

## Finding Work as an Ex-Felon Is Daunting Obstacle

by [Cynthia Barnett](#)

Earlier this year, when Ralph Waccary applied for a full-time electrician's position at Capitol Regional Medical Center in Tallahassee, he seemed like a shoo-in: He'd worked at the hospital for two years with an independent contractor as a foreman installing MRI machines. He was good at his job, worked hard and was well-liked by everyone he worked with.



Ralph Waccary turned around his life while in prison and has worked full time since his release in 2005. [Photo: Jeffrey Camp]

During his interview for the permanent job, he was also upfront: He had a felony record. He'd served three years for arson but turned around his life in prison with the help of the Horizon program, one of the faith-based programs at Wakulla Correctional Institution. He had had nothing worse than a speeding ticket since his release in 2005 and had worked full-time ever since. He'd lived in a Horizon half-way house, then served as staff director for the house, then moved out on his own. He remained an active member of the Catholic church, which had reached out to him in prison. He maintained friendships with Wakulla volunteers who'd helped him, such as former Monroe County Sheriff Allison DeFoor, now an Episcopal priest, who baptized him when he converted from Islam.

Hospital executives wanted Waccary for the job. But when his past came to light, they called him and told him they were sorry; they just couldn't hire someone with his record. The response is common among employers, says Vicki Lopez Lukis, also an ex-convict, who serves as vice chairwoman of the DOC's Re-Entry Advisory Council. She says employment remains one of the top barriers to successful re-entry. Waccary "truly deserves a second chance," she says. "He knew that he would have to work harder to prove himself ... and he took on this challenge with great dedication."

After some powerful people intervened, including DeFoor, Lukis and Bob Spivey, a Florida State University administrator who volunteers at the prison, and after a second interview in which they asked Waccary tough questions about his past and his rehabilitation, hospital administrators agreed that he deserved a chance. "I can't imagine where I would have been if I didn't have this support system of people who advocated for me," says Waccary. "Most ex-cons don't have anything close."

Dale Neely, chief operating officer at Capital Regional, says the hospital is "proud to be part of the faith program."

"While each case needs to be carefully evaluated," Neely says, "we were satisfied that Mr. Waccary's situation warranted a second chance and an opportunity to be part of our organization."