby Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, wore the characteristic khaki fatigues as she and other boot camp participants fanned out across the training center Tuesday.

Answering interviewers in the staccato "Sir! Yes, sir!" Session said she was Interested in a welding job, a field she's been training in for three months.

"We find that women make wonderful welders because they tend to be more precise," one recruiter told Session, who beamed as she handed over her resume.

"I wanted to do welding because it's a challenge," she said. "I'm getting my GED. I could never dream of doing something like this, especially here. I know I'm never coming back."

Lyndon Matthews, a former prisoner at Hunt Correctional Center and now a construction firm owner, talks to a Hunt inmate during a job fair. With the state's unemployment rate near an all-time low, employers are turning to soon-to-be-released prisoners.
LOS ANGELES TIMES May 18, 2000

Jail's Job Fair Raises Hopes for Inmates Employment: Three dozen men nearing the end of their sentences practice interview skills after taking trade classes behind bars.

Dennis Stratton is looking for a few good men and he thinks he may have found Them Wednesday at--of all places--a jail.

Busily interviewing prospective employees for a group of painting and roofing companies he represents, Stratton and other companies were screening potential candidates Wednesday at a job fair at the Pitchess Detention Center in Castaic.

About three-dozen inmates enrolled in vocational training classes at Pitchess Tested their interview skills and learned more about jobs that may be available once they complete their jail terms. Stratton said he was impressed with the pool of candidates, noting that many of them have appropriate backgrounds.

"There are a lot of well-trained, experienced people here," he said. "There is a good fit for everyone I've interviewed so far at one of these companies. I guarantee that a few businesses will be following up with some of these guys."

The job fair is a joint project of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District. The district pioneered vocational education programs in jails nearly 30 years ago.

Sheriff's officials selected inmates who were nearing the end of their sentences And groomed them for Wednesday's interviews. The inmates watched instructional videos, prepared their resumes and polished their personalities.

The room where the interviews took place was abuzz with optimism by employers And inmates. Instead of introducing themselves to a group of stylishly dressed applicants, employers talked to young men wearing lime-colored jumpsuits and sandals.

One of those interested was 20-year-old Clifton Jones, who is serving three months for cocaine possession. Jones said he hopes it's the first and last time he will have to attend a job fair in jail.

Although he believes his job at a print company will be waiting for him when he Is released, he said the event provided good training.

"The more practice you have, the better chance you will have in the employment field," he said. "This is one of the best things to happen in the jail system. Inmates are given a chance to do something positive so they don't end up back here."

Organizers are betting on that notion. Many of the Pitchess inmates serve short Jail terms with an average stay of 41 days. Realizing that inmates will return to society soon, the county created vocational classes at the jail. More than 12,000 inmates have taken computer, painting and printing classes and 175 were placed in the job sector last year, said Don Carmack, the director of the jail's Correctional Education Division.

"If people come back to the community the same way they left it, it will be a perpetual cycle," Carmack said. "One of the most disheartening things to see is someone who took classes in jail but landed right back behind bars."

The job fair was first held last year, but only two inmates were called back by businesses, Carmack said, and neither was hired.

With a nationwide record low unemployment rate, most newly released inmates are still able to find employment, said Terry Thornton, a spokeswoman for the

California Department of Corrections.

The Department of Corrections operates three job placement programs, the oldest of which had an 83% success rate last year, Thornton said.

"There will always be a challenge for ex-offenders to find jobs," she said. "But we are seeing that more people on parole are obtaining jobs because of the stronger economy."

The number of convicted felons returning to jail has also dropped. About 70% of inmates were convicted of another crime and returned to jail during the late 1980s, according to Department of Corrections statistics. Last year, that number dropped to 55%, the department reports.

While encouraged, officials recognize that job placement programs will succeed only if interested inmates are motivated.

"It's a steppingstone on the right path," said 18-year-old Carlos Calderon, who has served three months of a one-year sentence for strong-armed robbery. "If you are messing up in jail, how are you going to make it in the real world? These programs are giving us the experience we need."

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR May 25, 2000

Boom economy taps prison labor The private sector is short of workers, but are cellblocks the right place to look?

The room could be anywhere in corporate America. Fans hum, soldering irons sizzle, wire cutters snip.

But the women who assemble computer components here are doing time for murder, drug pushing, embezzlement.

"I'm a seven-time loser," says Cathy Ramirez, a convicted drug-seller working at this state project at the Central California Women's Facility. "But this time around, I'll have some money and a job waiting for me when I get out, so I won't come back for the eighth time."

Such jobs increasingly are providing more than just training and hope for inmates. In a booming US economy hungry for workers of all kinds, prisons represent a vast pool of workers. And growing numbers of them, 80,000 at present, are being tapped for work in the private-sector as well as making license plates.

But amid calls for expanded inmate employment, an enduring debate is coming into sharper focus: Should prison labor be welcomed as a tool of rehabilitation and economic growth, or does it steal jobs from law-abiding Americans?

Prison officials and civil libertarians say the issue is a no-brainer: Keep inmates out of trouble while building job skills and work habits. But a growing chorus of politicians, unions, and business leaders is saying "hold your computer harness - watch who you're putting out of work."

"The US economy is so hot and employers so desperate that these captive pools of low-wage workers suddenly look extremely appealing," says Barbara Auerbach, manager of a US Justice Department program that regulates prison labor. "But there are very many people ... who are not happy about it because of the fear of unfair competition. The conflict is forcing a major debate."

To some, America's record-high inmate population makes prisons a natural place to turn to ease the economy's labor crunch.

The appeal of prison labor is simple. It costs less. In traditional prison jobs, for example, inmates work for pennies making clothing, furniture, and other items for government agencies.

The new and growing issue lies with private-sector industries. In these, despite laws that require inmates to make the "prevailing wage" for a given commodity, wages often end up close to the federal minimum, because contractors admit that prison labor is untrained and turnover high.

Those who employ convicts also save bundles in health insurance, unemployment insurance, payroll and Social Security taxes, workers compensation, and vacation time.

Such advantages have paved the way for 30 states over the past 20 years to enact laws permitting the use of convict labor by private enterprise. Prisoners now help consumers book airline tickets, pack and ship computer software, and stock Christmas toys. Windfall profits from prison labor have led to a boom in the building of private prisons.

"Prison labor has been a fabulous success for us," says Jack Cleveland of Server Technologies, which employs inmates at the Central California Women's Facility To make computer components. "The workforce can expand and contract to our needs ...which saves us a lot."

The program also dramatically lowers the likelihood of repeat offenses: only 6 percent for those in the program, compared with more than 60 percent for the prison as a whole.

The prisoners make minimum wage ($5.75 an hour), with earnings split between paying room and board, victim's restitution, family, and savings.

But the effort's flip side is concern over competition and jobs.

"When Oregon state prisons got into my business, it basically dried up the entire private market," says John Palatiello, president of the Management Association for Private Photogrammetric Surveyors, whose member firms design electronic maps. "There are no longer any private firms doing the work that Oregon prisoners are now doing. They basically created a monopoly."

Such concerns were not as much at issue when the number of US prisoners wasn't So high. The number of inmates has grown from 1.2 million to 2 million in the past eight years. About 80,000 now hold conventional jobs, earning from 25 cents to $7 per hour mostly for government but also for private industry. And the number of private-sector programs has doubled since 1995.

"This is a serious problem that is poised to explode into a bigger problem," says Gordon Lafer, a political scientist at the University of Oregon. "Until there is a change in the number and severity of mandatory sentencing laws, we are going to see rising political pressure to keep prison labor from swamping free labor."

Prison officials say the growing stream of inmates will create discipline problems if they have nothing to do. But many labor and business officials say the unlevel playing field promises to destroy more free-labor jobs.

"Prisoners should never be used in competition with free labor or to replace free labor," says Greg Woodhead, a senior economist at the AFL-CIO.

Too often, he says, a prison job gained is a civilian job lost. Fabray Gloves of Wisconsin, for instance, shut down its free-market operations in that state after it won a contract using prison labor. In Georgia, a recycling operation by prisoners unwittingly scuttled jobs for people transitioning from welfare to work.

A final beef, brought out in recent congressional hearings, is that work programs ignore prisoners' deeper needs: for education, drug-abuse programs, and general behavioral counseling. "Having prisoners make furniture or computer parts or whatever all day long may help wardens deal with discipline issues, but it is not helping the prisoners with what they really need," says Joe Tyson, a lobbyist for the US Chamber of Commerce.

While many states grapple with how to balance both sets of concerns, two bills In Congress are coming at the issue from different angles.

One, offered by Michigan Rep. Pete Hoekstra (R), would curtail a federal program which mandates that federal agencies buy prison-made products. A second, by Florida's Bill McCollum (R), would allow the Federal Bureau of Prisons to include more private-sector jobs. A combined bill could mandate that state-run prison programs better compete with private companies and allow companies to hire federal inmates.

Many observers call for society-wide debate on prison labor.

"That issue needs to be confronted head-on in a dispassionate sense by those [who don't] stand to win and lose directly," says Steve Schwalb, CEO of Federal Prison Industries, which employs about 20,000 prisoners.

ATLANTA (GA) JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION June 1, 2000

State's prison-to-work program falls short

The state promised to help Tyler Thurmond so he could start working as soon as he was released from prison, but it failed to keep the bargain.

Six months from the end of his seven years in prison for burglary, Thurmond enrolled in a program that would teach him how to find work and get copies of his birth certificate and Social Security card. TOPPSTEP [The Offender, Parolee, Probationer State Training Education Program] was created as a partnership between the Department of Corrections, the state Board of Pardons and Paroles and the Department of Labor to help reduce the number of criminals returning to prison.

But according to state records, the documents are not being provided promptly or routinely; fewer than10 percent of parolees received the documents during a recent two-week period. And it cost Thurmond his job.

"This thing has got to work. We can't keep building prisons," said state Rep. David Lucas (D-Macon), who called a meeting of the House State Properties and Institutions Committee on Wednesday to deliver an old-fashioned spank on the hand for agency officials who have been quarreling instead of addressing problems.

Studies have shown that former inmates who have jobs are more likely to stay out of prison.

Thurmond has been there twice.

"I'm determined to stay out," said Thurmond. "I don't want to go back. I'm not going to be a

statistic. Not me."

Days after leaving the state prison system with a $25 check, Thurmond had a job paying $6.95 an hour to clean at a downtown Atlanta hotel. But he lost it two weeks later because he could not produce proof he was a citizen either a birth certificate or a state identification card.

He finally got a copy of his birth certificate about two weeks later.

"It seems like they want to make it harder for you," said Thurmond, who has applied for other hotel cleaning jobs but has not yet received an offer. "I want my own place. I want to be responsible. I want to earn my keep."

Officials began developing the program last July. Six months before a scheduled release, inmates would take courses on life skills, and the Department of Corrections would apply for copies of their birth certificates and Social Security cards so they could look for work immediately upon release.

DOC was to send a completed package with the necessary documents to an inmate's parole or probation officer, or hand the documents to those who served all their sentences and were not supposed to have any supervision. DOC has been accused of not giving the documents to inmates, or providing them to parole officials.

"We've done a pretty good job," Corrections Commissioner Jim Wetherington said. "We could have done a better, but it's not all our fault."

The Department of Corrections could not say how many packages with all the papers had been provided to released inmates.

A Parole Board audit, which did not include those freed from prison at the end of their sentences or released on probation, found only 20 of 241 paroled April 3-17 had documents so they could start working.

"If all the departments do what this (TOPPSTEP) says, it will work," said Parole Board Chairman Walter Ray. "What it will do is make sure the recidivism is reduced, and we will save money by having these people pay taxes, pay child support and keep them from coming back to prison. That's the whole objective, to get them employed so they won't come back to prison."

APPLETON, WISCONSIN POST-CRESCENT June 19, 2000

Job skills, education may turn bad to good

Prison officials and other agencies are taking new steps to equip offenders to be better citizens when they leave prison and fulfill Governor Tommy Thompson's

pledge to "turn these bad guys back into good guys" who can hold jobs and support their families.

State Sen. Robert Cowles, R-Green Bay, played a background role in knitting together prison, vocational rehabilitation and welfare-to-work job preparation and placement programs to prepare soon-to-be-released Green Bay Correctional Institution inmates for work.

Corrections Secretary Jon Litscher said his department is reshuffling funds and preparing a request for added funding with the goal of eliminating waiting lists in some prisons where more inmates are seeking to learn basic reading and other academic skills than the available instructors can teach.

Thompson in his January state of the state speech linked the state's low Unemployment rate and resulting shortage of potential workers to fill new jobs with the need to prepare prisoners better for life on the outside.

He ordered Litscher and his department to find funds "for basic reading skills and GED (high school equivalency) studies so that no inmate will leave prison without being able to read and fill out a job application.

Instead of hitting the sack, inmates will be hitting the books."

Curtailing the return rate of inmates for offenses committed after they are once freed would help relieve the state's prison crowding burden.

Litscher said the department will start at the Fox Lake Correctional Institution to add instructional staff in basic reading-writing-arithmetic skills because the prison has only one shift of teachers. Other prisons have two shifts, he said.

The Brown County Correctional Employment and Training Project takes advantage of the sharp drop in numbers of former welfare recipients being helped to qualify for and get jobs through the W-2 welfare-to-work program. The project assigns W-2 case workers to help inmates who would qualify for the W-2 program if they were outside prison walls.

Cowles said the idea was suggested to him by Tom Lucas, a retired prison ministry worker from Green Bay. Cowles said as a member of the Joint Finance Committee he learned that many W-2 job training and placement specialists were themselves under-employed because of the caseload drop and they could be put to work helping inmates.

The corrections department, the divisions of workforce excellence and vocational rehabilitation in the Department of Workforce Development, the Bay Area

workforce Development Board and Northeast Wisconsin state job center are collaborating in the pilot program that Cowles said should become the model for communities statewide that host prisons.

The project has a budget of $180,000 and goals of getting jobs for at least 77 inmates when they are released during a period that began Feb. 10 and continues through June 30 next year. Funding combines state funds and federal vocational rehabilitation grant money.

The project outline assumes not all inmates will be eligible or will get jobs.

In the first five months through the end of this month, the goals were to refer 45 inmates for consideration, with 22 being hired and 14 keeping jobs from 90 to 180 days at average pay of $285 a week.

From July 1 through June 30 next year another 105 will be referred for consideration, with 38 staying employed at least 90 days at the same average wage.

Litscher's office indicated the program had gotten a faster start than planned, Receiving 68 inmates for review by the beginning of this month.

The agreement signed by the agencies to start the pilot program notes, "National research has found that 40 percent of all offenders were unemployed or marginally employed prior to arrest and that 83 percent of probation and parole violators were unemployed at the time of the violation."

The prison basic education and job programs are aimed at the 83 percent who wind up returning to prison or losing probationary status for lawbreaking.

Litscher was cautious in his expectations for the programs. He said they may not reduce recidivism rates - probation and parole violators becoming inmates - but they should help curb increases.

The tight job market provides an opportunity, he said, because inmates who are given basic skills can find jobs today.

"If you don't have entry-level basic skills, even entry-level jobs become much harder (for inmates) to receive," Litscher said.

"One help is that there are enough entry-level jobs now that with the training we provide, plus training provided at Green Bay, there are entry-level jobs waiting for people" when they leave prison.

AP Wire Service

Good economy means more job opportunities for ex-cons

With the economy booming, many employers around the country are so desperate for workers that they are going out of their way to recruit ex-convicts, former gang members and recovering drug addicts.

Fliers are being posted in halfway houses. An increasing number of employers are ofering college tuition reimbursements. Some companies, like United Parcel Service, even have recruiting vans that roam city neighborhoods in search of applicants.

Among the more popular methods are "second-chance" job fairs, which have been organized this year from Massachusetts, Ohio and Iowa to Texas and California.

At a recent Chicago job fair, organized by state and private agencies, there were hundreds of applicants and more than a dozen employers, from Radisson and Hilton hotels to United HealthCare and the Army.

"I need to stay busy -- to take care of my kids and stay off the streets, because it's getting pretty bad out there," said Antwan Berry, a 22-year-old former drug dealer and father of three who was filling out an application with a messenger service.

"This is my chance to change my life around," said Berry, who is on probation and having trouble finding the fork-lift driving job he wants.

The nation's unemployment rate is 3.9 percent, a 30-year-low. America is going Through its longest stretch of economic growth ever, nearly 10 years and counting, and employers are having trouble filling jobs.

In addition, some experts say businesses might be more willing to hire ex-convicts because they have already had success hiring welfare-to-work applicants.

"The overall impression is that welfare recipients are pretty good employees," said Irene Lurie, a welfare reform researcher at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany, N.Y.

Competition for the best of the applicants is so fierce that employers are Getting creative. In St. Louis, for example, Titan Tube Fabricators posts fliers in halfway houses to help fill welding and other jobs.

"It's definitely hard to come across good people," said Kevin Black, a Walgreens

drugstore manager who attended the Chicago fair. He said he and another store manager hired six people at a similar job fair two years ago and the employees are still with the company.

Employers say they are also impressed with ex-convicts who are coming to them well-prepared -- asking good questions, dressed in suits and often with resumes in hand.

That is due in part to coaching they get the day before the job fair and in prison. The first rule they are taught: Be honest about your criminal record.

"A lot of them will tell you right up front that they have a problem with money," Black said. "So we'll start them off as service clerks and see how they do."

He and other employers say they consider applicants case by case -- looking at The type of offense, when it happened and length of the sentence. They also insist that anyone with drug or alcohol addictions is at least in rehab.

Their method seems to be gaining popularity.

Last year, at its fourth annual job conference, the Northern California Service League, a San Francisco agency that serves ex-offenders, placed more than 600 of them in jobs with wages averaging $8.40 an hour. This year, employment administrator Darro Jefferson said the agency is on track to place 1,000.

Part of the key, he said, is to "turn negatives into positives."

He tells the story of a former drug dealer who had no other skills than, well, salesmanship. Jefferson got him a job at a San Francisco car dealership, where he is now an assistant general manager.

Matthew Hinton, released in April after serving more than eight years in Florida for drug dealing, is working for a Clearwater tire retreading company, using skills he learned in prison. He started work nine days after he was released with the help of a program called PRIDE Enterprises.

"Now I'm making $9.50 an hour and I'm loving it," said Hinton, 40. "I got my freedom, my own apartment, a nice car. I feel like I can't ask for nothing more."