

Home / Top Stories

## No one would hire Craig because of his past, but one Canberra firm took a chance



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A man who spent nearly 20 years of his life locked up says he was never given a chance to prove himself as a good employee.

"I've got an extensive criminal record, and I spent pretty much 70 per cent of adult life behind bars, and no one would give me a go," Craig Payne said.

"Then I [saw] the program advertised, and thought to myself, 'It's either this or nothing!'"



He secured a spot on a training program run by Canberra construction firm Woden Contractors for formerly incarcerated people, First Nations people and women looking for a start in the industry.

Their new "Civil Tasters" program provided 15 such applicants with paid training, white card certification, asbestos and silica awareness training, and hands-on work experience with the company.

All 15 trainees successfully graduated from the program in August last year and nine of them were offered construction roles at the company.

Five of them, including Mr Payne, have stayed on at Wodens Contractors.

The managing director of the firm, Ben Helmers, said finding full-time employment could be a significant challenge for people transitioning out of the criminal-justice system but Mr Payne was "the star of the show" in their program.

"He's certainly someone that can go along and with us in the future, and that's not to minimise any of the others. It's just that [Mr Payne] is always outstanding," Mr Helmers said.

In the ACT, 36 per cent of prisoners released during the 2020-21 period returned to prison within two years according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Mr Helmers said pre-program estimates showed only 10 of the 15 applicants might complete a Civil Tasters program, but he was delighted when all of them passed with flying colours.

"Now they have skills for some sort of job in construction, or even to go on a different pathway [like] TAFE," he said.

"I think it's given them that encouragement [that] they can continue with us as well. Some of them decided it wasn't for them after six months [but] they tried."



The managing director said the company ensured it hired trainees suited to their company.

He said in some cases people, whether formerly incarcerated or from disadvantaged backgrounds, could not meet the demands of onsite or full-time work.

"Domestic violence is one thing that [prevents] people from coming to work ... we really feel for them," Mr Helmers said.

"Another one [that can be] really difficult to manage is drug-related issues."

***"I actually look forward to coming to work. I wake up in the morning and I'm excited ... I love my job."***

- Craig Payne

While managing such cases is "tricky and sensitive", Mr Helmers said Woden Contractors, established in 1958, was committed to providing strong pathways for people looking for financial independence and a fresh start.

Mr Payne said he had been a free man for a year when he secured a full-time contract with the company.

"I have steady accommodation, family support, my future goals. It's amazing," he said.

"The [program] changed my outlook, my family, my future. Everything."

He said he had done a number of programs offering potential employment opportunities but none worked out because he never heard back from recruiters.

Mr Payne would not share details of his criminal past, but a spokesperson for the company said they did not involve violence.



Mr Payne said ex-prisoners were almost never given a chance when companies did background checks, regardless of their qualifications.

He said many were missing out on strong employees.

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"Anyone with a criminal history, if you give them the chance, they will open your eyes and surprise you," he said.

"We are some of the hardest working [people] because we don't get given the chance so when we do, we're going to do everything possible we can, to show you that we can."

He and his partner welcomed a newborn this month.

"I actually look forward to coming to work. I wake up in the morning and I'm excited ... I love my job," he said.

The Woden Contractors' Civil Tasters program is a partnership with the Australian government's Launch into Work program, the ACT Training Fund Authority, the Umbrella Collective, Worldview Foundation, St Vincent de Paul Society in Canberra and the Master Builders Association.

Five trainee graduates who didn't continue in construction began their careers with Worldview, a charity providing employment opportunities in the field of technology.

