

FORUM

Second Chances: The Key to Economic Prosperity



Gayle Anderson
Guest Columnist

In December, the U.S. unemployment rate remained steady at 5 percent, the lowest in more than seven years. By comparison, the unemployment rate in November for North Carolina was 5.7 percent, while Winston-Salem weighed in at 5.1 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Some might suggest that at the local level we have finally attained full employment following a prolonged period of economic decline, where all eligible people who want to work can find it at prevailing wage rates. But our local employers tell us that is not the case for them, and we hear from current job seekers and those who believe they are underemployed that they have difficulty finding jobs. Clearly there is a disconnect between available jobs and the available workforce, and this gap is affecting our ability to prosper economically.

One group is having the greatest difficulty finding employment: individuals with a prior felony conviction. In expanding the pathways to employment for prospective workers in our community, the Chamber has developed new resources for employers who are considering hiring

formerly incarcerated individuals.

Since 2001, the Chamber has encouraged local employers to invest in our community by hiring locally through JobNet, a free online tool for Chamber members and all job seekers that serves as a matchmaker between employers and potential employees. Last month, the Chamber created the Second Chance Initiative, a community resource designed to help employers considering hiring ex-offenders to learn more about business incentives such as federal bond insurance and tax credits, as well as guidance on assessing a criminal record.



Ministries. The Chamber also has seeking to hire qualified individuals to fill available

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In addition, the Second Chance Initiative helps those with criminal records get information about employment and/or training opportunities through local agencies, including Project Reentry, the Northwest Piedmont Workforce Development Board, Project SOAR and Forsyth Jail and Prison

expanded its JobNet database to include positions, not just for experienced workers, but also for seasonal jobs requiring no previous experience or training, as well as internships for students or those seeking entryway into a competitive field.

JobNet connects job candidates with employers

positions, and the Chamber encourages employers to give fair consideration to the formerly incarcerated for appropriate positions. From September 2014 to September 2015, 788 formerly incarcerated individuals were released in Forsyth County. Most are looking for and needing jobs. Research has shown

that a history of incarceration reduces a worker's chance of being hired by up to 30 percent.

In 2010, the Center for Economic and Policy Research released a study, “Ex-Offenders and the Labor Market.” The findings were compelling. The study concluded that a felony conviction or imprisonment significantly reduced the ability of formerly incarcerated individuals to find jobs, costing the U.S. economy up to an estimated \$65 billion in lost economic output each year.

In an effort to give fair consideration to everyone, some local and many national employers have

without prior knowledge of a conviction record.

By removing conviction history from the initial job application, it allows employers to view prospects objectively and on their own merits and gives prospects the opportunity to explain the circumstances of their criminal background as part of the interview process. It does not mean that the employer never asks about a conviction; merely that the question is asked later in the interview process. For companies that might consider doing so, the Chamber can be a resource to connect them with other organizations already adopting this practice that can provide them with practical advice and information.

While momentum for this policy has grown exponentially across the country the past few years, it is understandably controversial. Of course, criminal convictions will absolutely disqualify applicants from certain jobs—but prior convictions don't necessarily have to disqualify the formerly incarcerated from all jobs.

Giving ex-offenders in our community a second chance for a fresh start and providing them with access to jobs could be one of the keys to unlocking the secret of a vibrant local economy.

Gayle Anderson is president and CEO of the Greater Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce.

The MLK Holiday is over; What are the next steps?



James B. Ewers Jr.
Guest Columnist

The parades, breakfasts and luncheons honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are now over. The speeches given by city, state and federal officials extolling Dr. King's non-violent philosophy have all been given.

Many of us participated in some type of community service event which highlighted his mantra of helping each other. Dr. King always reminded us that we are our brother's and sister's keeper.

As we now pass the King Holiday and onto February, which is Black History Month, let us rededicate ourselves to some guiding principles. It is my opinion these guiding principles which Dr. King talked about throughout his life will serve as a launching pad of hope for us.

First, let us understand and appreciate the importance of getting a good education. Dr. King was a man of letters which prepared him for a life of service.

It is my view that every young person must participate in some form of education and training after high school. There are three options for a high school graduate to consider: You must have college,

military service or a job with training on your radar screen.

If you choose one of these three options, you will be well on your way to becoming successful. Each of these options will provide you with the opportunity and the flexibility to become a productive citizen in the world. If you are undecided, talk to your counselor, mentor or friend about the choices. The most important part of this equation is that you choose one of the options.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed for us. It gives all of us the chance to elect the leaders of our country. The voting numbers in communities of color are not where they should be. If we want to see change in America then we must help to change America by voting. We cannot sit at home on Election Day and expect change to occur. Our votes will count if we exercise our right to vote.

In the coming months, we will have a presidential election and we will have a choice to make. If you don't vote then you cannot complain about the outcome. If you have not registered to vote, then go and register today. Take a friend with you so that they, too, can register.

Civil Rights leaders like Dr. King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Flonzie Brown-Wright, Andrew Young, John Lewis, Jesse Jackson and countless others worked tirelessly to get us the right, so now we must

not sit on the right but must act on the right to cast our ballot. If you are in a position to organize a voter registration drive then do so. You will become a difference-maker in your community.

We have a moral mandate to treat one another better. The words dignity and respect should be the rule in how we treat one another, not the exception.

Dr. King said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in moments of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.”

As black people, we must pledge in 2016 to stop the violence against ourselves. Let us become statistics of success, not statistics of sorrow. If you are a black man like me, our households need us. We have been absent and missing in action for too long.

Let us vow in 2016 to be fathers and grandfathers to our children and grandchildren. They cannot have model behavior if they have no role models to emulate.

If we want our communities to be better, then we must become better. Higher levels of self-respect will get us the

respect from others that we want. Our avenues and streets can no longer be battlegrounds with us being afraid to come outside.

Are we ready for 2016? Yes we are! It will take all of us doing our part and becoming transformational leaders. Some time ago, I read the book entitled, “The Servant Leader” by Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges. The sub title is, “Transforming your Heart, Head, Hands and Habits.”

The authors write about Jesus Christ being a situational servant leader. He was the ultimate servant leader. Let us practice the habits of serving others, having humility and just being kind. These traits will help us in any situation.

The year 2015 is in our rearview mirror and 2016 awaits us with eagerness and anticipation.

Dr. King said, “This is no time for apathy and complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

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