PennsylvaniaBoard of Probation and Parole

Parolees Successfully Complete Welding Program

Last month six parolees successfully completed an intensive three-month Welding Technician training program, and one student has secured employment. With AWS and ASME welding certification testing, these students are now prepared for a career in manufacturing, fabrication, construction or repair.

HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, offered the welding program at their state-of-the-art welding lab in Harrisburg. Second Chance Ministries, Inc. followed the training with job coaching services entitled W.O.R.K. - Working with Offenders to Reintegrate with Knowledge.

Known as Better Choices, the job training program is a public/private partnership with HACC, the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole and Department of Corrections, and Second Chance Ministries that strives to break the cycle of recidivism and provide a blueprint for employment success. The program also offers training in culinary arts, warehouse equipment moving specialist and CNC machine shop.

"Our goal is for this education and job training partnership to lead to sustainable employment for offenders and to reduce recidivism," said the Board of Probation and Parole Chairman Michael C. Potteiger.

Better Choices is one of many new reentry services that resulted from changes fostered through Governor Tom Corbett's Justice Reinvestment Initiative. Community corrections funding was restructured to provide for needed services in the community that will help offenders to successfully reintegrate. Through a competitive bid process, more than 100 sites across the state are providing services and programs in eight key areas, including workforce development.

Approximately 20 parolees expressed interest in the welding program, 13 were recommended and 10 were chosen based on their interview, but one didn't show up. "Many people couldn't commit to the six or eight hour day for several weeks because they needed to work," said Bob Gill HACC workforce development training coordinator who personally interviewed each student.

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Also, becoming a welder isn't easy. Per HACC, the top 10 traits of a great welder are the ability to read blueprints, awareness of safety standards, good concentration, excellent customer service skills, detail-oriented, good eye sight – sharp vision and ability to see intricate details, knowledge of metallurgy, knowledge of tools and equipment, manual dexterity and good eye hand coordination to perform complicated physical maneuvers; and thorough knowledge of various welding techniques, such as metal arc, oxy-fuel, flux core arc and gas tungsten arc.

These traits could be challenging for anyone, but especially for individuals with a lack of education and workplace experience. "When they received the results of their first test they were down. They didn't do well, but they supported each other," said Gill.

The job can require work to be performed in uncomfortable and unusual positions; a welder must have the stamina to be on his or her feet for long periods of time. Many jobs also require work to be performed outside in extreme hot or cold temperatures.

Starting with nine students, six were able to meet the demands of the program and graduate: one student wasn't able to continue because of a child's illness, another dropped out after two weeks and the third one was removed from the program for too many absences.

In jest Gill said his job is the "vice principal" - he is responsible for setting the standards because he knows what employers expect from their employees.

"They needed to learn that they must arrive on time and clean up after their work is done," he said. "Some of them are not used to being responsible or to a structured day."

Following the welding training, the students attended W.O.R.K., a job services program run by Jim Law, an ex-offender that the students can relate to.

Jim sets high standards as well. Everyone signs a W.O.R.K. Student Agreement which states: no profanity, show respect for others, no personal phone calls, come with a positive attitude and no tolerance for tardiness, bad attitude, sloppy dress or food in the classroom.

During their last class, students watched their mock job interviews on video. The mock interview was the culmination of three days of instruction on thinking right (attitude, priorities, work ethic and respecting authority), computer basics, job skills assessment, job search skills, creation of a resume and preparation for a job interview.

In the mock job interview, George Paulison, workforce development specialist for W.O.R.K., represented the fictional employer. As the students watched the videos, they laughed and teased one another, all in a spirit of good fun and a strong sense of camaraderie. The joking and laughter would cease when Law and Paulison would stop the video and provide a real learning moment by asking what the interviewee did wrong.

In one particular instance the interviewee had just revealed his age and that he was married with children. "Don't reveal your age, marital status or if you have children. They can't ask these questions by law and you become viewed as an expensive insurance cost," George said. His point is that if the decision came down to two equally qualified candidates, the company is likely to choose the younger individual without a family.

Like most individuals who experience a job interview, they were nervous. One student expressed that he was scared of the mock interview and wasn't going to show up for class. In the end he was glad he did because he said "when I saw the video I wasn't that bad. I learned from it." They learn confidence.

The most difficult part of the interview is, of course, how to handle questions about their criminal history. As with all questions they are taught to answer them truthfully but don’t over answer. Specifically, they are taught to thank the interviewer for asking, briefly explain that there was a time in their life where they made bad choices, explain what they did in prison to improve themselves and explain the right choices they are making now.

Wrapping things up, Law commented that they all did well in the interviews, and were quick on their feet.

"I want you to understand that George and I are here for you," said Law. "Put your street smarts to work and you can be more successful than other people. Use that creativity and street smarts for legal activity."

Now that they have the training they need, Law and HACC continue to offer job services to help them successfully market themselves to a potential employer and launch a new career.