

**TESTIMONY OF  
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JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE  
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I begin by thanking this committee for both the opportunity and privilege to appear before you today. A lot of what I describe today is not only based on experience through my work but is also of a very personal nature as I am an ex-offender and substance abuser. As one of four siblings, raised by my mother in a NYCHA project, I begin with the following: My mother was certainly able to teach me right from wrong, she could clothe me, feed me, house me. What she **COULD NOT** do was to teach me how to be a man. This phenomena of women serving as back-bone in our communities comes at a price. We've developed generations of young men that seek to define their manhood by what they observe on the street. For me, this became the guy with the biggest car, nicest clothes, and a string of beautiful women. Additionally, the larger society sends messages. Constantly. The messages can be contradictory. Society wants to "talk like me, dress like me, rap like me" but clearly, does not want to be me. The former, I derive from television, movies, the music industry, etc. The latter is the result of my day to day existence. I'm followed wherever I go, viewed with suspicion in any interaction below 96 Street, on guard whenever a cop car passes me, no matter what I may be doing. In schools, I'm made to feel dumb or not worthy of educational attention. I'm moved from grade to grade when I **KNOW** I haven't done the work. And so:

The specific barriers that black/latino men face relating to employment can be categorized as personal and societal. Many black/latino men develop a set of survival skills on the streets, creating a mindset that protects them and assists with coping with the aforementioned messages, but that can impede effective functioning in the larger community. Day-to-day decisions, relating to what a black/latino man is going to do, and how, does not incorporate thinking beyond the immediate. . As a result, the awareness of decision-making requirements, the ability to tolerate the feelings of ambiguity around choice, and the ability to exercise good judgment when making choices may all be impaired to varying degrees. This directly affects the ability to engage in long-term thinking, an orientation that presumes that individual have choices. This short-term orientation is reinforced as black/latino men are consumed with day-to-day survival concerns. These constraints on long-term planning seriously diminish the decision-making

ability as it relates to employment. Attaching or re-attaching to the workforce is a slow process for black/latino men, so they find the process particularly difficult to navigate.

Another reaction to the messaging is that black/latino men will tend to function from a defensive posture, closing themselves off emotionally and developing preservation instincts that are guarded and suspicious. This is compounded by the seemingly adversarial relationship they develop with authority figures, be they law enforcement officers, school guidance counselors, teachers, or society at large. Combined, these adaptations almost always result in potentially unproductive, if not volatile, relationships in the work place. If a young black/latino male is able to navigate the hiring process, he may lose a job because of the inability to get along with peers or supervisors.

At the nexus between personal and societal barriers are the family, friends and acquaintances which most black/latino men interact with on a daily basis. Families may have turned their backs on these young men for behaviors deemed self-destructive. Peers encourage them in the more negative aspects of day to day survival, including, but not limited to criminal activity. Friends may not understand how to support them to make positive changes in their life choices. Beyond the communities where black/latino men live, the broader society presents numerous obstacles that they must confront in trying to enter the workplace. Black/latino men live in communities of concentrated poverty. Beyond being affected by the social pressures described above, these communities are isolated from the economic mainstream and thus lack networks of employed people, access to the informal avenues most people use to hear about job openings, and working role models.

Society at large tends to further distance black/latino men from the job market. There are long-standing stigmas about minority youth, young adults, and black/latino men in as being poor performers on the job. Additionally, if these men are ex-offenders, there are additional barriers keeping them from being considered for many types of employment. (Jobs or entire industries are out of reach, such as banking, law firms, jobs at airports, etc.) Many employers impose additional restrictions that go far beyond those imposed by law. Many employers will not hire former offenders even if they are legally permitted to do so, fearing problems among co-workers, liability problems, risk to property and image and reputation.

Education and training options are limited for black/latino men as well, cutting off avenues for improving their work prospects over time. Federally funded supports for education and job training, for example, restrict benefits for drug offenders and those who did not participate in the Selective Service registration process. While not all black/latino men will be affected by these policies, many of this group shirked their military registration responsibilities and may have aged out of the time period when they can still enroll. Without interventions, these obstacles block many black/latino men from integrating into society.

## **PROGRAM MODEL**

STRIVE has provided employment services for chronically unemployed adults since 1984. Black/latino men have been participants in the program since the beginning, and in every city where the STRIVE program has been replicated. In October, 2004, STRIVE operated a special initiative to place ex-offenders and individuals at risk of court involvement, using its entire network of programs. STRIVE's core program elements meet many of the needs of black/latino men in general and ex-offenders in particular, and programs have been adapted to target these populations.

Four basic tenets underlie the model that STRIVE developed. The first is that significant numbers of people who have been considered outside the workforce or unemployable want to work and can succeed in employment.

Second, personal development, not just technical skill, is crucial to success in the workplace. The ability to understand one's own identity, envision long-term goals, demonstrate personal responsibility, and manage one's own behavior, are central to creating positive experiences at work.

Third, STRIVE believes that employment offers the best and quickest leverage on the problems of the urban poor. STRIVE recognizes that many (although not all) unemployed people can move quickly into real jobs and can benefit from that experience.

The fourth tenet is that ongoing support is essential as people gradually stabilize their circumstances and move ahead. Resources must be available over time to help people work through challenges they encounter adapting to the workplace, integrating a job into the other areas of their lives, and looking toward future advancement. STRIVE recognizes that building a stable attachment to the workforce is a long-term, ongoing process rather than a one-time task.

From these principles, STRIVE developed a focused portfolio of core services:

- Three to four weeks of highly interactive and structured training on personal responsibility, attitude, self-esteem, and many of the soft skills that employers expect from all workers, such as professionalism, communication, teamwork, and working with a supervisor.
- Opportunity after training for immediate placement in jobs with a future, but without "guarantees," so that participants earn their newfound positions.
- Two-year follow-up support and tracking for all graduates to help them remain in the workforce and continue moving forward, and lifetime access to services ( skill up-grade trainings) for those who want to take advantage of them.

### *Attitudinal training*

The foundation for STRIVE's employment services is its unique attitudinal training program. Among the many issues that it addresses, STRIVE's attitudinal training helps people set long term goals, learn to deal with authority, build new networks of supportive relationships, and overcome social alienation. Research on the effectiveness of vocational programs for individuals suggests that in addition to building traditional skills, it is also important to address motivation and lifestyle and to help establish connections with organizations in the community. The attitudinal training addresses these motivational and lifestyle issues.

Attitude shapes and expresses who an individual is; at the same time, attitudes can be early warning signals of future behavior problems. Attitudinal training is a demanding blend of self-examination, critical thinking, relationship building, affirmation, learning and teaching. The training connects to the most tangible of goals: employment. A training focused on attitude and attitudinal change zeroes in on unwanted behaviors (such as inflexibility, dishonesty, inattentiveness, defensiveness, or impatience) that become barriers to successful job placement and job retention, while refining positive attitudes such as personal initiative, teamwork, and the ability to take constructive criticism. This focus forms the central philosophy of the STRIVE approach.

While academic achievement and work experience are necessary assets, they alone do not guarantee success in negotiating today's job market. Workplace managers and personnel directors filling entry-level jobs look for people who will fit into the workplace, get along with supervisors and co-workers, and display an eagerness to

learn and contribute. These same attributes are essential to retaining jobs and career development.

STRIVE's instructional approach and curriculum incorporate five facets that lead to attitudinal change and thus the development of positive workplace attributes: breaking through egos and emotional barriers; building trust; dealing with emotional "baggage"; engaging in critical self reflection; and building self-esteem for the future. Implemented as a whole, this process peels away the excuses that focus blame on everyone or everything else. "The buck stops here" with the participants and shows how they may have been carrying around baggage of past mistakes into all of their relationships and human interactions. This has not only been reflected in their work lives but may have been an albatross around their necks in their personal lives as well. Once participants begin to expand their self-awareness and personal accountability, they move easily to the aspects of the program that focus on developing strong general workplace skills like following instructions, listening, communicating, problem solving, getting along with co-workers and working successfully with supervisors.

While many programs have added "soft skill" components to their overall program designs, most do not use instructional approaches that reach below the surface and address this real process of change. Attitudinal change does not occur through traditional, academic instruction. Instead, it must be experiential, using the classroom itself as both a simulated work environment and a "therapeutic community" where members of the group recognize their commonalities and hold each other accountable for change. In the context of employment, trainers maintain a tight structure organized around basic workplace rules such as lateness, lack of professional attire or failure to complete assignments. Infractions have escalating consequences as participants learn to take responsibility for their own actions. Rather than talking intellectually about the requirements of the workplace, participants engage in a highly interactive learning environment where their daily performance provides the teaching and learning material.

As a supportive group learning environment, the classroom becomes a place that encourages participants to talk openly about past inappropriate behaviors, actions, attitudes and habits that have caused unfortunate choices to be made. This communal sharing and non-judgmental seeking of solutions provides participants with a number of experiences that they probably have never had: the notion that they are not alone and that they are accepted into the community regardless of past mistakes. An important aspect of the training period is creation of support

networks and accountability mechanisms among the participants, further advancing the notion that the participants are responsible for their own success at work.

To create this classroom experience, the sensitivity, experience, skill and empathy of the trainers is critical. Trainers' abilities to break through "hard core" barriers and fragile egos and to establish an atmosphere of trust, pride and dignity spell the success or failure for participants, and, indeed, the STRIVE Model itself. Trainers must facilitate participants through the often painful and always frightening process of self-discovery first, so that past mistakes will not be repeated. They must strike the proper balance, participant by participant, of challenge and support, and deftly move between the two as circumstances require. STRIVE has shown, through its twenty year history and its replication across the country, that it has the ability to consistently select and develop people to perform these difficult tasks.

### *Social Services*

Each client has access to a range of social services. The goal is to remove obstacles that could prevent a client from finding or retaining a job. Staff aid participants with issues such as:

- Helping clients attain the necessary documentation to secure employment (i.e. birth certificate, Social Security cards, State-issued ID cards, and Medicaid cards);
- Providing referrals to partner agencies for specific issues, such as substance abuse, mental health services, childcare and parenting resources, educational credentials, legal services, and housing concerns, to name a few, as well as to STRIVE's other programs such as support groups for women and for fathers;
- Providing short-term counseling, oftentimes enabling the client to graduate from the workshop. As the workshop contains an intensive introspective segment, issues often surface that could result in a client's inability to complete the workshop. Case Workers are able to head off such attrition, increasing the retention rates and the overall success of the program.

Some STRIVE affiliates go beyond individual case management and referrals to outside resources. These include running support groups for various target populations, providing mental health counseling, emergency shelter, transitional housing, parenting classes, leadership development programs, and child care.

## ***Job Development and Job Placement Services***

Each client in the STRIVE workshop is assigned a Job Developer and receives job placement services upon successful completion of the program. It is important to understand that STRIVE does not guarantee its graduates jobs, but it assures that they have access to job openings that they qualify for, and that employers will interview them. Job Developers use wide networks of employers who have appropriate, entry-level and semi-skilled positions. In particular, they look for employers who will hire participants with spotty and criminal backgrounds. Essential to the Job Developers' success is creating and maintaining good relationships with these employers. They meet with them regularly to discuss the advantages of working with STRIVE to fill any job openings they may have, check on the success of prior placements, and identify their new hiring needs.

An important part of making a successful job placement is matching the client to the right opportunity. Parallel to the Case Worker relationship, each graduate of STRIVE's Core Training is assigned a Job Developer. The Job Developers work individually with each client to gather a wide range of employment-related information: education level, prior training, work experience, volunteer service, transferable skills developed at home or in other atypical settings, work preferences and career goals. Once they point clients towards suitable job openings, they follow through with all stages of the hiring process – helping clients research a company, setting up interviews, and following up with the employer and graduate until a decision is made.

### ***Graduate Services***

Training and placement are followed by long-term support services. STRIVE's Graduate Services staff coordinate these services, and initiate the follow-up with clients for the first two years after graduation. After the two years when staff actively reach out to clients, STRIVE continues to offer a lifetime commitment to its participants; once individuals complete training, they can access the full spectrum of STRIVE services at any time. This helps to create and sustain a new social and professional network that can counteract negative influences they may encounter elsewhere in their lives. Follow up is most active during the tenuous first three months of employment, but continues with a minimum of quarterly contacts. Follow-up services are tailored to each individual and include phone contacts; in-person meetings; individual counseling sessions; referral services, and crisis intervention (referred to in Social Services); evening and weekend events (i.e. alumni forums and career development seminars); employer contact; upgrade/replacement services; and occasional home visits. After the formal two-year follow

up period, alumni are still invited to participate in group activities and to check in to keep STRIVE abreast of their career advancements and promotions.

Job re-placement and upgrade services are an important part of the follow-up work. Since many clients possess serious barriers to employment, they often are unable to secure any kind of employment before coming to STRIVE. For these individuals, their first job placement is often a position that allows them to establish a work history. STRIVE works with clients to help them see that this first job is only the beginning. Once they have established a work history, they can transition into more demanding jobs, and STRIVE serves as a continuing resource, helping graduates at all stages of their careers move to better opportunities. Approximately 30% of the job placements that STRIVE assists with each year are job changes that help clients stabilize or move ahead.

### ***Career Advancement***

Once clients have begun working, STRIVE's CareerPath programs offer a selection of advanced, sector-based training opportunities for STRIVE graduates with sustained work experience (six months to one year of steady employment) to further their careers. Black/latino men in particular can benefit from opportunities to acquire industry-specific technical skills because enhanced skills can help compensate for the stigma they carry. The skill-training programs that STRIVE graduates participate in are typically nine to 24 weeks in length, and are generally conducted in the evenings, to allow the participants to maintain employment while studying. Careful analysis of the job market is needed before referring clients to training programs, to ensure that these clients do not waste time in training programs only to learn that they are excluded from employment because of legal constraints or pervasive employer practices. Training has been offered in fields such as computer assembly and repair, computer programming, construction trades, commercial driving instruction, and hospitality services. Many of the programs are provided by other agencies. In those cases, STRIVE's graduate services staff provide the coordination between programs.

### **Program Innovations**

Incorporation of a fatherhood training component can help men discover that they can successfully connect with their children. For many, this is a major motivating force. STRIVE programs in New York and Baltimore include fatherhood activities.



An issue of particular concern to black/latino men is the issue of arrearages accrued while unemployed or imprisoned. The financial burdens of unpaid child support often discourage fathers from having any relationship with their children. After-hours support groups help fathers who seek to improve their relationships with their children and become more responsible and capable fathers. The programs address emotional needs, parenting techniques, practical issues of financial planning and mediation with the children's mothers, and provide access to legal assistance. The programs integrate offenders and non-offenders.

Females face a different set of issues. The STRIVE New York affiliate has offered an eight-week, after-hours support group for women, to help them deal with the many issues that may hinder their success at home and in the workplace. The program is facilitated by a professional life-skills coach and aided by the STRIVE Social Services staff, and addresses such issues as single parenting, lack of childcare, emotional and physical abuse, presentation for the workplace, and public assistance/legal aid issues. Once clients graduate from the program, they are invited to join a mentoring program, where they are matched with successful career women in a relationship beneficial to both.

Several STRIVE programs are exploring the use of non-profit temporary staffing agencies to provide work experience for people who have difficulties finding placements in the traditional job market. These include ex-offenders, who are excluded from many mainstream employment opportunities. Temporary staffing can offer a number of benefits. Temporary work may be an appropriate transition phase for individuals who are dealing with multiple barriers to employment, and, if the jobs are under the control of the service provider, they can create the chance for intensive supervision and guidance. Also, temporary jobs can give workers exposure to a variety of fields before committing to training in a particular industry. As an added benefit to the service provider, they can generate revenue that covers some or all of the cost of running the service. STRIVE affiliates in Flint, New York, Baltimore and San Diego are exploring the use of this strategy, with the Flint program already 12 months into operating such a program.

### **Policy Barriers for Ex-offenders**

STRIVE's services make a difference for many of the people who participate. However, the broad environment of policies and practices that exists impedes success for others in the program, and is even more detrimental to individuals who cannot avail themselves of programs. STRIVE's work around the country raises a

number of questions about policies and practices that should be examined to more widely improve the life-chances for black/latino men in general and ex-offenders in particular.

Extending limitations on individuals who have been convicted of felonies beyond their prison sentences serves several purposes. On the one hand, barring people from working in fields related to a former offense addresses security needs of employers and customers who fear repeat criminal behavior. On the other hand, it appears that many post-incarceration restrictions of ex-offenders are the result of a desire to reinforce retribution against criminals and serve as a more powerful deterrent to potential future offenders.

*Have legal restrictions on hiring ex-offenders gone too far?*

While some research questions the impact of vocational training programs, there is much less doubt about the correlation between reduced recidivism and participating in legitimate employment that provides income to live on. Yet a variety of laws limit ex-offenders' options in entering the workforce. The rationale for these limitations is often clear, but the growing number of restrictions has not been reviewed for true relevance to performance of the affected jobs or protection of the public at large. Some laws prohibit people with specified offenses from working in particular occupations or industries. For example, banks are prohibited from hiring people with a range of breach of trust offenses, schools and other institutions that work with children are prohibited from hiring offenders with records of violent assaults, and so forth. With increased concerns about "homeland security" and terrorist attacks, however, new jobs have been placed off limits to ex-offenders, with much less correlation between the desired improvement in safety and the potential worker's criminal record. For example, no one with any felony convictions can work as either a security screener at airports, or in any job that has access to the runways. The connection between a drug abuse conviction and terrorism seems limited at best, and appears to create little value for security while creating a significant restriction on individuals who have supposedly completed the punishment for past offenses.

*Should there be time limits for how far back employers can check criminal records?*

There are no federal limitations on how far back employers can check job applicants' criminal records, and very few state limitations. Employers can use convictions far in the past – ten, fifteen years, or even older - to exclude people

from employment. In effect, this means that an offender has never completed paying his or her debt to society. Further, the effect of the ability of employers to impose a virtually permanent ban on employment means the elimination of many avenues for rehabilitation or reform. Former offenders are never offered a second chance. With increased computerization of records and networking among agencies, this can mean life-time constraints on employment. Questions should be raised about the relative value to society of allowing ex-offenders to work after a certain number of years versus the risks created by keeping them from viable, legitimate employment.

*Should employers have access to arrest records?*

Currently, employers can access arrest records, not only records of convictions, as part of their background checks on job applicants. They can use this information in making their hiring decisions, and there are no legal limitations against their doing so. This raises significant questions about the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. In particular, with disproportionate arrest rates of black/latino males, and consistent evidence of racial profiling, the access to arrest records seems to pose a highly inappropriate restriction based on race. State policies or legal test cases might be necessary to make changes in this area.

*Most employers STRIVE works with are not interested in the federal bonding program. Should it be revamped? Or abandoned entirely, with the funds put to better use on behalf of the same population?*

The federal government offers a bonding program for certain ex-offenders who obtain employment, protecting against damages for people who would not be covered by employers' regular insurance programs. However, with more than 20 years of experience, in 17 cities, working with more than 400 employers annually, STRIVE has found few companies who will agree to hire a former offender because of this bonding program. This lack of interest raises a number of questions about the efficacy of the program and why employers do not take advantage of it. There appears to be little administrative burden on the employers. The bonding is limited to six months in length, so the limited time may be of concern. The low level of insurance coverage might also be of concern. And, it may be that the perceived risk and stigma of hiring former offenders goes well beyond a question of insurance. In any event, it seems certain that usage of this program should be examined, and based on employers' reactions, the program should be revamped or funds reallocated for more effective interventions.

*What effect has the elimination of education programs in prisons had? What effect has limiting student loans and grants to drug offenders had in restricting educational advancement for former offenders? How does this diminish their chances for successful re-entry?*

Most evidence shows a direct correlation between educational achievement and lowered recidivism. Unfortunately, in decisions that were the result of efforts by states to reduce deficits, combined with policies to “get tough” on crime, many states have eliminated their education programs in prisons. Programs that have been eliminated include opportunities to study for the GED exam, vocational training programs, and college-level studies. Research on reintegration has begun to stress the value of services provided before prisoners are released, but the reduction of educational programs seemingly ignores the value of such services in reducing recidivism.

Similarly, limitations on access to education after release are likely to cause the same problems for those ex-offenders who want to make a change and pursue legitimate work. Restrictions on receipt of student aid by drug offenders, and exclusion of those who did not sign up for the Selective Service from job training programs, are likely to cause undesired consequences that increase crime and recidivism rather than reduce them.

This concludes my testimony and again I thank this body for the opportunity.