

## FIRST PERSON

First Person is a periodic feature designed to allow socially responsible individuals to share their solutions to community problems with The Portland Observer readership.

# Better People

## Not Just Better Workers

By William "Chip" Shields

Well, about two years ago I saw that there was a need for a program here in Portland that would focus on the employment needs of people that were on probation or on parole and no one was really taking that lead. Additionally, no one was doing anything on unemployment beyond just helping somebody find a job. The trick is not to just place somebody on the job, but to help them make lasting changes in all aspects of their lives.

One of the unique things about my company, Better People, is that we only work with companies that pay a minimum of \$8 per hour plus health benefits. We try not to place people in jobs that do not pay them enough to live on. Some companies don't have the best of intentions. If a company is interested only in giving low wages and has a high turnover, we're not going to deal with them. We want to work with companies that take a long-term interest in the career development of our clients.

If someone wanted to get into our program, they would call our Recruitment Specialist, Clarina Boston. She would set them up for an orientation depending upon how much room we have in our program. They would pay a one-time fee of \$25 and then enter our group sessions. We ask clients to attend Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) two times per week in the evening. MRT is a 12-step program that helps ex-offenders learn more about themselves, how to build good relationships and set and achieve long term goals. We help them get temporary employment while they're progressing through the MRT, and once they demonstrate that they can accept rules, procedures and treatment requirements, then they're eligible to be placed with the companies that we work with on a permanent basis paying \$8/hour plus benefits.

We will work with any client

that meets us halfway. We have an alumni club of people who have gone through our program and who are now giving back to the community. Clients in the group decide whether the other clients are ready to progress to the next step. So, you can't really con your way through the therapy groups. Some people who aren't ready to make life changes don't make it through the elementary steps. Their colleagues can see through some of the situations they're in. It's kind of a natural screening process. Some of our best successes have been where a client has gone into a group session and has been so touched by the MRT process that they've decided to take responsibility for their own lives completely.

Better People stays in the picture after placing a client in a job much longer than most agencies do. Our staff person, David Aplin, makes sure that the client is succeeding at work. He goes out to the work site and sits down with the supervisor and employee to periodically iron out potential issues before they become problems. Our track record has been impressive; we've had excellent references from the companies where clients have worked, and a job retention rate of more than 78% after 6 months. Because of the support we offer, many times companies can do better hiring people through us than by hiring people just walking off the streets.

William "Chip" Shields is the founder and executive director of Better People. The company is located at 4839 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. #9. For more information, call 503/281-2663.



Photo by Cheryl Juetten

Executive Director Chip Shields (left) and Recruitment Specialist Clarina Boston help a client (seated) with his program steps.

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