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NEWS

Job fair provides second chance opportunities for people with felonies



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After serving their time, people with felonies on their record face multiple barriers to getting back on the right track. Being barred from housing and job opportunities can prevent them from re-establishing a better life for themselves and their families.

The Second Chance Pop-Up Event, hosted by the 100 Families Initiative, Zero to Three and the Fort Smith Workforce Center, will help individuals connect with job opportunities and additional services.

The event will be from 8:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. Monday, March 14 at the Western Arkansas Workforce Development Center, 616 Garrison Ave. in Fort Smith. Eight area employers and service providers, including Goodwill, the Center for Arkansas Legal Services, Burger King and Job Corps, will attend.

Heather Edwards, the Sebastian County coordinator for the 100 Families Initiative, said the event came together after a conversation a community member had with Chief Danny Baker of the Fort Smith Police Department.

“There was a concerned member of the community who saw people in his community that were struggling to find employment and housing because of having a felony on their background,” Edwards said. “He approached the chief, and we’re so lucky here to have such community-minded law enforcement, that the chief then reached out to us.”

“We always have this in mind because we work with families in crisis, we work with re-entry individuals,” Edwards said. “Second-chance employment is something that we’re always trying to be aware of and get people connected so that they can work toward financial stability, independence, long-term self-sufficiency for themselves and their families, which benefits the community as a whole.”

Marie Robinson, the community coordinator for the Safe Babies Court Team, works with Edwards and sees the need for second-chance employment with some of her clients.

“Some of the families that I work with have felony charges, and that’s a big barrier for them to get stable income to be able to get their children back or to maintain their family in their home,” Robinson said. “Knowing that there are some employers out there that are willing to work with felony charges and are willing to work with people as a second chance employer is huge for some of our families.”

Hosting the first-of-its-kind event specifically for second-chance employment builds on the work of Shirley McCutchen, a one-stop operator at Fort Smith Workforce Center, who started hosting pop-up job fairs in February. She said she wanted to help community members after many job fairs were canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“There are going to be some really great resources and people available at the job fair and I think employers are really ready and willing to help people get back on their feet and give them a second chance,” McCutchen said. “Fort Smith is our community and we’re all in this together.”

Employers interested in future job fairs can contact McCutchen at 870-416-8566.

The group is planning a larger re-entry event in May in connection with the Center for Arkansas Legal Services and Goodwill’s re-entry program for a record-sealing clinic along with other services.

A 2019 study conducted by the Urban Institute found that Sebastian County had a high incarceration rate compared to the state and national levels, which adds a financial burden to families and increases the likelihood of experiencing hunger.

In the 2019 study, residents and regional stakeholders told the Urban Institute about the challenges their families faced due to incarceration.

One stakeholder said, “There are no programs to help those who went to jail, regardless of the crime, to a large degree. If there’s no way for them to make a good living, honest living, then in their mind, they’ll go back to what they know.”

Edwards stressed the need for community partnerships to support individuals seeking to better themselves and achieve stability. She cited the high re-entry population in Fort Smith that needs resources.

“They made a mistake, whatever that looks like – there's a degree of what that kind of mistake would be – but they've done their time,” Edwards said. “... We know that people are working toward stability. As a society, that's what we tell them we want. We want them to get a job. We want them to get back on their feet ... so the responsibility then comes back on us to give them some opportunities to do that.”