



Your Guide to Success

Incarcerated Edition



Blackstone
Career Institute™

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About Us

Blackstone Career Institute is an accredited distance education school with a variety of career-focused programs for adult learners.

At Blackstone, we believe that prison education is a fundamental component for incarcerated individuals interested in serving productive time. Our students seek to expand their minds, gain valuable skills, and build self confidence in a limited-opportunity environment.

We've offered our Paralegal Certificate Program to incarcerated individuals since 1979. As a long-standing provider of prison education, we've seen firsthand how our courses help individuals envision, work toward, and create a brighter future—both during incarceration and beyond.

Education Empowers

We believe it is important to meet students where they are. By delivering accessible legal education to incarcerated individuals, we help foster a sense of purpose and lay the foundation for meaningful opportunities—both during incarceration and after release.

Our Accreditation

Blackstone Career Institute is privately licensed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and accredited by Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC), Washington, D.C and by Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools. These regulations are your assurance that Blackstone offers first-rate quality programs and instruction.

Our Career Center

We created the Blackstone Career Center to assist our students in securing employment upon graduation. While we cannot guarantee employment of any student, we do want to provide the resources to help them succeed.

As part of our career center, we have created a specialized career guide for individuals seeking employment after incarceration. Because we understand that lasting change takes more than education—it takes perseverance, resources, and the confidence that new beginnings are within reach.

Welcome to our **Career Guide: Incarcerated Edition.**



Guidance on Reentering the Job Market

Goal Setting

Figure Out What You Want to Pursue:

Before you can move forward, it helps to have a clear goal. If you're not sure what kind of work you want to do, now is a good time to explore your options. There's no pressure to have it all figured out—this section offers information to help you determine the career that works best for you.

Learn about Different Careers:

Use [CareerOneStop](#), a free resource from the U.S. Department of Labor, to explore over 900 career profiles. You can find information on:

- Job duties and work environment
- Required education or training
- Average salaries
- Job outlook
- Short career videos to help you visualize the work

Consider Your Conviction:

Some careers may be restricted based on criminal history. For example, jobs in law enforcement, healthcare, or certain government positions may have limitations. Do your research and be aware of restricted industries.

Before choosing a career path, make sure to:

- Research any legal restrictions
- Understand licensing or background check requirements
- Look for industries open to second-chance hiring

Knowing this early can save you time and help you focus on realistic, attainable goals.

Take Career Assessments:

Career assessments can help match your interests, skills, and values to potential job paths.

Utilize the career assessments from CareerOneStop. They offer several free tools, including:

- Skills Matcher
- Interest Assessment
- Work Values Matcher

These tools can help you identify careers that fit who you are and what matters to you.

Ask Others Who Know You:

Online tools are helpful—but don't overlook people who know you personally. Friends, family, former coworkers, or mentors may see strengths or talents in you that you haven't recognized. They may also have advice about jobs or industries worth exploring.



For Paralegal Certificate Program Graduates

If you've completed the Paralegal Certificate Program, congratulations! You now have a solid foundation to begin working—or to keep learning. If you're interested in continuing your education, here are some of the most common next steps:

- Advanced Paralegal courses through Blackstone Career Institute
- Paralegal certification: Certified Paralegal (CP®) or Accredited Legal Professional (ALP)
- Transferring credits to a college or university

These options are not listed in any required order. Choose what works best for your goals, time, and situation.

Advanced Paralegal Courses

If you've completed the Paralegal Certificate Program, you can choose one or more Advanced Paralegal courses to keep building your skills. Each course results in a certificate and is designed to:

- Deepen your knowledge in a specific area of law
- Enhance your resume with specialized training
- Explore topics that match your interests and career goals

These courses are not measured in traditional credit hours, but each may be equivalent to 3 semester hours.

Why Specialization Matters

- Larger law firms often prefer paralegals with specialized training
- Smaller firms typically look for paralegals with general legal knowledge

By continuing your education in a specific legal area, you increase your chances of qualifying for more jobs—and more varied opportunities in the legal field.

Professional Development & Recertification

Our Advanced Paralegal courses are also a great option if you're looking to meet Continuing Legal Education (CLE) requirements or advance professionally.

- Each course has been reviewed by NALS, the Association for Legal Professionals
- They can be applied toward the 5-year PLS and PP recertification requirements

If you're certified through NALA (National Association of Legal Assistants) as a Certified Paralegal (CP®), each Advanced course is worth 20 CLE hours—nearly half of the 50 hours required for recertification.

Paralegal Certification Exams

The Paralegal Certificate Program you've completed includes over 900 clock hours of coursework, which qualifies our graduates to sit for:

- Accredited Legal Professional (ALP) exam (offered by NALS)
- Certified Paralegal (CP®) exam (offered by NALA)*

*Please note: To sit for the CP® Exam, you must no longer be incarcerated for a felony and must not be on parole, probation, or any felony-related court supervision.



Whether you choose to take Advanced courses or sit for a certification exam is entirely up to you. These steps are not required for entry-level paralegal work—but they can make you more competitive in the job market. There's also no required order—pursue whichever path makes the most sense for you and your goals.

College or University

Another option is to continue your education at a Title IV-accredited college or university. Many of our graduates have successfully transferred and gone on to earn degrees.

Here's what to know:

- Our program was not originally designed for college credit
- However, the 915 clock hours completed in the Paralegal Certificate Program may be equivalent to 30.5 semester hours—if the college is willing to accept the transfer
- Each Advanced Paralegal course may be considered equivalent to 3 semester hours

Acceptance of transfer credits is up to the college or university, so be sure to check with the admissions office before making a final decision.

Tips for Reentering the Workforce

Now that you've completed your sentence, you're likely ready to focus on building your life and career. While having a criminal record may present some challenges, it doesn't prevent you from finding meaningful work. With the right tools, mindset, and support, many formerly incarcerated individuals successfully return to the workforce.

Use a Functional Resume Format

A functional (or skills-based) resume focuses on what you can do—not just where you've worked.

- Start with a summary of skills, highlighting 3–4 key qualifications for the job you're applying for.
- Describe your experience, strengths, and accomplishments under each skill area.
- Include a short employment history section, listing job titles, employers, and dates—omit job duties.

This style shifts attention away from employment gaps or incarceration and toward your abilities and potential.

Research the Employer's Background Check Policy

Some companies only ask about felony convictions or offenses committed within the last few years. Others run full background checks, even for minor or older convictions.

Before applying:

- Check the company's hiring policy (some post this online).
- Understand what they'll see in a background check.
- Be prepared to address your record honestly if asked.



When & How to Explain Your Circumstances

It's usually best not to mention your criminal history in your resume or cover letter unless the job application requires it. Instead:

- Wait until the first interview, when you can explain in person.
- Be honest and brief—describe the circumstances, what you learned, and how your life has changed.
- Focus on accountability, growth, and readiness to work.

This allows employers to hear your story directly from you, with context and professionalism.

Turn Your Experience into a Strength

Highlight ways you used your time during incarceration to your advantage. Some examples:

- Earned a GED or took post-secondary classes
- Completed career training
- Worked a job (e.g., kitchen staff, clerk, grounds keeping, civilian employment). For example, if you were incarcerated in a state prison in Illinois, you would list your employer as the “State of Illinois.” Employers will see you took initiative and responsibility during your time inside.

Target Your Job Search

Focus your search on industries open to second-chance hiring. Avoid jobs that may be restricted due to a record, such as:

- Law enforcement
- Firefighting and EMT
- Education or childcare
- Certain government positions
- Transportation (if convicted of a DUI)

Try searching:

- Hospitality and food service
- Warehousing and logistics
- Skilled trades
- Customer service
- Remote/online work

Check out the [Second Chance Business Coalition](#) for a list of companies that support fair chance hiring.

Seek Help from Reentry Support Programs

Many state agencies, nonprofit groups, and community programs assist formerly incarcerated individuals to reenter the workforce. Their services often include:

- Resume writing and interview coaching
- Access to job listings and hiring fairs
- Professional attire programs
- Connections to employers willing to hire people with records

Use the [Community Partners Map](#) on the Second Chance Business Coalition's website to find support in your area.



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Clean Up Your Record (when possible)

Depending on your state, you may be able to:

- Expunge a conviction
- Seal your record (make it invisible to most employers)
- Have a conviction set aside or reclassified

Laws and processes vary by location. To access information on the laws in place, visit the Restoration of Rights Project at the [Collateral Consequences Resource Center](#). Check their [50-State Comparison: Expungement, Sealing & Record Relief](#) to see what's available in your state.

Interviewing: First Impressions

To make a positive impression, maintain appropriate eye contact, offer a firm handshake, and avoid interrupting or talking over the interviewer. How you carry yourself and dress will most likely influence how an employer sees you—not just as a job candidate, but as someone who could represent their company or organization. What truly matters in an interview is your preparation, your mindset, and your willingness to move forward.

Practical Clothing Tips for the Interview

While your value goes beyond what you wear, it's still important to take into account the company's culture and dress expectations. When in doubt, it's better to appear more professional than too casual. Aim for clean, wrinkle-free clothing, and if you choose to wear makeup or style your hair, keep it neat and simple. The goal is to show that you're prepared and taking the opportunity seriously.

Resources for Interview Attire

- [Jails to Jobs – National Directory](#): Jails to Jobs offers a national database of organizations that provide free interview clothing, specifically created for people with criminal records.
- [The Salvation Army – Correctional Services](#): Many locations offer clothing assistance, including for those re-entering the workforce.
- Other local resources:
 - Thrift stores (Goodwill, local non-profits)
 - Church or community organizations
 - Reentry programs in your area
 - Ask a friend or family member for help pulling together an outfit

Ace the Interview

An interview is your chance to show that you're more than your record. It's about presenting your skills, experience, and motivation—and doing so with honesty and professionalism.

- Be honest but brief if asked about your criminal history.
- Focus the conversation on your qualifications, goals, and what you've learned.
- Share how you've made positive changes and taken steps to stay on the right path.

For example:

In the past, I made mistakes that I've taken full responsibility for. I've since completed a 12-step program and have been drug-free for five years. I've also taken educational programs and built job skills that I'm now ready to apply in the workplace.



You don't need to share every detail—just enough to show growth, accountability, and readiness for a fresh start.

Employment Outlook & Resources

Whether you want to work as a paralegal or pursue a different career path, employment after incarceration is possible. It will take effort and persistence, but you're not alone.

There are many organizations and tools available to help you succeed:

- **CareerOneStop for Justice-Impacted Job Seekers**: This government-sponsored website has a ReEntry Program Finder, an American Job Center Finder, and additional tools.
 - Learn how to talk about your conviction during interviews
 - Discover reentry programs and local job centers
 - Explore job training, resume help, and more
- **The National Reentry Resource Center**
 - Read the Guide to Federal Employment for Second Chance Applicants
 - Learn about applying for jobs in federal agencies
 - Find support for reentry planning and employment
- **Honest Jobs**: Use the Fair Chance Job Search to discover more than 300,000 job postings from over 1,500 second-chance employers on their website.
- **Prison Fellowship**: Check out the list of re-entry resources this non-profit organization compiled to help you with housing, employment, addiction recovery, and more.
- **Fair Shake Reentry Resource Center**: Find a national directory of resources including employment, education, and housing.
- **Jails to Jobs**: Discover a reentry guide, free or inexpensive tattoo removal programs, fair chance companies, and places to get free interview clothes on this non-profit's website
- **FreeWorld**: Look into this non-profit reentry program that provides free training and career placement services to many justice-impacted individuals who want to pursue careers as truck drivers.

For Paralegal Certificate Program Graduates:

We often hear from our incarcerated graduates that they obtained positions as paralegals upon their release. In fact, many of them state they have found positions with attorneys they met while incarcerated or during their court proceedings.

While employment decisions are always at the employer's discretion—restrictions may apply to roles in the federal/state government or jobs requiring advanced degrees.



What Employers Look For

In addition to legal knowledge:

- Professionalism
- Strong verbal and written communication skills
- Experience or specialized legal knowledge (depending on the role)
- A positive, forward-looking attitude and proof of change

Taking an online [Advanced Paralegal course](#) can be a great way to gain expertise in a specific area of law and make yourself a stronger candidate.

Where Can Paralegals Work?

Paralegals are needed in a wide range of industries—not just law firms. Here's where to look:

| <u>Industry / Organization Type</u> | <u>Example Roles</u> |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Law Firms | Civil, criminal, family, corporate law |
| Construction Companies | Contract compliance, zoning law support |
| Corporate Legal Departments | HR law, compliance, contracts |
| Court Reporting Agencies | Document prep, case tracking |
| Federal/State Banking Agencies | Regulatory filings, compliance reviews |
| Insurance Companies | Claims review, fraud investigation support |
| Internal Revenue Service | Tax compliance, audit prep |
| Legal Aid Societies | Public interest work, client intake |
| Municipal/Court Systems | Court clerking, docketing |
| Savings & Loan Companies | Loan documentation, legal compliance |
| Private Investigators | Research, case summaries |
| Sheriff's Department | Evidence organization, legal filings |
| Title Companies | Real estate documents, title searches |
| Unions | Labor law support, grievances, arbitration |

State Licensing Requirements

Because licensing and certification requirements differ from state to state, it is important to check with the state licensing board or similar regulatory body in the state you plan to work to determine the requirements. Research your state's department of professional licensing to learn more on state licensing/regulatory boards and specific industry licensing information.

Job Search Tools: Resume Building, Cover Letter Writing, and Networking

Resume Building

If you took our correspondence [Paralegal Certificate Program](#), you may refer back to Volume XIII, How to Find a Job as a Paralegal, for a refresher on any resume building tips, the format to follow, or example templates.



Focus on:

- Skills gained during incarceration
- Certificates (e.g., Paralegal, Advanced Paralegal)
- Soft skills: research, writing, organization
- Work experience (legal clerk roles, prison law library clerk)

For a great article on resume building, see [How To Write a Resume Objective If You've Been Convicted](#) by the Indeed Editorial Team.

Cover Letter Writing

Your cover letter is your chance to explain your skills and growth.

For advice on cover letter writing, check out [How to Write a Cover Letter When You Have a Felony](#) by Denise Dayton. A blog post by Honest Jobs titled [How to Find a Job with a Criminal Record: Create a Strong Resume and Cover Letter](#) provides guidance on cover letter writing (as well as resume building).

Networking

Networking is essential. Don't skip this step.

Tips:

- Reach out to attorneys you met during incarceration or court
- Join LinkedIn, legal forums
- Contact reentry nonprofits that host job fairs or workshops
- Look into paralegal associations (some offer low-cost student memberships)

For additional tips on the job search process including networking, see [Can You Get a Job With a Criminal Record?](#) by the Indeed Editorial Team. To learn more about networking after incarceration, read our article [here](#).

See the resume and cover letter sample on the next two pages to reference as examples.

Final Thoughts

Reentering the job market can be challenging, but your past does not define your future. No matter where you're starting from, rebuilding a career is possible. By setting clear goals, continuing your education, and using the many resources available to you, you can move forward—one step at a time.



Chris Jones

Certified Paralegal, CP®

Chicago, IL | 111-111-1111 | chrisjonestest@gmail.com | linkedin.com/in/chrisjonestest

OBJECTIVE

Detail-oriented certified paralegal looking for employment in a law firm. Organized multi-tasker with a broad knowledge of the law and a passion for making a difference in the community. Prior experience scheduling, researching, communicating, and assisting in prior jobs.

EDUCATION

Blackstone Career Institute Jun. 2023-Dec. 2023
Legal Assistant/Paralegal Program Certificate, with Distinction

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Attention to Detail

- Utilized attention to detail when assisting with legal research in a law library
- Volunteered in grant writing for ABC Non-Profit and helped to secure a \$20K grant

Leadership and Communication

- Coached a community basketball team and helped boost morale among team players
- Interacted with customers in a pleasant and friendly way while working as a cashier

Scheduling and Planning

- Scheduled meetings with potential donors as part of my volunteer work with ABC Non-Profit
- Planned a community event to provide food to the homeless and served over 100+ individuals

WORK HISTORY

State of Illinois, Chicago, IL Jan. 2024-May 2024

Law Library Clerk

- Categorized and organized legal reference books for easy retrieval
- Interacted with frequenters of the library and helped to find relevant resources
- Assisted with research for legal matters as necessary

ABC Store, Chicago, IL Sept 2017-June 2019

Cashier

- Communicated policies to customers upon request, demonstrating a thorough knowledge of company policies and procedures, while maintaining brand integrity
- Kept accurate inventory and thorough record of daily finances
- Reported incidents of suspicious behavior or behavior that did not adhere to company policy

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- NALA® Certified Paralegal
- ABC Store Employee of the Month Award (chosen for excellent customer service)



Chris Jones

Certified Paralegal, CP®

Chicago, IL | 111-111-1111 | chrisjonestest@gmail.com

John Doe
Hiring Manager
EFG Law Firm

Dear John Doe,

I am writing to express my interest in your Entry Level Legal Assistant listing at EFG Law Firm. As a NALA® certified paralegal who strives to make a difference in the community, I was pleased to come across EFG Law Firm, a local firm dedicated to providing quality legal support. My skills and education will benefit EFG Law Firm and make me a valuable addition to the team.

My attention to detail, communication skills, and scheduling abilities contribute to positioning me as an ideal candidate for this position. In my role as a Law Library Clerk, I utilized my attention to detail to assist with legal research, and I categorized and organized legal reference books. As a volunteer grant writer, I helped to secure a \$20,000 grant for ABC Non-Profit by presenting a compelling yet realistic purpose. I am a clear communicator, and my experience as a community basketball coach enabled me to effectively lead and support a variety of different personalities. Working as a cashier gave me an understanding of company policies and procedures and allowed me to practice communicating these policies effectively to others. My ability to schedule meetings and plan events has been useful in volunteer work that I have participated in to gain donors and serve individuals in need. These transferable skills will help me succeed in this paralegal role.

Through Blackstone Career Institute's accredited Paralegal Certificate Program, I deepened my knowledge of the law and gained legal research skills. As part of my legal education, I practiced drafting a demand letter and contributed to a legal research memorandum. My education provided me with foundational legal skills to utilize in my career as a legal assistant.

Thank you for your consideration. I have attached my resume and look forward to further discussing your needs for this role.

Sincerely,



Chris Jones



Moving Forward with Confidence

Learning how to pursue gainful employment is an important step in moving forward after incarceration. It's your opportunity to work towards your goals by building the future you've imagined.

No matter what field you are looking to enter, this guide contains helpful tools and resources to support you along the way. And if you're looking for more support, check out our blogs. We've created an Incarcerated section as well as a Career Development section that you might find helpful.

At Blackstone Career Institute, we care about your success. If there is a career topic you would like us to cover or a resource you or others would benefit from, you can send ideas through our online submission form.

We also invite you to share your story. Your journey could inspire others and may even be featured on our website or in future materials. If you're open to it, please email us at info@blackstone.edu.

Wherever you go from here, just know you're not alone. And if you ever want to revisit our career tips, our Career Center is always open.

