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SC Expands Jobs Program for Former Inmates

By Robert Kittle

COLUMBIA, S.C. (WSPA) – South Carolina is expanding a successful pilot program that helps former prison inmates get jobs once they're released. Monday, the state held a "Second Chance Summit" to tell potential employers about the program and urge them to hire former inmates who go through the program.

Department of Corrections director Bryan Stirling says the state releases almost 10,000 inmates every year, since about 85 percent of the people in prison serve less than five years. 80 percent of them are in for non-violent crimes. He says the fact that almost everyone in prison will eventually get out means the state needs to do what it can to help them turn their lives around. "They're coming back to live with you, go to church, school, etcetera, etcetera, and we know that a job is one of the greatest preventers of them coming back," to prison, he told the business leaders.

Gov. Nikki Haley says the program is the first in the nation. It starts with inmates who are serving time for non-violent crimes, and who have clean disciplinary records, getting job training while in prison. The programs include auto work, barbering, carpentry, construction, electrical, horticulture, HVAC, masonry, plumbing, and welding.

What makes the program different is that, in addition to the job training, the state Department of Employment and Workforce starts working with inmates 90 days before they're released. They're taught employment and "soft" skills, and then 30 days before release they work directly with a DEW counselor to get registered in the SC Works system, write a résumé, and apply for jobs online once they're released.

The program also holds job fairs where employers can meet with potential employees.

The companies that hire former inmates receive federal payroll tax credits on eligible employees' first year of wages. There's also a federal bonding program, a free insurance policy for high-risk workers.

Gov. Haley says, "These are people that, if we can lift them up, show them a skill, get them a job, not only are we changing a family, we're giving the company a loyal worker and we're changing the state of South Carolina."