



# INCREASING EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN JUSTICE-INVOLVED PROGRAMS

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Prepared for: Santa Barbara County Workforce Development Board (SBCWDB)  
Prepared by: Santa Maria Valley Chamber  
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# Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings from the Santa Maria Valley Chamber's employer outreach initiative aimed at increasing participation in justice-involved hiring programs in partnership with the Santa Barbara County Workforce Development Board (SBCWDB).

The primary barrier to engagement is not overt resistance, but rather logistical concerns centered on a perceived lack of suitable roles and the time commitment required for supervision. Key insights reveal that businesses place the highest value on punctuality, reliability, and strong work ethic from second-chance employees.

To enhance program success, we recommend a shift toward targeted, incentive-based outreach. Specifically, the SBCWDB should emphasize the use of risk mitigation tools (Federal Bonding Program), expand access to subsidized training (Paid Work Experience/PWEX), and integrate business skill requirements directly into pre-employment training to align candidate readiness with employer needs.

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## Introduction and Program Context

The Santa Maria Valley Chamber partnered with the SBCWDB to conduct outreach and gather data from local businesses regarding their hesitations and needs when considering hiring justice-involved individuals.

This effort included a series of information sessions specifically designed to promote Paid Work Experience (PWEX) programs targeting second-chance employees, in hopes of increasing business engagement in these programs.

The outreach utilized surveys and focused discussions to capture qualitative and quantitative data, intended to inform necessary adjustments to the SBCWDB's second-chance employment programs and increase employer engagement in these efforts.

# Key Findings: Local Business Concerns

The primary hesitations expressed by local employers demonstrate that the barriers to hiring are largely practical and logistical, rather than philosophical. The data below, compiled from employer feedback, highlights the most common concerns.

**Table 1: Primary Employer Hesitations Regarding Justice-Involved Hiring**

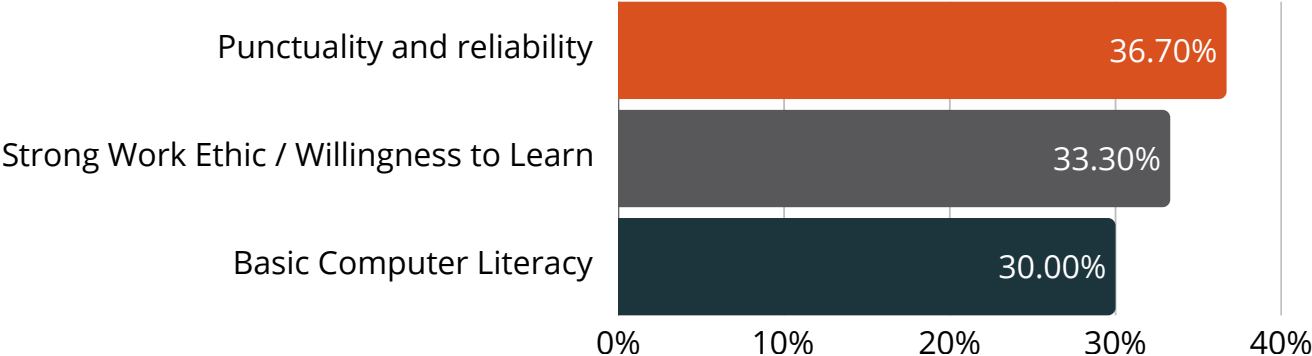
Concern Category	Percentage of Total Mentions
Lack of suitable roles or tasks within my business	50.00%
Time commitment for supervision/training	25.00%
Liability / Risk Concerns (Negligent Hiring, Theft)	12.50%
Uncertainty about Reliability / Work Ethic	12.50%

**Analysis:** *The most critical barrier is the 50% concern over the physical or sensitive nature of the work environment. This suggests a need for targeted outreach to industries where job roles are less susceptible to conflicts with justice involvement (e.g., manufacturing, skilled trades, hospitality) and providing clearer assurances on legal liability.*

# Key Findings: Essential Employee Skill Expectations

To ensure successful matches, the Chamber captured the most desired skills and characteristics employers seek in any new hire. These points represent the minimum requirements for job readiness and must be central to any pre-employment training provided by SBCWDB partners.

**Table 2: Essential Skills/Characteristics Required by Local Employers**



**Analysis:** The overwhelming focus is on foundational employment soft skills: reliability (Punctuality/Work Ethic accounts for 70% of mentions). SBCWDB programs must guarantee that candidates are rigorously screened and trained in these areas to meet local employer expectations.

# Recommendations for Program Success

The following recommendations integrate the SBCWDB's existing tools and national best practices to directly address the logistical and skill-based concerns of Santa Barbara County businesses.

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## Recommendation 1: Targeted Risk Mitigation and Financial Incentives

The SBCWDB must lead a messaging campaign that shifts the focus from the individual's history to the employer's security and financial benefit:

- Federal Bonding Program (FBP): Ensure every initial employer meeting highlights the FBP as free insurance for up to \$25,000 against employee dishonesty. This will help address concerns around employer liability & risk.
  - Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC): Integrate a simple WOTC checklist into the SBCWDB enrollment process, guaranteeing employers are aware of the potential \$2,400 federal tax credit per hire. This will help address concerns around the cost of hiring & tax burden.
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## Recommendation 2: Subsidized Onboarding to Address Time and Skill Gaps

To directly address the 25% concern over the time commitment for supervision and training, the SBCWDB should aggressively market subsidized programs.

- Paid Work Experience (PWEX): Emphasize that the PWEX program covers 100% of the employee's wages and liability for up to 300 hours. This demonstrates a shared investment and eliminates the cost barrier for initial onboarding and supervision. This will help address concerns around time commitment and training cost.
- Mentorship Integration: Encourage businesses to re-frame supervision as a mentorship program. Utilize SBCWDB resources to provide training to managers on supportive, rather than punitive, leadership techniques for new employees. This will help address concerns around skills gaps.

## **Recommendation 3: Enhanced Candidate Screening and Skill Alignment**

To address the high importance placed on Punctuality and Work Ethic, program partners must align candidate readiness with business needs.

- **Pre-Employment Soft Skills Training:** Mandate that all candidates complete a readiness program focused on the top two employer-required skills: Punctuality and Work Ethic. The Chamber will help vet this curriculum for local relevance. This will help address concerns around work ethic and reliability.
- **Targeted Industry Outreach:** Focus outreach efforts on the industries that have successfully hired second-chance employees (e.g., manufacturing, warehousing, construction), providing sector-specific success stories to overcome the perception of role unsuitability. This will help overcome the barrier of businesses who have a “lack of suitable roles” for second chance hires.

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## **Conclusion**

The data collected and information sessions hosted both confirm that the Santa Barbara County business community is open to second-chance hiring, provided their practical concerns are addressed.

By utilizing the full suite of SBCWDB and federal resources and by guaranteeing that candidates meet the high local bar for reliability and work ethic, the SBCWDB can transform employer hesitation into reliable engagement, leading to a more robust and equitable workforce.



*This report was prepared for the Santa Barbara County Workforce Development Board by the Santa Maria Valley Chamber, as part of the "Business to Business" contract.*

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