

# IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## MDOC Calling on Businesses to Help Find Jobs for Ex-Offenders

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JACKSON – The Mississippi Department of Corrections is calling on businesses across the state to help inmates find employment once they are released from prison.

Statewide Re-entry Coordinator Matthew L. Riley, who started in the newly created position Sept. 1, plans to travel with other MDOC Re-entry/Pre-release employees to 82 counties to speak directly with potential employers. He has already visited a dozen counties since launching the “82 Counties in 82 Days” initiative on Jan. 22.

“It has been shown that employment is key to individuals successfully re-integrating into society when they are released from prison,” Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. “Therefore, helping offenders find a job is very important. Stable employment provides them a sense of worth, a feeling of accomplishment and self-reliability. They become taxpayers rather than tax burdens.”

Most employers contacted thus far have been positive, Riley said. Some, however, have zero tolerance for hiring a person with a criminal record, and then there are some who are willing to work with the offender, based on the type of conviction and how old it is, Riley said.

The Federal Bonding Program is available to protect employers with reservations about hiring ex-offenders for fear that the persons would be dishonest, he said. The workforce service protects employers from loss of money or property.

“We are asking employers or businesses for their policy on hiring, if they have a job opening, if they hiring and what type of employees are they looking for,” said Riley, whose 20 years of experience in both the public and private sector in corrections, education, and the judiciary has emboldened him against rejection.

MDOC is visiting a variety of businesses, including those in the hotel and restaurant industry, manufacturing, poultry processing, welding, heating and air conditioning, construction, electrical, retail, and the auto mechanic industry.

“We are grateful for the fast-food companies that have been very supportive in providing our returning citizens employment opportunities,” Riley said. “However, we are expanding our focus and reaching out to other employers in the state. Our goal is to secure long-term employment. We want to find out what skill set employees are looking for and match those offenders with those employers.”

The agency’s pre-release program can be better tailored to meet those employment needs, Riley said. The department has expanded pre-release beyond the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) to South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI) and Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF).

The Pre-release program is designed to not only teach the offenders cognitive thinking skills, employability, readjustment and social skills but also to provide job assistance via counseling, referral, interviews, job development and follow-up.

“One challenge we have is those persons who have little to no job experience and getting them enrolled in one of our vocational programs,” Riley said, “but we are committed to overcoming challenges like these.”

The agency has 37 vocational programs, including welding, automotive mechanic and automotive body repair, small engine repair, horticulture, and carpentry.

“We have no additional money for new programs,” Commissioner Hall said. “Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to make sure that we are teaching offenders what they need in the programs we have. We also need to make sure that offenders are participating in these programs. I have sent the message loudly and clearly that the Mississippi Department of Corrections is committed to providing meaningful rehabilitation programs.”