



The Power of Second Chances for Women Who Served Their Time

Filed in Employment and Training, Special Initiatives, Wages and Benefits • **By: Marlaina Guillaume** • April 29, 2024

In 2022, a woman named Shan Shan Burkett from Escambia County, Alabama, was given a second chance that transformed her life. Shan Shan had a history of incarceration for a drug-related crime, on top of addiction issues, strained family relations and outstanding legal fees.

Like many of the 650,000 people who are released from state and federal prisons every year, Shan Shan left prison with no resources or job prospects to set her up for success in her new life. However, she was determined to turn her life around and enrolled in the Re-Entry Program at the Dannon Project. With the project's comprehensive support—including housing placement assistance, counseling, job skills training and court advocacy services—she achieved her goal. After earning two valuable certifications as a forklift heavy equipment operator and flagger, she worked as a flagger for a construction company and is now employed as a material handler at a subsidiary of Mercedes.



In the last decade, reentry programs that provide training and support services for justice-involved individuals—that is, people who have had contact with the criminal justice system, including people who are incarcerated—have proven to be successful evidence-based and community-supported solutions. And for good reason: If local officials want to strengthen their community's economy, build a robust workforce, reduce recidivism and improve the safety of cities, then investing in reentry programs may be a cost-effective method to accomplish these goals.

Organizations like the Dannon Project, funded in part through a 2019 Department of Labor grant, are critical to helping women like Shan Shan gain financial independence. Key to their success is an understanding of the specific factors that cause recidivism among women and the provision of holistic and comprehensive services, including support services like child care to those who need it.

Reentry programs can also help those who have served their time obtain good-paying jobs rebuilding America on projects funded by the historic federal investments in infrastructure. In Alabama alone, \$6.4 billion in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds have been invested as of March 2024, creating many jobs. These federal investments are an opportunity to recruit and train the workforce of tomorrow while ensuring that marginalized populations such as justice-involved individuals are fully integrated into the workforce.

Providing career pathways to populations who have been excluded from the workforce has the power to change lives and communities. At the Women's Bureau, one of our top priorities is ensuring that women from underserved communities like Shan Shan have access to the job training and the good-paying, union jobs that are being created by federal investments. Our Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) grants fund community-based organizations that help women succeed in industries where workers are in demand but women

are underrepresented, such as construction, manufacturing and renewable energy. For example, Vincentian Ohio Action Network was awarded a WANTO grant in 2023 to expand its Accompanying Returning Citizens With Hope project, which helps incarcerated and justice-involved women obtain trade credentials and find employment in the solar energy field while also providing wraparound supportive services like assistance for child care and stable housing.

Shan Shan’s story shows what we can achieve with smart investments. Let’s work to give more women like her a second chance.

Marlaina Guillaume is the Southeast Regional Administrator at the Women’s Bureau.

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