

It's Time To Expand Our Workforce

Unemployment is at historic lows and businesses are struggling to simply find workers to fill positions. In June, there were 6,000 more advertised jobs in the Upstate than there were officially unemployed workers.

That means it is more important than ever for business owners and hiring managers to look beyond the traditional candidates and seek out the ready, willing, and able workforce that has always been in our community.

The Upstate Chamber Coalition will finalize our 2018 legislative agenda next month, and expungement reform will be at the top of the list. Admittedly, this is a new issue to tackle for the South Carolina business community, but the need has been around for years. The FBI has nearly 80 million Americans – one in three adults – in its master criminal database, according to The Wall Street Journal. One in three. And researchers find many of them were never convicted of any crime. As crime rates and drug use exploded in our consciousness in the 1980s and early 1990s, “zero tolerance” and “tough on crime” policies became the norm, and many people were caught up in the dragnet.

In 2014, researchers at the University of South Carolina tracked more than 7,000 randomly selected people in their 20s, watching for interactions with law enforcement. According to the researchers, more than 40 percent of the male subjects have been arrested at least once by the age of 23. Nearly half of blacks had an arrest (49 percent), 44 percent of Hispanics, and 38 percent of whites. In addition, almost 20 percent of women had been arrested by age 23.

They further found that 47 percent of those arrested weren't convicted. In more than a quarter of cases, subjects weren't even formally charged. Those arrests appear on background checks, even if law enforcement didn't believe it had enough evidence to prosecute.

There are many in law enforcement who contend that by arresting people for low-level offenses in the 80s and 90s, it prevented many more serious crimes from occurring. Crime rates have dropped nationally.

We believe that an old arrest without a prosecution should be cleared. We also contend that a one-time, low-level, nonviolent offense should not be a life sentence, but it is in many cases. These adults have a harder time finding a job, make 10 to 20 percent less at age 25, and are twice as likely to live below the poverty line.

There are some organizations that are willing to take the time to interview these applicants, but research shows that more than half of folks with a criminal background never even get a call back. A survey by the Society for Human Resource Management in 2012 found that 69 percent of organizations performed background checks on employees. Three of four organizations decided not to hire when they found a nonviolent felony – the kind the chambers are working to expunge. Make no mistake: The Upstate Chamber Coalition, and our partners across the state, are not pushing for expungement for violent felons, those convicted of sex crimes, criminal domestic violence, or driving under the influence. There is a process for expungement for many of these crimes, and they do not need to be expanded.

Yet, more than 5,000 people in the past five years have been released from prison back into Greenville County, and the Department of Corrections says that 83.9 percent of prisoners eligible for release will be out in within five years. On October 12, the Coalition will hold a Workforce Summit and Job Fair at the TD Center. We'll run through how to hire these willing workers, we'll show employers how hard it is for ex-offenders to find employment, and we'll show you how to overcome the stigma and stereotypes. Employers need workers. These people need employment. If they find jobs, recidivism drops dramatically. Per capita income rises. And more people are able to participate in the Upstate's prosperity.



By Jason Zacher
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