

County sets up program to give ex-convicts jobs

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Cook County government will establish an internship program for non-violent ex-convicts seeking entry-level employment under an ordinance that commissioners approved unanimously Thursday.

The Cook County Re-Entry Employment Project will invite 100 participants to take part in the pilot program in which applicants will receive training and possibly a county job for one year.

If the internship is successful, participants would receive a "certificate of completion" that they could use to bolster their resumes as they seek permanent employment, either in the public or private sectors.

Community advocates and commissioners hailed the measure, acknowledging that while it's largely a symbolic move it could prove to be a model for other governments in addressing the issue of felons returning to society with few job skills.

"This is a landmark piece of legislation," said Sharron Matthews, director of public policy and advocacy for the Safer Foundation, which provides services and job training for ex-felons. "There is nothing else in Illinois like it, and I would dare say there's nothing else in the country like it right now that's this comprehensive.

" Although the pay may vary by the job, the county internships are expected to pay an average of nearly \$25,000 and include health benefits, said Commissioner Roberto Maldonado (D-Chicago), one of the ordinance's sponsors.

Matthews said studies show the rate of recidivism drops when ex-offenders land good-paying jobs that include benefits.

"A lot of these people are adults who have spent time incarcerated, on probation, and have come back, gotten an education ... yet they are still labeled," said Commissioner Bobbie Steele (D-Chicago), the ordinance's lead sponsor.

With passage of the ordinance, the county has 60 days to set up a five-member panel that will review applicants and select entrants into the program.

County Board President John Stroger will select three of the panel members, and Circuit Court Chief Judge Timothy Evans and Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown will pick one each.

Once selected, participants will go through a four- to six-week job training and readiness program provided by a community-based group such as the Safer Foundation and the North Lawndale Employment Network, although those agreements are still being worked out.

Participants can then apply for county jobs knowing they have the support of the five-member panel, Maldonado said.

While no departments are setting aside specific jobs for the program, the county has about 500 vacant entry-level positions. Maldonado said he will push for program participants to get some of those jobs as their one-year internships.

By Mickey Ciokajlo
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