

Conference helps people overcome barriers to employment, affordable housing

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Often times, men and women who have been incarcerated and have paid their debt to society find their past transgressions are barriers to employment and even affordable housing.

This was a sentiment expressed by some of the participants at the Re-Entry Partnership Conference held Monday at Library Partnership at 912 NE 16th Ave.

The conference is designed to assist people with barriers to employment, including limited work history, criminal background, limited education or changes to their life circumstances and need for employment.

While incarcerated at Lowell Correctional Institution, Judith Gambles Milley worked to rehabilitate herself. She took culinary arts, carpentry and business administration classes, and thought those skills would help her get a job to become self-sufficient.

Milley said she applied for jobs and had great interviews, but when the background question came up, the jobs were no longer available.

Milley is one of nearly 20 men and women who attended the conference, which includes workshops that end Thursday. The conference also features motivational speakers and professionals who offer tools to help participants overcome background barriers to employment.

Milley said she came to the conference to learn ways to explain how she has grown as a person and the skills she has acquired to better her situation.

“I’ve been alcohol and drug free for six years,” said Milley. “I took anger management classes and I’m active in church. I’ve changed and I’ve grown, but the past keeps catching up and it’s like I can’t overcome it. I keep hoping to find a key to succeed.”

After a two-hour workshop, Milley thinks she may have found the key and feels motivated to continue to persevere to find employment.

Terry Jones, 62, said he was 16 years old when in 1971 he was sentenced to prison. He was released from prison in Sept. 2018, and he said, right away he started working with CareerSource of North Central Florida taking classes and preparing himself for a job. While in prison, Jones said, he earned his GED, learned to make cabinets, and gained horticulture and cooking skills.

And, although he has job skills, he can’t get a job, Jones said.

Jones said he is glad he came to the conference and plans to attend all the workshops being offered. He hopes employers will look past his background to his job skills.

“I’ve been preparing myself for the interview,” said Jones. “I’m ready and I have job skills.”

The workshop facilitator was Cherie Kelly, Library Partnership manager. The presenters were keynote speaker Tequila McKnight, the owner of TNT Dynamite Cleaning Service, Harold Gertner, adult education career placement and learning specialist at Santa Fe College and Jhody Polk, director of the Alachua County Re-Entry Coalition and executive director of the Florida Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls.

McKnight said she was incarcerated for four years (2010-2014). When she was released from incarceration, she got a job at a restaurant, but was let go because of her background. She was able to get a job cleaning rooms in a hotel, and in 2016 she decided to work for herself and started her own cleaning business, which offers house cleaning, construction cleaning and other cleaning services.

“You can’t give up,” she told the conference participants. “Believe me, you have to crawl before you can walk. Your journey will be hard but not impossible. I followed my dream to become a success.”

Gertner gave attendees tons of information. He told them to look at their experiences and what they've learned as assets. He said attitude is at the top of the list of what employers look for because "you can't train attitude." He said a fixed mindset misses out while a growing mindset adapts.

He told them to be truthful and take responsibility for their decisions and actions. He said an employer looks at someone who has taken responsibility for their actions and continues to grow as someone who would be a reliable employee.

Polk said she was a young mother of a baby and a toddler when she was incarcerated. She was released five years ago. Polk is pursuing a legal education and is an advocate for social justice.

Polk said she is owning her barriers.

She told participants to map out where they're going and to look at barriers holding them back.

She distributed a comprehensive "Social and Emotional Learning" or SEL handout, she said saved her life.

According to the handout, SEL is a "process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relations and make responsible decisions."

The conference is sponsored by Partnership for Strong Families, the Alachua County Library District, and other partners that include Satchel's Pizza, Gainesville Housing Authority, Greater Gainesville Chamber, The Florida Council, CareerSource NCFL, Alachua County Sheriff's Office and Florida Department of Corrections.