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San Quentin is helping men prepare for jobs outside

The men participating in Prison to Employment Connection’s Employer Day at San Quentin State Prison in California. Photo courtesy of Prison to Employment Connection.

Around 30 men dressed in freshly pressed blue uniforms line up in a row as Bay Area employers file into the chapel at San Quentin State Prison. Handshakes are out because of COVID protocols, but the men look the visitors in the eyes and greet them.

It’s Employer Day at San Quentin. The visitors all represent organizations that have committed to fair-chance hiring — meaning they will employ people with criminal records. The organizations here include Silicon Valley tech companies, government agencies, a community college, nonprofits, and a bakery.

The employers will sit down with the men one on one. It’s not a job fair — they aren’t hiring for specific positions. Instead, the men will rotate between tables every 10 minutes to do a series of mock interviews, sort of like speed dating…with your potential boss.

Freddie Wortham, 66, wants to open his own bakery eventually, but knows he will likely need another job first. “I’m more or less preparing myself for a job coming out in terms of me taking care of me, first and foremost, because the majority of my family members have passed away and are no longer there to support me,” he tells a potential employer.

While inside, he has earned certificates in baking and food handling. “I’m able to do cinnamon rolls from scratch,” he says. “I’m also able to do fruit crisps, cornbread, and cakes from scratch.”

“It sounds like you have the baking skills down pat,” the interviewer notes. “Is it more on the business side that you think you need to develop more skills?”

“Yes, sir,” Wortham says with a nod, noting that he’s looking at taking more classes that might help him develop a business plan.

Training for the future

Other than the final graduation ceremony, this is the culminating event for Prison to Employment Connection, or P2EC, a 14-week job-readiness training program for people who are within one year of a release date or have a scheduled parole board hearing in the next six months. The curriculum includes an assessment to help participants identify possible careers, workshops on identifying strengths and transferable skills, and résumé editing.

While San Quentin offers some of the most robust programming of any prison in California, including its own college, Mount Tamalpais, this program helps the men learn how to put the work they’ve done inside into context for prospective employers. Many, including those who have earned college degrees inside, have never filled out a résumé before. And Employer Day not only exposes them to a range of industries with fair chance companies, it also helps them get an idea of what hiring managers are looking for.

“Some of these guys have been out of the workforce for decades. Some of these guys don’t know how to make a living legally,” says Angel Alvarez, lead facilitator. “It’s new to them, and...
it makes them nervous. But Employer Day gives them a lot of confidence to know that they can do it.”

Forty-eight-year old Reggie Thorpe, who has spent more than two decades behind bars, says he did his first job interview ever today.

During one interview, he talks about the two associate’s degrees he’s already earned, highlighting his math skills, and the sociology degree he’s currently pursuing. When he gets out, he wants to work with young people and become the mentor he never had as a young man growing up on the streets of Oakland. That feels even more important now, as the city grapples with poverty, homelessness, and drug use.

“Excuse me,” he says, pausing for a moment. “I get emotional because I see where my city is right now and the state that it’s in. And I feel like my crime has something to do with what’s going on right now.”

He wants to help heal the community he feels he took away from. “I’m confident in who I am today as opposed to what was before I got incarcerated,” he says. “I worked very hard to get to where my city is right now and the state that I’m at right now.”

The talent behind the walls

Thorpe is putting the principles he learned through P2EC into practice. The program spends an entire week on how — and if — to discuss prior incarceration during interviews.

That’s what sociologist Sadé Lindsay, a researcher at Cornell University, calls “the prison credential dilemma.” For many formerly incarcerated people re-entering the job market, much of their most recent work and education experience would have been gained in prison.

As I reported last year, Lindsay’s research found that formerly incarcerated people often have little insight into employers’ perceptions of prison credentials, which can include GEDs, college degrees, industry-recognized certifications, and vocational certificates. That is one of the things that makes navigating the labor market so difficult for this population, she says.

The P2EC program tries to give the men concrete strategies for navigating the dilemma and provides opportunities to frame their own stories. “If they’re going to talk about their incarceration, we suggest they be proactive about it,” says Kevin McCracken, the executive director. “We make sure that they’re ready to talk about it and that they don’t talk about the specific reasons they were in prison.”

Thorpe says he learned how to be honest while not going into unnecessary detail. It’s also made him more conscious of word choice, such as saying “justice-impacted” or “formerly incarcerated” rather than “ex-felon” or “criminal.”

The participants are also briefed on their rights as job applicants. In 2018, California implemented a “ban-the-box” law, which prevents employers with five or more employees from asking about criminal history before they make a job offer. Employers are not allowed to ask about convictions on applications or during a job interview.

Still, there are times when it might come up, McCracken says, such as if an employer inquires about gaps in employment history. And while California’s Fair Chance Act prevents employers from asking about someone’s record during the initial application stages, they can still conduct a background check after making a conditional job offer.

McC racken recommends that the men focus on their accomplishments during their incarceration and how they’ve changed as a way to demonstrate accountability. It’s an uncomfortable topic, so the men first practice in small groups and then in front of the entire class.

I followed up Lindsay to see what she had to say about programs like P2EC. “Programs that increase contact between employers and returning citizens are a crucial part of improving reentry outcomes,” she wrote in an email. “These positive interactions can help break down certain stereotypes and mitigate past negative experiences.”

She added that developing and expanding these employer networks beyond organizations already willing to hire people returning from prison is a crucial next step. That needs to happen in tandem with integrated policy reforms such as tax credits to incentivize fair chance hiring, more ban-the-box laws, and opportunities for people to seal or expunge their records.

Zachary Moore has the unique perspective of not only being a former P2EC participant, but also coming back to San Quentin as an employer representative. He’s now a senior software engineer at Checkr, a background check company.

Moore was incarcerated at the age of 15 and came home in 2018 under state juvenile lifer resentencing laws. Because of his own experience, he’s able to offer a different kind of feedback to the men he interviews. For example, they may not always understand the subtext of certain questions. “You need to practice active listening,” he says, “and then have the humility if you don’t understand something to ask them to reframe the question, or ask it a different way or something.”

The program is also beneficial for the employers. “It gets them proximate to people who are justice-impacted,” Moore says. “It exposes them to the talent that’s actually behind those walls.”

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Please also let us know if you are OK being quoted and using your name in a story.
Bringing ASL to San Quentin

By Maddison Hwang, Open Campus editorial assistant

“Friendly Signs” is 25-minute documentary that follows Tommy Wickerd, who is incarcerated at San Quentin, as he fights to bring official American Sign Language classes to the prison. The film was directed, filmed, and written by Rahsaan “New York” Thomas — a College Inside contributor — while he was incarcerated with Wickerd. I watched the film in June during the 2023 San Francisco Documentary Festival.

Bringing ASL to San Quentin is a personal mission for Wickerd — he’s hearing but he’s fluent in sign language because he grew up with a deaf brother. In 2019, the warden informed Wickerd that 11 deaf individuals would be transferring to San Quentin. Wickerd faced a tough choice: He was a college student, and had to put his own education on hold in order to focus on teaching others ASL. Inside of a prison facility, the ability to hear or see can mean life or death. Correctional officers bark orders that people have a split second to respond to. To juxtapose the humanity of Wickerd’s mission with the hostile environment he lives in, Thomas cuts to shots of distinctly unfriendly signs that read “no warning shots” and “do not cross this line" throughout the film.

We recently reached out to Wickerd to get an update: after four years of submitting proposals, he was finally allowed to begin official American Sign Language (ASL) classes in San Quentin earlier this year. The class will be graduating later this year. “Now the San Quentin deaf population has 37 new friends,” he wrote in a message.

And, next spring, Wickerd plans to restart his own education, enrolling in English 101 at Mount Tamalpais College.

Despite the lack of approval for a formal class, Wickerd began teaching fellow incarcerated folk and staff at San Quentin basic signs such as “alarm”, and “get down.” Inside of a prison facility, the ability to hear or see can mean life or death. Correctional officers bark orders that people have a split second to respond to. To juxtapose the humanity of Wickerd’s mission with the hostile environment he lives in, Thomas cuts to shots of distinctly unfriendly signs that read “no warning shots” and “do not cross this line” throughout the film.

Welcome to College Inside, a newsletter about prison education produced by Open Campus, a national nonprofit newsroom. Topics we cover include college-in-prison programs, Pell Grants for incarcerated students, and career and technical education. We launched College Inside in December 2021 and now publish a biweekly email newsletter and a monthly print edition.

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You can reach us at charlotte@opencampusmedia.org, via JPay, Corrlinks, Securus, Connect Network, Getting Out, or at the postal address above.

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We work with incarcerated writers, but do not usually publish unsolicited manuscripts, essays that have been published elsewhere, poetry, or stories on topics other than education. We are looking for story pitches that offer new and surprising insights about higher education in prisons.

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