

# South Carolina wants to help former prisoners find jobs, expand the state's tight job market

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Inmates walk on the grounds at Kirkland Correctional Institution in Columbia, a facility that all male prisoners with long sentences pass through. Several initiatives across the state are intended to help offenders find work when they're released, in part because South Carolina faces its tightest labor market in years. File/Staff

A female prisoner at the Graham Correctional Institution learns to weld. Now female inmates can also learn the soft skills needed to get a job once they leave prison. The S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce and the Department of Corrections have expanded the Second Chance program to teach female inmates such skills as how to interview, write a resume and talk about their past. Provided/SCDEW

Unemployment in South Carolina is about as low as it's been this century, and businesses across the state say they can't find enough workers to fill their openings. So the state is pushing to improve the job prospects of a group that has long struggled to find work: former convicts.

From the prison system to the Statehouse, a flurry of efforts is underway across South Carolina, all intended to get prisoners ready for the job market and make it easier for them to find work when they're released.

The initiatives are still in their early days, reaching only a small number of the thousands of prisoners that are released each year. But if they're successful, they could lower the number of people who return to South Carolina's prisons and tap a new source of workers in a state that business leaders say could use more.

The push began in earnest in late 2014, when the state Department of Employment and Workforce introduced a pilot program to help prisoners write a resume, apply for work and prepare for interviews. Instead of trying to push specific job training, the initiative largely focuses on honing "soft skills," like explaining a conviction to a future boss or deciding what to wear to work.

"The idea was to really have a more focused approach to inmates who were about to be released — to help them address the issues that caused them to obviously be behind bars," said Grey Parks, the labor department's deputy director of workforce operations.

The "[Second Chance](#)" program has grown quickly at Columbia's Manning Correctional Institution, which houses men within six months of release. The workforce agency says nearly 1,000 inmates have gone through it so far.

released in the last two-and-a-half years, about three-quarters have gone on to find a job.

They represent a small fraction of the 9,000 or so inmates the state releases each year, but the numbers are promising. Past nationwide studies have found that only about a quarter to two-fifths of inmates land a job within a year of release.

So the state plans to expand the program later this year at one of the state's two prisons for women, the Graham Correctional Institution, which is also in Columbia. How many people will participate in the expansion isn't yet clear, Grey said, depending on how its first classes go.

The idea is that ex-convicts are less likely to commit a crime if they find a job, though information on the program's effect is somewhat limited. Corrections Department spokeswoman Sommer Sharpe said the department hasn't calculated a recidivism rate for inmates who participate in the program, but the [data it collects](#) suggest that prisoners are less likely to return if they participate in a work-training program.

"Providing job training to offenders gives them self-confidence, direction and a skill set for their betterment now and upon release," corrections director Bryan Stirling said in a statement.



South Carolina Department of Corrections director Bryan Stirling. File/Brad Nettles/Staff

But former offenders [face challenges](#) in finding work, even if they're well-trained. They're half as likely to get a call back, for instance, since employers in most states ask them to check a box disclosing their criminal history when they apply. And even if employers don't ask about their past early on, background checks are commonplace later in the process.

Some recent efforts have sought to address those hurdles.

A group of state and federal agencies held a series of job fairs in May meant specifically for ex-offenders, in hopes that airing out an applicant's criminal history right away will help clear up the issue. The U.S. attorney's office, which is helping host the four events, says it intends to make them annual events.

And under the Obama administration last year, the U.S. Department of Labor and the Justice Department announced more than \$100 million in grants to groups working with former inmates. Two of [those grants](#) — worth \$4.5 million each — were directed toward nonprofits working in South Carolina.

The Birmingham, Ala.-based Dannon Project got funding, in part, for its job-training work in Florence, and Clearwater, Fla.-based Eckerd Youth Alternatives received a grant aimed partially at efforts in Allendale, Bamberg and Barnwell counties.

The Trump administration has continued to pursue similar programs: Last month, the Labor Department awarded nearly \$73 million in grants for re-entry programs. In South Carolina, Goodwill Industries received \$1.5 million for work in the Midlands and Upstate.

In the Statehouse, meanwhile, lawmakers have advanced [legislation](#) that would expand the number of convictions that can be cleared from someone's criminal record — a move supported by the S.C. Chamber of Commerce.

The bill, which was approved unanimously by the House in April, would let people delete multiple convictions from their record if they happened around the same time. It would also add a first-time drug charge to the list of crimes that can be expunged.

And while they'd still have to wait three to five years to apply to have a conviction removed, supporters say it would prevent a one-time mistake from becoming a permanent mark.

That proposal still needs the OK of the state Senate when it reconvenes in January. The Senate Judiciary Committee advanced the bill before adjourning for the year. The rush of activity has come as South Carolina's unemployment rate — 4.1 percent in May — has pushed to its lowest levels since 2000. The state's break-neck rate of job growth, meantime, has slowed in recent months as employers struggle to find the workers they need.

That's made workforce development and labor shortages key concerns for the state's business community, and it's helped raise interest in getting former offenders into the job market. The state chamber included "ex-offender workforce integration" on its annual list of legislative priorities this year, alongside traditional initiatives like career education and apprenticeships.

Chamber CEO Ted Pitts says it's a new push for his organization to ask lawmakers to help clean up people's criminal records.

Businesses typically want to know everything they can about an applicant before making a job offer, Pitts says, but the chamber's members feel comfortable with the change because crimes involving violence or dishonesty wouldn't be cleared.

"We look at this as a solution to a problem. It's a solution for a segment of society that has some minor offenses that continue to come up or get in the way when it comes time to look for a job," Pitts said. "It's not a silver bullet. This isn't going to solve the problem. But it's a piece of the puzzle that goes into helping South Carolinians and providing some workforce in places that it may be needed."

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