



City Councilwoman Cherelle Parker conducted a workshop on moving forward with a criminal record at St. James United Methodist Church on March 28th—Tribune Photo by Samaria Bailey.

## Councilwoman Cherelle Parker holds workshop on moving on with a criminal record

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Families of the St. James United Methodist Church and Olney neighbors attended a “Your Right to Know: Moving Forward with A Criminal Record” workshop held at the church and sponsored by City Councilwoman Cherelle Parker, on March 28.

St. James said this was the first time they’ve had such an event and that it was an important one for its community and the congregation.

“It was important to host the [workshop] because we as a church have to forgive and the community has to forgive,” said St. James Pastor John T. Brice, referencing ex-offenders. He added that if a person has done all they can to be reintegrated back into society, nothing should prevent them from being all that they can be.

“We are an all-inclusive church. We are not here to just serve God, but the people of this community,” said Frances Legarreta, St. James’ Director of Development. “[And] we understand how a criminal record will and has held people back. This is a way to break through that block.”

Legarreta added that the clinic was also relevant to James’ members, as some families there have been affected by incarceration. “They were here and some of their relatives,” she said.

Councilwoman Parker said the workshop was necessary because some ex-offenders and their families don’t know about the assistance available to them or that they have certain rights.

“The purpose of the workshop was to ensure our constituents know their rights and know that it’s possible to move forward. Gain employment and become self-sufficient in caring for their families,” said Parker. “I’m always concerned when people don’t know certain services are available. Each of these agencies are coming out so people can connect with this information, so they can be empowered to fight for themselves.

One of the major misconceptions cleared up at the workshop was the voting rights of returning citizens with felonies and inmates held in prison for misdemeanors.

A lot of people are under the impression that once Incarcerated you are no longer eligible to vote. That is so untrue,” said Greg Irving, of the Philadelphia City Commissioners office. “As long as you’re not serving time for a felony, you’re eligible to vote.”

Irving added that inmates are able to vote through an absentee ballot.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, people on probation, parole, living under house arrest and in halfway houses or community corrections centers can vote.

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Michael Lee, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, was another presenter. One of the basics he covered was on job opportunities.

“If an employer uses your criminal record to deny you an opportunity, they have to put it in writing,” he said. “You can sue under the state law. Or under ‘Ban the Box,’ you can file a complaint.”

Pamela Gwaltney, Deputy Director of Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, said because of their criminal record victims of discrimination can visit their office for assistance. “An individual has to be able to explain why they’ve been discriminated against for a job [or] housing,” she said. “We are all about what you want to do going forward.”

Greg Abdul Jaleel, of the Construction Apprenticeship Preparatory Program (CAPP), invited returning citizens to take advantage of good-paying careers.

Jaleel said CAPP is a free program that “prepares you for the tests union give you to get into apprenticeships.” He noted that one of his students who was incarcerated is now a carpenter.

The city’s Office of Adult Education (OAE) offers a free program to help high school dropouts earn a GED.

Catherine Freimiller, OAE Administrative Manager, said students have to take a test to assess their grade level and will be set up with a learning coach to get placed in classes that will prepare them for the high school equivalency test.

The Philadelphia FIGHT Institute for Community Justice offers all types of services for returning citizens. Khia Naylor, a FIGHT staffer, said they start working with people while still in prison and offer help with vital records, a GED program and a host of other re-entry services.

Khalil Morrison, a case manager with the RISE (Reintegration Services for Ex-offenders), encouraged returning citizens to take advantage of their life-skills classes and job readiness training, which includes mock interviews and resume help. Morrison said individuals in RISE programming are also assigned a case manager for one year.

PA CareerLink Northwest was also represented at the workshop. They offer a free program that helps with job searching, resume building and interview skills.

“It was great to help my family—my son, who did time for having a gun, he said he can’t vote; and a girl living up the street, now she can learn how to do something; and to help my great-grandson, I’m taking him down to RISE,” said Ann Ruffin, an Olney resident who attended the workshop.” ■