

Job plan for ex-felons clears 2 county panels

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Up to 100 non-violent ex-felons could get job training and a one-year internship with Cook County under a proposal approved Thursday by two county committees.

A "certificate of completion" would be awarded to successful participants, which could be used in attempting to gain permanent employment with the county or elsewhere.

"When people have paid their debt to society, when do we forgive?" said County Commissioner Bobbie Steele (D-Chicago), one of the ordinance's chief sponsors. "Let us start here. Let us show our true humanitarian spirit."

The Law Enforcement & Corrections and Department of Corrections Committees are sponsoring the proposal.

Thousands of ex-convicts return to Chicago, particularly to the West Side, from prison each year. A vast majority of them are non-violent drug offenders, said Brenda Palms-Barber, executive director of the North Lawndale Employment Network.

Palms-Barber said few agencies offer job training to ex-convicts, and even if the county could help only 100 each year it would be an important start.

The state's attorney's office is reviewing legal issues, including how union contracts might affect the program. Patrick Driscoll, chief of the office's civil division, said the county could not, for example, set aside jobs for ex-convicts.

Mark Kilgallon, county human resources chief, said most offices under County Board President John Stroger do not automatically disqualify applicants based on a felony conviction.

Under the proposed one-year pilot project, a review panel would evaluate applicants and determine eligibility. There would be four to six weeks of job training from one of the non-profit agencies in partnership with the county, Steele said.

The county has more than 100 funded but vacant entry-level jobs that could be used for the internships, Steele said.

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