

Sacramento program helps formerly incarcerated workers become truck drivers

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Local News

From behind bars to behind the wheel: Sacramento partnership opens the door for workforce re-entry

By [Ashley Sharp](#)

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A first-of-its-kind partnership in Sacramento is delivering more commercial truck drivers to California roadways at a time when there is a critical gap in the industry's workforce statewide.

Emerge Career and the Sacramento Employment Training Agency (SETA) teamed up to help connect an often misunderstood and overlooked population of workers to help fill highly skilled trade positions: the formerly incarcerated.

"We believe in second chances. To provide them a livable wage so that they can provide for their families, so they can have a career pathway that's successful and sustainable, that's the work that we do," said Anita Maldonado, executive director of SETA.

Earlier this year, the California DMV cancelled 13,000 commercial driver's licenses of immigrant drivers who are non-citizens in the state under pressure from the Trump administration and the threat of lost federal funding. It followed multiple high-profile big rig crashes involving California immigrant drivers.

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The new federal regulations could eventually mean more than 60,000 drivers lose their licenses in the coming years. That represents between five and ten percent of California's commercial license holders.

Industry experts say fewer truck drivers on the road could mean consumers see higher shipping costs.

"There's a huge, huge need for skilled trade workers across the country, with about 2.1 million job openings, to increase even by 2030. Yet there's about half a million folks who are cycling out of the prison system every year and even more from our jails. So our vision was, how do we solve these two problems?" said Zo Orchingwa, co-founder and CEO of Emerge Career.

One of the careers Emerge is focused on getting ex-offenders connected to is truck driving, helping them navigate every step of the process both through their online, AI-driven proprietary platform and by connecting them to on-site job training.

"We've done hundreds of thousands of hours of hands-on work, the manual human work. That is what has allowed us to develop this proprietary technology and has allowed us to modernize this process," said Doug Dahl, Emerge co-founder.

Dahl says that includes help with housing, food and initial needs as soon as they get out of prison.

"We are not just focused on up-skilling folks and placing them into these careers, but we're also focused on getting them all of the support from all of the agencies that they might benefit from," Dahl said.

Life coaches through their platform help guide the participant to landing a job.

"One thing we kept hearing about was poverty, lack of access to jobs, and that was really causing this vicious cycle to happen," Orchingwa said.

A recent program graduate now looking for employment is David Martinez, 34, of Sacramento. After completing 160 hours of on-site training at Western Truck School in West Sacramento, he is the proud holder of a commercial driver's license, something he calls his fresh start.



David Martinez behind the wheel of a big rig at Western Truck School

"When I was behind bars, it just opened my eyes up," Martinez said.

Martinez says it was hanging around the wrong crowd for years that led him to a robbery charge and a five-year sentence.

"And then I found God in there. So after that I was like, OK, let me walk with God and let me just figure myself out until I get out," Martinez said.

He has three children. His youngest daughter was born while he was incarcerated. He says hitting rock bottom is what it took for him to finally get back on track, and he is now more driven than ever to put his family and his faith first.

"We just sat down and prayed about it. We searched up what companies are working with felons and then Emerge popped up. So we just applied, and I'm here," Martinez said. "It's just like a weight getting off your shoulder."

Western Truck School is California's longest-established truck driver training school, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

"We estimate about 40,000 to 45,000 that we've trained in those 50 years," vice president Sean Nord said.

Watch CBS News Nord says people like Martinez are worth investing in. It's why they partnered with SETA and Emerge to help train those getting out of prison and back into the workforce.

"It just gives people an opportunity that may not otherwise have that. Plus the industry needs lots of drivers," Nord said. "There's always been a need for entry-level drivers. We're trying to fulfill that need for the industry as we focus on a safe, knowledgeable driver out on the road."

Martinez said that while the training is hard, anyone can do it.

"We've created at least \$50 million of new wealth for low-income families, and we know we can get that number in the hundreds of millions. But the key data points for us that we are super proud of is we have a 95% graduation rate. So practically anyone who is committed and enrolls in the program, we will get you to the finish line," Orchingwa said.

Emerge serves about 700 people a year through this program and says it also has a 91% job placement rate.

When it comes to recidivism, they say it has been massively successful.

"The program to date, we haven't had a single re-arrest," Orchingwa said.

Compare that to California at large, where, on average, CDCR says about 40% of people released from prison will reoffend.

Emerge and SETA both say they are proving that reducing recidivism starts with removing these hurdles to finding a job when re-entering society.

"Our job is to bring opportunities to the people that have the highest barriers," Maldonado said.

SETA has helped the formerly incarcerated re-enter the workforce for decades, but this year they entered into a new three-year contract with Emerge to help drive success for this population in the Sacramento region.

"We are letting employers know and educating them that just because they have a blemish on their record doesn't mean that they're not hard workers, that they can't

learn a new skill. All they need is a chance," Maldonado said.

SETA secured the state funding through a Board of State and Community Corrections grant, so the training is completely free for those participating in Emerge's program.

"We only charge the government if the person graduates and if they get a job, adding that extra layer of safety to make sure the government dollars are being used most effectively," Orchingwa said.

Through SETA's 13 job centers across Sacramento County, they serve about 32,000 people every year. They say 91% of them have significant barriers to employment and will get connected to a job making, on average, \$75,000 a year.

The average annual salary for a truck driver in California ranges from about \$55,000 to \$87,000. Owner-operators can make upwards of \$120,000 per year on average.

"We do change people's lives every day. We've done that for years. You can sense that gratitude in that opportunity," said William Walker, SETA's longtime workforce development manager.

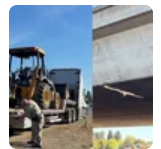
From corrections to correcting their path, it is a partnership helping the formerly incarcerated forge forward: both on the road and in life.

Visit the websites of [Emerge Career](#) and [SETA](#) for more information on getting connected to local employment.

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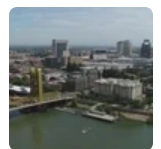
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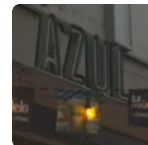
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