

RETURNING CITIZENS – MORE THAN A WORKFORCE

By MiBiz Marketing Staff

It's no secret: West Michigan companies need to find a deeper pool of talent.

For businesses, the questions are always the same: Where do we find them? How do we attract them? Who will train them? How do we keep them?

In the search for answers, a first impulse is to look beyond a company's immediate community, luring potential employees from other job markets. That can be a costly and competitive battle that may not be necessary, according to some forward-thinking executives at West Michigan companies. For them the talent is already here, and they were willing to take a chance.

At an upcoming event, *Expanding The Workforce With Second Chance Employment*, hosted by **Fifth Third Bank** and key noted by Chief Investment Strategist Jeff Korzenik, West Michigan executives will discuss the pressure points on today's workforce, the opportunities for businesses to hire "second chance" employees and the implications of an economy running out of workers.

It's certainly not a new idea, but the track record of success with local companies like **Cascade Engineering** and **Butterball Farms** hiring formerly incarcerated individuals can't be ignored if other companies in the region want to continue to grow, Korzenik said.

With the unemployment rate in Michigan at 4.0%, the state, like the rest of the nation, is likely at full employment. There are over 16 million people outside of prison in the United States with a felony conviction. While not all of them are unemployed, many are, and even among those with a job, the vast majority are underemployed.

"For economic growth to continue, we will need to raise the labor force participation rate, bringing marginalized workers into productive employment," Korzenik said. "We have seen very consistent models of businesses that successfully employ second chance hires. Generally speaking, these businesses partner with nonprofits that help identify which candidates are ready for employment."

Korzenik said such employers also recognize that many second chance employees need additional assistance with the type of basic life management many of us take for granted: housing, transportation, childcare, to name a few. Often these adjustments are more related to poverty than histories of in-

FREE EVENT EXPANDING THE WORKFORCE WITH SECOND CHANCE EMPLOYEES

June 5, 2019, 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.
Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park
Grand Rapids, MI

Free event, registration required:
mibiz.com/secondchance

This free education-and-networking event — featuring senior executives from Fifth Third Bank, Cascade Engineering, Butterball Farms and the Women's Resource Center — will explore best practices and opportunities for hiring citizens returning to the workforce after incarceration or supervision. *MiBiz* is the media sponsor of this event.

Register at mibiz.com/secondchance



KEYNOTE SPEAKER
Jeff Korzenik
Chief Investment Officer
Fifth Third Bank



PANELIST
Sandra Gaddy, CEO,
Women's Resource
Center



PANELIST
Mark Peters, CEO,
Butterball Farms



PANELIST
Fred Keller, Founder
and Chair, Cascade
Engineering

carceration or addiction. Employers who utilize this approach find the benefits of low turnover rates and highly committed employees far exceed the additional costs of these accommodations.

Sandra Gaddy, CEO for the **Women's Resource Center**, knows these challenges well, and she also knows the struggle to reenter society can be more difficult for women dealing with the stigma of past offenses.

"When our community fails to extend a second chance to returning citizens, it means that the sentence they've served never really ends," Gaddy said. "They continue to be penalized for years following their release. Once they have paid their debt to society, returning citizens must have an opportunity for a fresh start. Without this, the cycle of incarceration will repeat itself."

Research shows more than 30 percent of individuals who return to their community after prison are incarcerated again

within three years of their release, which is just one of the reasons why Gaddy and others, including Cascade Engineering, are proponents of the "Ban the Box" movement that removes the checkbox on applications that asks about felonies in an applicant's past.

Employing people exiting the criminal justice system should matter to all employers, according to Cascade Engineering Founder and Chair Fred Keller. To that end, it's helpful to understand some of the facts related to incarceration in the United States:

- The United States locks up more people per capita than any other nation — currently 2.3 million people are incarcerated.
- 40 percent of the people (576,000) currently behind bars are there for no compelling public safety reason. This includes drugs, burglary, fraud, and DUI convictions.

- People of color account for 37 percent of the U.S. population, yet they represent 67 percent of the prison population.
- The annual cost of incarceration to state and federal governments and taxpayers is \$182 billion.

"We have found that people who have been incarcerated are some of our best employees and they are very appreciative of the opportunity to work in such a supportive environment," Keller said. "Individuals who have recently been released from prison are often overlooked and represent a viable source of untapped talent. My only hope is that employers are looking at these returning citizens as valued human beings and not as a last resort."

Employment, Gaddy said, is the foundation for returning citizens to reestablish a home and family life, find affordable housing, create a positive social network and to meet other basic needs.

Providing these supports systems doesn't just create resilient individuals, but resilient communities too, according to Mark Peters, CEO of Butterball Farms.

Butterball Farms, along with Cascade Engineering, has been committed to the 30-2-2 initiative, a program launched in partnership with Grand Rapids Community College in 2012 with a simple concept to get 30 companies to hire two workers leaving jail or prison and track their progress for two years.

We all can start doing something different by not singling out those individuals leaving jail or prison as "second chancers," Peters said.

"The reality is we are all 'second chancers.' Our workplaces are full of people who have had missteps in their lives, been fired from jobs, had to quit for various reasons, like health, death of a family member or friend, eviction from a home, substance abuse or other sorts of addictions," he said. "Our workplaces are also full of people who for whatever reason have experienced all those same things but have been able to cope just enough to not lose a job. So, the single best practice is treating people with dignity and respect, because they are people."

Peters also highlighted the importance of having a plan on how to communicate these practices to an organization, understanding that there will be people within the company that may not be comfortable with the idea.

"For employers who choose to take notice and act it presents a great opportunity to bring talent into their organizations," he said. "If some of us — like the network of employers in the 30-2-2 initiative — can inspire and teach other employers about how to successfully hire from populations that are 'non-traditional' for them, the net result will be a stronger and more resilient economy." ■