

C4AD

CINCINNATIANS FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

MJB / January 9, 2018 / Reporting

Ex-Offender Finds a Lifeline at Miami Valley Gaming



Shunned by employers because of her "checkered past," Vantrice Hunter-Swain found work with Miami Valley Gaming in 2013. She inspects the line at MVG's Acres Seasonal Buffet.

The Warren County racino builds a committed workforce partly with overlooked workers and benefits designed for their needs.

The offer of a dishwashing job, just months before her 40th birthday, seemed too good to be true.

But it was true. It was a second chance that proved even better than she could have imagined.

Because of her “checkered past,” many employers had ignored her, says Vantrice Hunter-Swain, 44, of Westwood.

“I got so discouraged and depressed, I was barely getting out the bed anymore. I wasn’t being a good example for my kids.”

After six years without a full-time job, she desperately wanted the dishwasher job. “I wouldn’t care if they had me scrubbing floors with a toothbrush.”

But she knew better than to get her hopes up, convinced the offer would be withdrawn once Miami Valley Gaming saw her criminal record. But to her surprise, she got a call in September 2013 that the dishwashing job was hers.

Hunter-Swain was one of the racino’s first hires.

“I think Miami Valley Gaming is pretty unique,” says Janice Urbanik, director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce, which helps meet employer demands for skilled workers.

It is one of the region’s best practices employers for its efforts to see untapped potentials in the workforce and to remove barriers to their employment, she says. In 2018’s tight labor market, Urbanik expects more employers to start “thinking outside the box” like MVG.



Miami Vally Gaming operates about 1,710 video lottery terminals, three large meeting and entertainment venues, a racing simulcast center, a harness racetrack, and four dining facilities in Lebanon, Ohio near Interstate 75.

When she was 26, Hunter-Swain had been convicted and sentenced to probation for selling 19.66 grams (less than one ounce) of marijuana valued at \$40 in her apartment complex to an undercover policeman. “Sometimes money got tough” for a single mother with two young children, she says.

It took nearly eight years for word of the felony drug trafficking conviction to reach her employer, but when it did, Hunter-Swain was fired from her job as a home health aid in keeping with state law.

In hope of a brighter future with a good job and better pay, Hunter-Swain earned associates degrees in criminal justice and business while working temp agency jobs. But the degrees from Brown Mackie College in Woodlawn opened no doors and left her instead with \$59,000 in student loan debt, she says.

Gaps in her work history—due to school and surgeries to remove a tumor behind her eye and repair her face—gave prospective employers another reason to ignore her, according

to Hunter-Swain. Meanwhile, efforts to expunge her criminal record were unsuccessful.

When Mardia Shands was hired in 2013 as the senior director of human resources for Miami Valley Gaming, plans for the 186,000 square foot video gaming facility were still on the drawing board. The site was no more than a big corn field in rural Warren County adjacent to the Lebanon Raceway harness track, just downhill from Lebanon state prison.

Shands immediately saw the staffing challenge: more than 400 employees for a year-round, round-the-clock, low-wage, customer-service business, roughly midway between the urban labor markets of Cincinnati and Dayton.

The situation seemed to call for paying above market wages and benefits to attract and retain job candidates.

But the MVG board insisted on market rate compensation instead. So Shands would have to find other ways to not only compete with area employers like McDonald's, Triple Fin, and Pay Corp, but also achieve the board goal that MVG be the employer of choice in the area.

“The business is in place to make money and do the things that it needs to do,” she says. “But our people drive the business outcomes and drive our profit margin.”

About 1 in 6 working-age Ohioans have a misdemeanor or felony conviction, and most employers are not willing to hire applicants with a criminal record, according to Dorianne Mason, director of Second Chance Project of the Ohio Justice and Policy Center.

State laws, known as collateral sanctions, bar or limit employers from hiring people convicted of a range of offenses in fields such as healthcare, childcare, education, and security, says Mason. State law also exposes employers to potential liability for hiring people with certain criminal records.

But the perception that ex-offenders are unsafe and untrustworthy can be a greater barrier to employment than legal considerations, says Mason. “Some people are denied opportunities based solely on this stigma, and they pay a heavy cost for it.”

The legal considerations are complex and confusing for employers, says Urbanik.

“Many of the businesses around here are small- to mid-sized companies who, if they have

an H.R. [human resources] department, it might be one or two people, and they're so busy just managing daily kinds of stuff," she says.

"When it comes to hiring," says Urbanik, "a lot of time they are looking to screen people out rather than screen applicants in." They're looking for the easy-to-hire candidate.

Shands, however, comes with a different perspective on the role of a hiring manager that she calls "my mission, my ministry". "We have got to help get people out of poverty." In her view, a job is the first rung on the ladder out.

She decided that applicants with a criminal record would be considered on a case by case basis. And to further her mission and enlarge the pool of prospective employees, MVG also employs people on public assistance and people with disabilities.

"I'm not going to write people off as unemployable," Shands says. "A returning citizen is absolutely too employable. A single mom with transportation issues can too go back to work."

MVG's employees are its competitive advantage, says Shands. "A lot of companies say this, but I believe this wholeheartedly. It is why the H.R. department exists."



A job is the way of out poverty, says Mardia Shands, senior director of human resources for MVG. Her role and her mission is to make that happen in a way that also serves MVG's business interests.

Employees will deliver, she says, if they are properly trained and motivated. In return, the employer must deliver fair wages and remove barriers for employees to do their work. "It is a reciprocal relationship."

MVG conducts compensation surveys of wages and benefits of all positions at least twice a year. Entry level jobs like housekeeping might earn \$11 per hour, while gaming attendants might make more than \$50,000 per year. "We will always be fair and diligent in making sure that the level of compensation is comparable to what's in the market."

Full-time employees, who comprise about 88 percent of the workforce, receive medical, dental, vision, and life insurance, and they are automatically enrolled in a 401(k) program in which the employer contribution vests immediately with the employee.

Many of MVG's other benefits are primarily designed to be responsive to needs of employees, who are on the lowest rungs of their career ladders, and to make MVG their employer of choice.

Shands strives to make work schedules predictable so employees could work a second job and flexible so they can respond to family and personal needs. She does this within the constraints of the collective bargaining agreement with the Seafarers International Union, which provides for a seniority-based system to periodically re-bid work schedules.

Other employers may under-staff, but Shands says short-staffing—either “front-of-house” or “back-of-house” operations—would compromise MVG’s customer service standards, which are critical to the success of the business.

Shands emphasizes training, promotion, and alternative career paths for employees.

After starting as a dishwasher in 2013, Hunter-Swain was promoted to a cook I position after just four months on the job. “They’re not going to fire you for applying for another job,” she says. She eventually applied for and received a supervisory position. Later, in need of overtime hours, she left the supervisory role and moved to a cook II position, where she now works.



Vantrice Hunter-Swain speaks to attendees of a “Celebrating Good Employers” event hosted by the Woman’s City Club of Greater Cincinnati in November. (Photo courtesy of Harriet Kaufman, Woman’s City Club.)

Because many employees do not have access to computers or high-speed internet service, there is a computer hub in the employee lounge.

To improve financial decision-making and credit scores, Shands has arranged for LifeSpan of Butler County to provide weekly counseling services in the employee dining room.

Banks are invited to set up in the employee dining room to offer checking, saving, direct deposit, and loan services to employees.

MVG offers a prepaid tuition assistance program for college degrees and job-related credentials.

Given that reliable transportation is a significant challenge for many employees, Shands is evaluating the business case for a down payment assistance program to help them buy a car.

Also, in cooperation with Job Corps of Dayton, Shands is testing the idea of round trip shuttle service between the Job Corps office and MVG for kitchen interns, who could become MVG employees.

“We put things out there,” says Shands. “If it doesn’t work, we pull it back.”

Things are working out for Hunter-Swain. After four years, she remains convinced: “My job is better than yours.”

By Mike Brown, mbrown.c4ad@gmail.com

Miami Valley Gaming was featured in the “Celebrating Good Employers” series hosted by the Woman’s City Club of Greater Cincinnati in November. Next in the series, WCC will showcase Nehemiah Manufacturing in the Geier Room of Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church on Jan. 26 at 11:30 am. (Lunch included.) The reporter is a WCC member.

Miami Valley Gaming LLC is a 50:50 joint venture partnership of Churchill Downs Incorporated, a publicly traded company with a market capitalization of \$3.6 billion as of Dec. 28, and Delaware North, one of the largest privately held hospitality and food service companies in the world, according to Forbes.