

Ex-offenders make a beeline to a honey of a business

December 15, 2004

BY [FRAN SPIELMAN](#) City Hall Reporter

What's a little bee sting -- or four -- when you've endured the emotional pain of hearing a prison door slam shut?

If an \$8-an-hour beekeeper's job is all that you can get, you take it and grin and bear the bee stings.

On Tuesday, Mayor Daley awarded a \$259,367 grant to the North Lawndale Employment Network to help finance three programs designed to help ex-offenders readjust to life on the outside.

The most innovative program is "Sweet Beginnings," which manufactures honey in 40 hives on a former Sears lot at 3700 W. Fillmore and sells that honey at farmers markets.

"It taught me good communication skills, how to work with others, retail, manufacturing, assembling, nature, how to grow food and deal with insects -- everything," said 34-year-old Rhonda Moore, who spent 18 months in prison for a drug offense.

Without "Sweet Beginnings," Moore said, "I would probably be on welfare living month to month."

Ex-con Calvin Mitchell said he'd probably be "walking the streets" if it wasn't for his 20-hour-a-week job as a beekeeper.

Mitchell said he's not afraid, even though he's already been stung four times.

"That's something I used to do as a kid. I used to play with bees. . . . It's outside. It's working with nature," he said.

With the economy "still reeling" from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and security concerns making it even more difficult to place ex-cons, Brenda Palms Barber, executive director of the North Lawndale Employment Network, said she was determined to find some way to help.

"People say, 'How did you connect with bees and North Lawndale and honey? How did that happen? Frustration breeds innovation. We had a really hard time finding jobs for people,' she said.

According to a 2001 study by the North Lawndale Employment Network, as many as 57 percent of the adults in North Lawndale were in prison, on probation or on parole, and the unemployment rate was 26 percent.

Daley's 2005 budget calls for spending \$4 million of the windfall generated by privatizing the Chicago Skyway on programs for ex-offenders over the next five years.

Mayor is interested

Bee-keeping is near and dear to Daley's heart -- as evidenced by the hives at City Hall's rooftop garden. But even more important is offering ex-offenders a second chance.

"We're the only city putting local money up. Everybody points their finger [and says], 'Let the state [do it]. Let the federal government.' You have to have priorities. This is a priority," the mayor said.

In addition to "Sweet Beginnings," the city has awarded a \$94,500 grant to "U-Turn Permitted," another network program that offers a four-week job readiness course, then matches ex-cons with would-be employers with an 85 percent success rate.

Another \$70,367 will underwrite "Building Beyond." That's an 11-week program that teaches at-risk young people between the ages of 17 and 24 the basic computer and communication skills they need to make the transition to entry-level jobs.

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