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Q&A: Tijuana Estuary

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As far as second chances go, Scott Silverman is a firm believer. He's the founder and executive director of the local nonprofit Second Chance. Participants, most of whom are homeless or former prison inmates, go through three-week courses that often culminate in jobs. The organization also offers counseling and affordable, substance-free housing.

Silverman, 54, started Second Chance in 1993. The organization now has plans to take its program statewide. Most recently, San Diego officials declared Feb. 19 "Scott Silverman Day," honoring him for his work.

We recently chatted with Silverman about Second Chance.

QUESTION: How did Second Chance get started?

ANSWER: I was actually working at a feeding program at my temple (Beth Israel). I ran into people that told me they were having trouble finding a job. I told them, 'When you're ready and willing, I'll help you find a job.' ... After six months, I had 15, 20 guys waiting for me after my shift.

As the founder, what is your role with the program now?

I'm actually in the classroom every day; it keeps me raw and connected, at the cutting edge of what I do. A big part of my job in '08 is to get legislators and policymakers to start looking at ways to reduce recidivism.

Why is it so important to reduce recidivism?

If we can reduce it by five to six percentage points, we can save the state of California a lot of money. Our prison system is set up to lock people up and keep people safe. I think California does a really good job of that. The fact is, 95 percent of the people in prison get out of prison, and when they get out, they don't have any real tools to re-enter the community. Historically, 80 percent of those who get out recriminate and recidivate. At the end of the day, there's nothing good that can come to keep doing what we've always done.

What are your goals?

My main goal is to take our PREP (Prisoner Re-entry Employment Program) program and find ways to replicate it throughout the state. There are 170,000 people in prisons throughout the state My goal is to be in as many major marketplaces as corrections will allow us to be in. We'll try to get affiliates to try and teach others what we do. Imagine if we could reduce the prison population by 10 percent. We could shave off 10 percent of the overall corrections budgets.

Why does San Diego need a program such as Second Chance?

I think that there are people falling through the cracks. I've historically articulated what we do as an exit program. If you're chronically unemployed or underemployed or unemployable, there aren't a lot of resources. (Second Chance) just enriches the overall service delivery in our community. The work we're doing is not complicated ... but it has a significant impact on (our students) and their families.

How has working with Second Chance affected you?

From a career perspective, it's been very exciting. When a graduate comes back ... they look at me as if I did something. I look at them and say, '90 percent of this work is you; 10 percent is us.' Watching that unfold has been incredible. From a personal perspective, to go home at the end of the day and know someone has gotten a job ... those things just inspire me to keep going and growing.

—Rebecca Go