



# Accepting Applicants with Records

## A Guide for Trades & Vocational Programs

The skilled trades face a documented workforce shortage. The formerly incarcerated represent a large, motivated, and structurally overlooked pipeline. This guide helps admissions staff, program directors, and union apprenticeship coordinators understand who qualifies, what federal support exists, and how to set applicants up to succeed.

**650K**

### People released from U.S. prisons annually

The majority are employment-eligible and actively seeking work within weeks of release. Most have no clear pathway into stable employment. (Bureau of Justice Statistics)

**500K+**

### Skilled trades job openings currently unfilled

Construction, HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and welding are all facing structural shortages. The workforce gap and the reentry population exist in parallel — and can be solved together. (AGC / NAHB data)

**85%**

### Of HR professionals say justice-involved workers perform as well or better

Retention data from programs that deliberately recruit formerly incarcerated workers consistently exceeds industry norms. (SHRM, 2021)

## THE PIPELINE PROBLEM

## The Trades Need Workers. The Workers Need a Path In.

The construction and skilled trades industries face a structural workforce shortage that demographic trends will deepen over the next decade. The formerly incarcerated population represents a large, motivated, and systematically underutilized source of workers — sitting outside the pipeline not because they can't do the work, but because no one handed them the door.

Programs and apprenticeship coordinators who figure out how to intake applicants with records don't just serve a social mission — they solve a talent problem that their competitors haven't addressed yet.

### The Scale of the Shortage

The Associated General Contractors of America estimates the construction industry needs to attract nearly a million new workers over the next several years to meet current project demand. HVAC, electrical, and plumbing shortages are documented at the regional level across every major metro in the country. Welding has been on the critical shortage list for over a decade.

At the same time, approximately 650,000 people are released from U.S. prisons every year. The unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated individuals within the first year of release exceeds 40% — not because of a lack of willingness to work, but because of structural barriers in hiring, credentialing, and access to training programs.

**40%**

Average unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated in the first year post-release — higher than the Great Depression peak

*Prison Policy Initiative, 2018*

**3×**

Lower recidivism for people who are employed at 12 months post-release — employment is the single strongest predictor of successful reintegration

*Bureau of Justice Statistics*

**93%**

Retention rate at 18 months among formerly incarcerated workers in Kroger's second-chance hiring program — outperforming general workforce

*SHRM / Kroger data, 2021*

### Why Trades Programs Are Uniquely Positioned

Most professional and licensing pathways have statutory bars, discretionary board review, or background check requirements that create complex barriers for applicants with records. The trades are different. Many skilled trade roles — welding, general construction, commercial painting, manufacturing, logistics — have no licensing requirement at all. The only barrier is employer hiring policy, which is addressable.

Even in licensed trades like electrical and HVAC, most state licensing boards apply discretionary review rather than blanket bars. An applicant with a non-violent, older conviction has a real path to licensure in the majority of states — particularly if they can demonstrate completion of an accredited training program.

#### THE TRAINING PROGRAM ADVANTAGE

Licensing boards across the trades consistently weight program completion favorably in discretionary reviews. A formerly incarcerated applicant who completes an accredited electrical or HVAC program is in a substantially stronger position before a licensing board than one who applies without that credential — regardless of the underlying record. Your program completion certificate is evidence of rehabilitation in the eyes of most boards.

## What Motivates This Population

Research on workforce outcomes for formerly incarcerated workers consistently shows high motivation, strong attendance in structured environments, and willingness to accept entry-level positions in exchange for a credible career pathway. These are applicants who have, in many cases, spent years in highly structured environments and respond well to the structured learning model of a trades or vocational program.

## WHAT THE RECORD ACTUALLY BLOCKS

## Statutory Bars vs. Discretionary Review — Know the Difference

The most important question for any applicant with a record is not whether they have a conviction — it's whether the specific offense triggers a mandatory bar or falls into discretionary review territory. Most trades fall into discretionary. Knowing this changes how you counsel applicants at intake.

### The Two Types of Criminal History Barriers

#### MANDATORY (STATUTORY) BAR

The conviction type is listed in statute as an automatic disqualifier. No board review, no discretion — the license cannot be issued. These are relatively rare in the trades and most commonly appear in healthcare, education, and certain financial licenses.

#### DISCRETIONARY REVIEW

The board reviews the application individually. They consider the offense type, time elapsed, rehabilitation evidence, and the relationship between the offense and the licensed activity. This is the standard in most skilled trades licensing — and it is navigable with the right preparation.

### Trades Licensing by Risk Level

| TRADE / PATH                    | LICENSING REQUIRED?                                                                    | APPROACH TO CRIMINAL HISTORY                                                                  | RISK LEVEL                      |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Welding</b>                  | No license required for most roles — certification (AWS) is voluntary                  | Employer background check policy only — no board                                              | <b>Low</b>                      |
| <b>General Construction</b>     | Most laborer and framing roles: no license required                                    | Employer discretion — union halls vary by local                                               | <b>Low</b>                      |
| <b>HVAC Technician</b>          | EPA 608 certification required (federal); state contractor license for self-employment | EPA 608: no criminal history review.<br>State contractor license: discretionary board review. | <b>Low to Medium</b>            |
| <b>Electrician (Journeyman)</b> | State-issued license required in most states                                           | Most states: discretionary review.<br>Some states have lookback limits of 5–10 years.         | <b>Medium — state-dependent</b> |
| <b>Plumber</b>                  | State license required                                                                 | Discretionary review in most states.<br>Violent and sex offense histories                     | <b>Medium — state-dependent</b> |

| TRADE / PATH                                 | LICENSING REQUIRED?                 | APPROACH TO CRIMINAL HISTORY                                                                              | RISK LEVEL                             |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                              |                                     | weighted most heavily.                                                                                    |                                        |
| <b>CDL (Commercial Driver)</b>               | Federal FMCSA framework + state DMV | Federal disqualifiers exist for specific offense types. See SCG CDL guide for detail.                     | <b>Medium — offense-type dependent</b> |
| <b>Cosmetology / Barber</b>                  | State board license required        | Significant fair chance reform progress nationally — most states now use individualized review            | <b>Low to Medium</b>                   |
| <b>Electrical Contractor (Self-Employed)</b> | State contractor license required   | Business-level licensing adds another layer of board review — more scrutiny than journeyman license alone | <b>Medium to Higher</b>                |

#### THE PRE-APPLICATION DETERMINATION — MOST IMPORTANT STEP

Before enrolling an applicant with a record in any licensed trade program, direct them to request a preliminary eligibility determination from the relevant state licensing board. Most states are required to respond within 90 days. This step costs nothing and prevents an applicant from completing 1–2 years of training only to face a licensing bar at the end. This is the single most important pre-enrollment step your program can take.

## FUNDING &amp; INCENTIVES

## Federal Programs That Support Your Students — and Their Employers

Three federal programs directly support the pipeline from trades training into employment for people with records: WIOA provides training funding, WOTC gives employers a financial reason to hire your graduates, and the Federal Bonding Program removes the risk objection. Together they form a complete support stack.

### WIOA — Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

WIOA is the primary federal funding vehicle for workforce development programs targeting disadvantaged populations — and formerly incarcerated individuals are an explicitly designated priority group. WIOA funds flow through state workforce agencies to American Job Centers (AJCs) and approved training providers.

- Formerly incarcerated individuals qualify as a WIOA priority population — AJCs can fund training costs directly for eligible participants
- If your trades program is an approved WIOA training provider, eligible students can use WIOA Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) to cover tuition costs
- WIOA co-enrollment: students can simultaneously receive AJC employment services and complete your training program — job placement support from day one
- WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker programs specifically cover formerly incarcerated participants — staff at local AJCs can confirm eligibility and fund enrollment

#### BECOMING A WIOA APPROVED TRAINING PROVIDER

Trades programs that are not yet on the WIOA Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) are leaving funding on the table. Application goes through the state workforce agency. Approval opens access to ITAs for eligible students who would otherwise have no funding path. Contact your state workforce agency for the application process.

### Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC)

WOTC gives the employers who hire your graduates a direct federal tax credit for hiring individuals with records — reducing the financial hesitation that often prevents employers from taking a chance on a

qualified applicant. This is a tool your job placement team should understand and be able to explain to employer partners.

\$2,400

Current WOTC credit for hiring a qualified ex-felon within 12 months of conviction or release (pending program renewal – check [irs.gov](https://irs.gov) for current status)

*IRS / U.S. Dept. of Labor*

\$6,000

Proposed credit under H.R.1177 (119th Congress) – would more than double the current amount if enacted

*[congress.gov](https://congress.gov), [H.R.1177](https://hrr1177.com)*

## Federal Bonding Program

The Federal Bonding Program provides free fidelity bond coverage to employers hiring at-risk workers including anyone with a criminal record. The bond covers the employer against theft, forgery, and embezzlement for the first six months — at no cost.

| DETAIL           | FACTS                                                                      |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bond amount      | \$5,000–\$25,000 per employee depending on the role                        |
| Cost to employer | Free — funded by the U.S. Department of Labor                              |
| Duration         | First 6 months of employment                                               |
| Claim rate       | Less than 1% of bonds issued are ever exercised (DOL data)                 |
| How to access    | American Job Centers / <a href="https://bonds4jobs.com">bonds4jobs.com</a> |

### FOR YOUR JOB PLACEMENT TEAM

When presenting a graduate with a record to an employer partner, open with these two programs by name before the employer raises any objection. "There's a free federal bond for the first six months, and if you hire within a year of their release, there's a federal tax credit worth up to \$2,400" — this framing converts hesitation into a financial conversation your graduate can win.

## PRACTICAL INTAKE FRAMEWORK

## Running Admissions for Applicants with Records

The goal of intake is not to screen for the presence of a record — it's to identify whether the specific offense creates a real downstream barrier for the specific trade. Most don't. A checklist approach to admissions creates false negatives and turns away qualified candidates your program and your employer partners need.

### What You Can and Cannot Ask

The legal landscape on criminal history questions in educational admissions is evolving. Several states have applied Ban-the-Box principles to higher education and vocational program admissions — restricting or prohibiting criminal history questions on initial applications. Staff should verify their state's current requirements.

**GENERALLY PERMISSIBLE**

Asking about criminal history post-acceptance in the context of program-specific licensing requirements. Asking about specific offense categories directly relevant to licensing (e.g., sex offenses for programs that place in schools or care settings).

**INCREASINGLY RESTRICTED**

General "have you ever been convicted" checkbox on initial applications — now restricted in several states for educational institutions. Blanket policies that deny admission for any conviction regardless of type, age, or relationship to the program.

### The Intake Conversation That Actually Works

Rather than a checkbox, the most effective admissions approach for programs that want to serve this population is a structured intake conversation with an admissions counselor who understands the licensing landscape for the specific trade. The conversation covers:

- **Offense type and date** — is this a mandatory bar offense for this trade in this state, or discretionary? If discretionary, how old is the conviction?
- **Licensing pathway** — does the trade require a state license, and has the applicant requested a preliminary eligibility determination from the board?
- **Target employer type** — are they targeting private sector employers (more flexible) or public sector / federal contractors (stricter standards)?
- **Expungement eligibility** — has the applicant explored whether their record qualifies for expungement? If so, is timing aligned with program completion?



## Setting Realistic Expectations

The most important thing an admissions counselor can do for an applicant with a record is give them an honest picture before they enroll — not after they complete the program. An applicant who understands they face a discretionary licensing review and needs to prepare documentation is in a better position than one who assumes the record won't matter and discovers otherwise at certification time.

### THE PRE-ENROLLMENT LICENSING CHECK IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

For any licensed trade program, the preliminary eligibility determination from the state board is the most important step an applicant with a record can take before paying tuition. Directing every applicant with a record to take this step is the single highest-value thing your admissions process can do. It is free, it is available in most states, and it prevents wasted investment by both the student and the program.

## Documentation That Helps at Licensing Stage

Applicants who go into a licensing board review with the following documentation are in materially better positions:

- Program completion certificate and transcript
- Character reference letters from instructors or employers during training
- Documentation of any community service, treatment completion, or supervision compliance
- Personal statement — brief, factual, forward-focused. Boards are evaluating rehabilitation, not explanation.

## OUTCOMES RESEARCH

## What the Data Shows About Justice-Involved Students in Trades Programs

The available research on formerly incarcerated individuals in vocational and trades training programs is consistently positive — on completion rates, on employment outcomes after graduation, and on the broader recidivism reduction effect of stable skilled employment.

### The Completion and Placement Picture

Studies of vocational training programs specifically designed for justice-involved participants show completion rates that equal or exceed general population benchmarks. The key variable is not the presence of a record — it's whether the program provides adequate support structures during training: transportation assistance, flexible scheduling for supervision requirements, and access to case management for non-academic barriers.

The RAND Corporation's landmark study on correctional education found that incarcerated individuals who participated in vocational training programs were 28% less likely to return to prison than those who did not. Post-release programs show similar patterns, with the effect strengthening when training leads to actual employment in the trained field.

**28%**

Reduction in recidivism for formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in vocational training programs

*RAND Corporation – Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education (2014)*

**43%**

Less likely to return to prison for formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in academic education programs – effect is additive with vocational training

*RAND Corporation, 2014*

### What Predicts Success in Your Program

Programs that have deliberately tracked outcomes for justice-involved students identify the following as the strongest predictors of completion and employment:

| FACTOR                                                     | WHY IT MATTERS                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Stable housing during training</b>                      | Housing instability is the leading cause of dropout in this population — not academic performance           |
| <b>Clear licensing pathway confirmed before enrollment</b> | Students who know they have a viable path to licensure complete at higher rates than those with uncertainty |

**Supervisor / probation flexibility**

Programs that communicate proactively with supervision officers reduce schedule conflicts that cause dropout

**Peer cohort with shared background**

Students in mixed cohorts that include other justice-involved participants report higher completion intent

**Employment commitment before graduation**

Pre-placement with an employer partner before program completion is the single strongest retention factor

**The Employer Relationship — Your Program's Multiplier**

The most effective trades and vocational programs treating justice-involved students as a serious pipeline have built direct relationships with regional employers who have agreed in advance to consider their graduates. This pre-placement model reduces the job search barrier from weeks to days and dramatically increases the rate at which graduates enter their trained field rather than defaulting to whatever job they can find first.

THE COMPOUNDING EMPLOYER RELATIONSHIP

An employer who has one successful placement from a justice-involved graduate is orders of magnitude more likely to hire a second. Building two or three of these relationships in your regional employer network creates a flywheel that compounds with every cohort. The Federal Bonding Program and WOTC make the first placement easier to pitch — use them as the opening of every employer conversation.

## CLOSING

## Your Program Has More Impact Than You Know

A formerly incarcerated person who completes a trades program and enters stable employment in their trained field is statistically unlikely to return to prison. That outcome — multiplied across a cohort — is one of the most cost-effective public safety interventions that exists. Your program is doing that work every day.

The barriers are real: licensing uncertainty, employer hesitation, housing instability, and supervision requirements create friction that general-population students don't face. But none of them are insurmountable — and the tools to address them are mostly free.

### Free Resources for Your Students

FREE RESOURCE

SecondChanceGuide.com

SecondChanceGuide.com is a free information resource for people with felony records navigating employment, licensing, housing, and training after incarceration. Designed to be printed and handed to students at intake or graduation. Includes:

- Trades & training directory — programs that accept applicants with felony records by state
- CDL eligibility guide — FMCSA rules, disqualifying offenses, state-by-state breakdown
- CDL companies directory — schools and carriers with documented fair-chance hiring policies (4 regions)
- Second-chance employer directory — all 50 states + D.C.
- Expungement resources — record-clearing options by state
- Housing directory — 120+ reentry housing programs for students who need stable housing during training

All content is free. No account required. [secondchanceguide.com](https://secondchanceguide.com)

### Key Program Resources

| RESOURCE                             | WHAT IT COVERS                                                                                           | WHERE                                                     |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>WIOA ETPL</b>                     | Eligible Training Provider List — how to get your program approved for WIOA Individual Training Accounts | Your state workforce agency                               |
| <b>Federal Bonding Program</b>       | Free fidelity bonds for employers hiring your graduates with records                                     | bonds4jobs.com / local AJC                                |
| <b>WOTC / IRS Form 8850</b>          | Federal tax credit for employers — share with your employer partners                                     | irs.gov/wotc                                              |
| <b>IJ Licensing Reform Database</b>  | State-by-state occupational licensing reform tracker                                                     | ij.org/activism/legislation/occupational-licensing-reform |
| <b>Pre-Application Determination</b> | Direct students to request preliminary licensing eligibility from state boards before enrolling          | State licensing board websites                            |

PRIMARY SOURCES

**RAND Corporation** — Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education (2014)

**Prison Policy Initiative** — Detaining the Poor; Unemployment post-release data (2018)

**Bureau of Justice Statistics** — Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States

**SHRM** — Getting Talent Back to Work Report (2021)

**Associated General Contractors of America (AGC)** — Workforce shortage data (2024)

**U.S. Dept. of Labor** — WIOA overview; Federal Bonding Program (bonds4jobs.com); WOTC guidance

**IRS** — Work Opportunity Tax Credit; H.R.1177 119th Congress (congress.gov)

**Institute for Justice** — Occupational Licensing Reform database (2025)

**National HIRE Network** — Workforce development for people with criminal records

**SecondChanceGuide.com**

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