

Congress of the United States – US House of Representatives – Committee on Small Business

Testimony of Gary Wozniak – Founder and CEO of RecoveryPark, Detroit, Michigan

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“Prison to Proprietorship: Entrepreneurship Opportunities for the Formerly Incarcerated”

Good afternoon. My name is Gary Wozniak and I am the Founder and CEO of RecoveryPark, a social enterprise in Detroit, Michigan. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of the honorable members of the US House Committee on Small Business. My testimony today is in support of “Prison to Proprietorship: Entrepreneurship Opportunities for the Formerly Incarcerated.”

RecoveryPark exists to create jobs for people with barriers to employment. We deploy this mission by launching food-based businesses on Detroit’s east side, starting with RecoveryPark Farms which grows specialty produce for chefs, and maintains a workforce largely of returning citizens. We provide opportunities for individuals transitioning from prisons, jails, shelters, and drug treatment facilities to gain permanent and supportive employment.

After graduating from college, I began to assess my career options and determine the best path to make a significant income. I found this path as a young stock broker in the 1980s. This line of work took me down the path of managing stress with illegal drugs, which quickly created an addiction that led me to a drug treatment facility, SHAR House, in 1987. Because I used my financial clients’ money to support my addiction, I was sent to federal prison from 1988-1991. Upon my release, I realized the tremendous burden that returning citizens face in transitioning from a punitive, structured environment to one without routine, where an individual becomes responsible for his or her well-being.

I’ll never forget the day that I decided not to accept the fate to which many returning citizens are relegated. I applied and interviewed for a job at Enterprise Rent-a-Car. When they denied me the opportunity and I asked why, I was told that because of my felony record, I would not be able to obtain even an entry-level position as a rental car clerk. Upon my return home that afternoon, I looked in the mirror and promised myself that I’d never let anyone tell me “no” again.

Scouting business opportunities, I was introduced to the Jet's Pizza franchise, and launched my first Jet's Pizza business in Hamtramck, Michigan. Seven businesses later, I reconnected with the treatment center where I found myself in 1987 which was amid a major financial crisis, facing shutdown. The CEO at the time was a friend and a person in long-term recovery, and since recovering people never say no to each other, I stepped in to help restructure SHAR's financials. Part of that restructure included reviewing pathways to create economic opportunities for SHAR's client base, many of who have a criminal history. Thus, RecoveryPark was launched in 2008, incorporated in 2010; and became an independent organization in 2012.

I launched RecoveryPark because I knew, both based on experience and data, that for-profit businesses with social missions can alleviate the kinds of stresses I personally experienced and create safer communities, engaged citizens, and taxpaying members of our neighborhoods. Time and again, we hear from employers in Detroit who struggle to maintain healthy and productive workforces. While some employers have taken progressive approaches to hiring disenfranchised populations, including Goodwill Industries, Peckham Industries in Lansing, Michigan, and RecoveryPark in Detroit, we still face the harsh reality that without addressing various barriers to employment, returning citizens will continue to find themselves in the revolving doors of the criminal justice system. The opportunities you are considering today will help lift that burden in substantial ways for this important population.

A few factors contribute to an individual's propensity to reoffend. Within the first three months of a returning citizen's arrival back to the community, if the individual is afforded the opportunity to obtain full-time employment or launch a small business, their recidivism rate is virtually nonexistent. If an individual obtains permanent employment by the six-month mark, that individual's recidivism rate is in the range of 30 percent. By the nine-month mark, the recidivism rate is 70 percent, and if a returning citizen is unable to obtain employment or launch a small business within 12 months of his or her release, his or her return to prison is virtually guaranteed. Reviewing these statistics, it is imperative to support returning citizens within their first 90 days post-release to find gainful employment. This work however should start before a person is released, and that's where opportunities for entrepreneurship training while still "behind the walls" is most important.

I returned from prison over 30 years ago, and despite owning seven businesses, launching an eighth, sitting on five non-profit boards and mentoring hundreds of returning citizens and people in recovery, I still cannot obtain a job mopping floors in a nursing home because of

occupational licensing laws and regulations. Proprietorship was, and still is, my only avenue for success. Imagine if I had learned business skills while incarcerated and had access to grants/loans upon my release to launch a business?

We must determine a more efficient and expeditious way to cut down the barriers that returning citizens face upon their release. We continue to educate individuals remanded to many of the nation's state facilities, yet we offer nothing in the way of training in the federal system. Our current Michigan Department of Corrections Director, Heidi Washington, has helped lead the charge to launch meaningful programs at Vocational Villages to set individuals up for real career paths from welding to landscaping and is also leading the nation with entrepreneurship training that taps into the business mindset that took many people to prison in the first place. Imagine those minds being educated on how to run a successful business? Expanding the reach of these state programs to federal prisons has real value, casting a wider net for a talented workforce that is often left behind because of the 'scarlet letter' on their records.

Opportunities for education while incarcerated at federal facilities coupled with SCORE mentorship and grants/loans that would help launch business ideas post-release could dramatically help returning citizens move forward in life. If an individual has obtained certain skill sets and certifications during his or her institutionalization, we as the public gain tremendously as those skill sets are deployed upon release. The kinds of limitations on training in federal institutions needs to be reviewed and more opportunities introduced so that people can make their time in prison as beneficial as possible.

Employment and proprietorship are the tip of the iceberg pertaining to barriers that individuals with criminal histories face. In Detroit, we face a massive crisis around housing, transportation, substance abuse, and much more for returning citizens. Reevaluating access to business start-up and employment is at the forefront, but the conversations must continue regarding pathways to housing and other quality-of-life needs for returning citizens. Expungement of federal crimes should also be considered, as many states have instituted cutting edge policies in this vein.

As a returning citizen, an entrepreneur, a person in long-term recovery, and the Founder of a multimillion dollar for-impact company, I fully endorse the ideas before you today. Returning citizens have a wide range of skills and abilities, and they should not be overlooked. I hope that

the honorable members of the US House Committee on Small Business will indeed pass legislation for entrepreneurship education, SCORE mentorship opportunities and grants/loans that support small business development post-release for returning citizens.

Thank you for your time this afternoon.