Green Jobs for Ex-Offenders: The Urban Resource Initiative's "GreenSkills" Program

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URI, connecting these two challenging figures, is working with the city to achieve its tree-planting goal through the development of a green jobs program to help ex-offenders transitioning from incarceration to gainful employment. This group is chronically overlooked on the job market, with unemployment rates topping 50 percent in some cases. Unemployment is considered one of the major drivers of recidivism. The green jobs program was designed to simultaneously address the costly urban problems of recidivism and sparse forest resources.

Keywords

green jobs, urban forestry, ex-offenders, incarceration

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Municipal/Nonprofit Collaboration

Over the past 18 years, URI has worked closely with the City of New Haven, collaborating with our park agency to support volunteer tree plantings in the right-of-way and in city parks. Over these nearly two decades, our partnership has grown stronger and our work with the city has expanded—implementing a citywide street tree inventory conducted by volunteers, for instance. In 2010, the City selected URI to serve as the sole-source contractor for all street tree plantings. We used this relationship to found GreenSkills, our green jobs program.

Program and Strategy

The GreenSkills program began as a partnership with local schools, providing tree-planting jobs, hourly wages, and an implicit environmental education for underserved New Haven teenagers. We expanded this program in 2010 to offer paid work for ex-offenders and other vulnerable populations.

Our exclusive contract with New Haven, replacing the former fragmented jigsaw of RFPs, has proven to be the most economical and effective urban forestry management strategy for the city. Upon request, whether by the City or private citizens, URI procures and plants trees. The homeowners and organizations that have either requested or consented to the planting of each tree are given a brief tutorial on the steps required to maintain the tree's health. When the planting is completed, the stewardship becomes their responsibility.

The particular circumstances of URI—its longstanding relationship with the City of New Haven and the existing infrastructure of our GreenSkills green jobs program for teenagers—facilitated the creation and implementation of the ex-offenders program. However, any volunteer training program for the planting and maintenance of trees could be readily adapted to a similar purpose.

One of the key components to building this green jobs program was creating strong partnerships with transitional jobs organizations. In one case, URI had already been working with a local drug rehabilitation center through our Community Greenspace program, which draws community support for the construction or management of local green spaces. In this case, inpatients provided weekly outdoor volunteer hours on the facility grounds and in the surrounding neighborhood. When New Haven announced its tree planting goals, this organization provided a natural partner, and URI reached out to build the green jobs program on top of existing volunteer work.

In other cases, we identified non-profits working on re-entry initiatives with whom we had never previously worked.

Having gained the cooperation of these nonprofits, URI created a full-time position to manage the GreenSkills program. At that point, URI had secured a contract with the City of New Haven to plant 1,000 trees in one year. This prospect helped to open funds for expansion of our GreenSkills program. URI worked with its new partner agencies to identify candidates for the planting positions, though at first URI had no part in the interview or selection process. Over the past three years, URI staff has started an informal interview process by talking with the team in advance.

The program started with two crews of six men. Each crew worked two days per week, eight hours per day, for ten weeks. This season we have two crews working two days per week, six hours per day; the fall will run nine weeks and the spring six weeks. We are also starting a pilot that will run for nine months, allowing the men to work through the fall, winter, and spring, in order to see if longer steady employment provides improved outcomes.

We generally recruit new workers each season, though there have been exceptions—for example, hiring one person for two consecutive seasons, and then bringing him on to be a supervisor for the third season. These decisions are made in tandem with the partner organization.

Results, Lessons, and Challenges

This work, because it addresses two problems, yields two outcomes that need to be measured. Determining the contribution of GreenSkills toward New Haven's 10,000-tree planting goal is a relatively straightforward challenge; URI only need track how many trees the men are able to plant during their employment. The other outcome we'd like to measure—how successfully does green jobs training reduce recidivism, and can planting trees influence the outlook and employability of ex-offenders?—is profoundly elusive.

With regard to the latter, URI has so far relied on exit interviews to determine the strengths and value of the program as it pertains to the workers. These interviews, while providing suggestions for administrative and logistical improvements, have also given insight into how a season of tree planting can affect those transitioning from prison back into society. For example, interviews showed appreciation because the work:

- Provided a sense of value.
- Gave the workers a sense of respect by allowing them to be leaders.
- Offered a chance to become "reacquainted with reality" and to "work to make it right."
- Was an outlet of productivity to focus the mind on something new, "get out of chaos and drama," and to build confidence and camaraderie.

Ultimately, many of the participants were grateful to be "giving back instead of taking."

The challenge, of course, is that these interviews provide neither a quantitative nor objective assessment of GreenSkills. One of the core objectives of the program is to build a vocational bridge for ex-offenders by providing professional training and basic workplace skills like communication, punctuality, adherence to instruction, and respect for both others and one's self. While self-reporting is very valuable, these "soft skills" are not readily measured; they are sometimes even unobservable. URI has thus far been unable to structure a system of assessment that can objectively decipher or quantify these outcomes.

One of the barriers is cost, as the collection of statistically convincing data, both in terms of quality and quantity, is an expensive endeavor. But in many ways, the social outcomes of this program are what interest us most. Devising a good system of evaluation has remained a constant challenge.

Besides finding effective metrics for one of the program's essential outcomes, the amount of turnover inherent in our operation presents another big challenge. Every season, a significant amount of time is spent training new workers (both supervisors from the Yale student-body, and new participants, who number 30-40 on average including high schoolers). This is a time-consuming process and introduces much more potential for error than in a conventional landscaping company, which has lower turnover.

The GreenSkills collaborative work with ex-offenders has so far proven a perfectly effective way to address the urban challenge of scarce forest resources. How this work alters the tragically destructive and widespread cycle of recidivism remains an open question in need of answering.

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[1] Macmillan, T. Mayor Vows To Plant 10,000 Trees. October 6, 2009. Available online at: http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/mayor_vows_to_plant_10000_trees/

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