



DRAPER, Utah — Holly Murphy’s story is familiar to many who have navigated the criminal-justice system. She struggled with drug abuse that eventually led her to a criminal lifestyle aimed at supporting her addiction. But Holly never had a problem landing a job. She was confident about her skills, adept at building a resume, and gave a solid interview. That is, until she was convicted of third-degree felonies and sentenced to probation in 2009. With her marred record, she found herself stumbling while explaining to potential employers that she had completed treatment, remained clean, and left her previous life behind.

“I got to the point where I didn’t even want to go fill out an application,” Murphy said. “I would go in as a felon hoping they didn’t ask the question, or ask too much about it.”

Then, her probation officer sent her to a class administered by the Utah Defendant/Offender Workforce Development (UDOWD) Task Force – an uncommon collaboration of representatives from local, county, state, and federal agencies dedicated to helping offenders leave their pasts behind and start anew. Murphy admitted she thought it would be a cakewalk. Instead, she underwent a series of workshops and learned how to honestly discuss her criminal record while touting her positive attributes. Murphy regained confidence. Shortly thereafter, in addition to beating her drug addiction and regaining custody of her children, Holly began a new career and successfully completed her probation ahead of schedule.

Everyday, offenders are faced with similar daunting tasks as they step back into the community and overcome stresses that range from establishing a law-abiding lifestyle to repaying victims. Utah Department of Corrections Employment Specialist Jeff Wilson notes the story all too often ends negatively, as 80 percent of offenders nationwide are unemployed at the time they return to prison.

“The earlier society helps ex-offenders become law-abiding, tax-paying individuals, the sooner our economy will benefit,” Wilson said.

UDOWD began in October 2009 when U.S. Probation Officer Anrico Delray and Utah Corrections Programming Supervisor Dan Chesnut began looking at how their agencies could collaborate to form an advisory and working group composed of

fellow public agencies, community partners, and employers with the goal of helping offenders obtain and maintain jobs. The partnership was strengthened under the leadership of the Honorable Brooke C. Wells, U.S. Magistrate Judge and chair of the task force advisory board. Not only is the task force now working to eliminate employment barriers for offenders, but it also works to eliminate internal barriers among partnering agencies.

“Offender employment is a shared responsibility,” Judge Wells said. “And only by working together can we break the cycle of recidivism that destroys the lives of offenders, their families, and their victims.”

Upon receiving a two-year federal Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) from the U.S. Department of Justice, six state employment specialists partnered with four federal probation officers and formed the UDOWD Task Force. The group established a mission to effectively collaborate toward increasing community awareness, aiding offenders with employment opportunities, and ultimately reducing recidivism. The task force’s successes immediately attracted statewide attention leading to a broader coalition of State, County, Federal, faith-based, and non-profit groups in the community. In addition to Utah Corrections, U.S. Probation, and the U.S. District Court, other integral participants include the U.S. Attorney for the District of Utah, Salt Lake County Criminal Justice Services, Utah Department of Workforce Services, Vocational Rehabilitation, Utah Federal Defenders Office, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

There are now four county re-entry working groups (Davis, Salt Lake, Utah and Weber) composed of government personnel and private businesses working to leverage resources. All State and some local task force members have completed an intensive three-week (180-hour) training sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections. The group provides job-readiness training and seeks to debunk misconceptions about former offenders. They raise employers’ awareness of economic benefits that come with hiring these individuals, such as free bonding, tax credits, and support from local probation and parole offices.

Utah Department of Corrections Executive Director Tom Patterson praised the task force’s efforts, noting their intuitive fit with a major part of Corrections’ mission: helping offenders to succeed. “Employment plays a critical role in reducing recidivism and promoting public safety. By helping recovering offenders attain a level playing field in competing in the job market, the entire community will benefit.”

The efforts have paid off for former offenders like Russell Bloss. He walked out of federal prison with bills, a rap sheet, and a laundry list of fears. Following a six-week job hunt, he realized companies wouldn’t hire a former bank robber – no matter how good his intentions seemed. Then his federal parole officer offered UDOWD’s services. Within a few years, Bloss successfully completed his federal supervised release and worked his way up to a management position at Salt Lake City-based

Molding Box: a Warehouse, Pack and Shipping company that *Inc. 500* named the second-fastest growing company in Utah and 71st-fastest growing in the nation.

Chief Executive Officer Jordan Guernsey has hired about 80 ex-offenders in recent years. Most start with entry-level jobs in shipping & handling but can work their way to the top like General Manager Bloss. Former offenders compose half Guernsey's staff – though the company reviews criminal histories and makes hiring decisions on a case-by-case basis. He's received thank-you cards from many who express gratitude that someone finally gave them a chance.

"I've talked to a couple people who were surprised or wondered if I was scared working with these guys, but our mentality is a lot different," Guernsey said. "We believe people can change if they're willing to work – and work hard. They're just like anyone else. A person is a person."

Chief U.S. Probation Officer David Christensen touts the multi-agency collaboration that enables UDOWD to aid people like Bloss, noting the criminal-justice system has long been skilled in adjudicating and processing but traditionally less versed at meeting the needs of those people and their families. "To overcome their troubled pasts and see a light at the end of the tunnel, they must have employment, schooling, and a positive support structure. For several years now, (UDOWD) has opened doors, removed major obstacles, and penetrated the bureaucratic walls to make employment opportunity a priority."

Bloss recently successfully completed his first semester of college and says he hopes offenders and society benefit from the efforts that helped him. "While I feel good about where I am today, I'll never feel good about the people I hurt," he said. "But I'm going to be your neighbor and someone you meet on the street. Now, I'm a contributing taxpayer. I'm not an outlaw or on drugs. I just hope what I've been able to do with my life can be duplicated by others."

#### **Other Participants:**

- Utah State Office of Rehabilitation
- Community Correctional, Re-Entry, and Treatment Centers
- Utah County Sheriff's Office
- Utah 3<sup>rd</sup> District Court
- Utah State Office of Education
- LDS Employment Services
- Catholic Community Services
- Davis Applied Technology College
- Division of Professional Licensing (DOPL)
- Utah Office of Recovery Services