

Working past a criminal record

NCWorks Former Offender Initiative provides resources to help job seekers overcome stigma

By Elizabeth Chen

Over 70 million people in the United States have a criminal record, ranging from minor crimes to serious offenses, according to the Council of State Governments Justice Center. Finding a job can be especially challenging for those with a criminal record. NCWorks Career Center is attempting to help former offenders become employed and overcome these challenges.

NCWorks hosts weekly workshops to aid former offenders who are seeking employment in Durham. The Former Offender Initiative workshop takes place every Tuesday from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at the Durham NCWorks Career Center on 1105 South Briggs Ave.

“The workshops that we do are designed to equip people with the skills to successfully execute a job search,” said Durham NCWorks Career Center Program Manager Brandon Keen.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of December 2017, 11,600 people in Durham were unemployed, which translates to a 3.8 percent unemployment rate. NCWorks hopes to lower the unemployment rate by assisting job seekers with the skills and resources to find employment.

Job seekers can use the NCWorks Job Seeker Services online for free to see what opportunities are available within their desired field. The Job Search tool on the NCWorks website allows users to narrow their search by using keywords or selecting their education level, minimum



Kimberly Gammons (left) and Kelli McLean lead the Former Offender Initiative workshop inside the Durham NCWorks Career Center. The workshop helps job seekers with criminal records develop skills necessary for finding employment. (Photo by Elizabeth Chen)



The Durham NCWorks Career Center is located at 1105 S. Briggs Ave in southeast Durham. The Center provides workshops, a searchable job database, practice interviews and other services to former offenders during the job search process. (Photo by Elizabeth Chen)

acceptable salary and other job criteria.

“Employers and job seekers can directly interact through NCWorks, kind of like it’s an applicant tracking system,” said Keen. “We can help them no matter what type of job they’re looking for — we will work with that person to help them find employment in that field.”

The Former Offender Initiative workshop, led by NCWorks Career Center Career Advisor Kimberly M. Gammons, offers legal assistance resources, skills training, education resources and information about the Federal Bonding Program.

Gammons, who is also the former offender representative and business services representative, addressed the psychological toll that a job search can take on a person with a criminal record, especially after being continuously denied employment. The Former Offender Initiative workshop presents techniques to improve self-confidence, followed by an interview workshop.

“A lot of individuals that attend the workshop really need self-esteem build-

ing, and [it’s important] for them to understand that they are vital to the community,” said Gammons.

NCWorks Facilitator and Outreach Coordinator Kelli McLean leads the interview workshop, as well as four other NCWorks workshops per month.

NCWorks workshops rotate their subject depending on job seekers’ demands. Past workshops have focused on resume building, cover letters, the Dos and Don’ts of Career Changes, Marketing Yourself and How to Win the Employer Over.

McLean says mindset is an important part of the job search.

“If you come in looking for something, or come in feeling a certain kind of way, we like to make sure that you leave with some kind of satisfaction or some kind of motivation,” McLean said. “So the way that you come in will not be the way that you go out.”

According to Gammons, the purpose of the Former Offender Initiative workshop is to not only overcome the stigma surrounding a criminal record, but to focus on the strengths and talents of the job seeker as a form of liberation.

“I think [the Former Offender Initiative workshop] is more of understanding that everyone is in the position to build people, to empower people and that everyone deserves a chance.”