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OPINION: CONNECTING INNER CITY WORKERS TO JOBS IN WISCONSIN

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‘Five three two oh six. Look it up. We are one of the most incarcerated zip codes in the country. We have some of the most negative statistics here in Milwaukee and in Wisconsin,’ says Orlando Owens, a community advocate and until recently the director of African-American outreach for the Wisconsin Republican Party. ‘Crime-stricken,’ interjects Pastor Jerome Smith, of the Greater Praise Church of God in Christ. ‘Murders. Drop-out rates. Drug addictions,’ Mr. Owens continues. ‘We don’t have a lot of sunshine.’

This view of the predominantly black 53206 zip code, on Milwaukee’s north side, is reflected in the official statistics. The University of Wisconsin’s Center for Economic Development reports that unemployment for working-age men is about 64%. Median real household income has dived by 17% since 2000 to \$22,962, and two-thirds of local kids live in poverty.

Mr. Owens notes these are the familiar ‘challenges you see in urban America’ that nonetheless stand out ‘for a city and a population that’s so small.’ Across the street from the Greater Praise sanctuary is a vacant lot and a boarded-up building that used to house several businesses.

The paradox, or the tragedy, is that there are tens of thousands of unfilled manufacturing and other entry-level positions in Wisconsin. Seven of 10 state CEOs had trouble finding enough qualified workers, the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce trade group found in a July survey, and demand is rising.

To try to resolve this mismatch between potential workers and the businesses that want to hire them, Mr. Owens and Pastor Smith last year started a partnership called the Joseph Project that has already seen some early notable successes. They’ve also got an unlikely partner— Ron Johnson, Wisconsin’s Republican senator.

Pastor Smith first met Mr. Owens when Mr. Owens was with the state GOP, which he left to join Mr. Johnson’s staff. ‘I get a call, and I’m like, OK, who’s Ron Johnson? Well, you know, he’s a U.S. senator. I said, oh, you mean Tammy Baldwin?’ Pastor Smith recalled, laughing, in an interview this week at Greater Praise.

If humanitarianism to mitigate concentrated poverty is unusual for a conventional Republican—at least according to the political caricature—then Mr. Johnson’s party affiliation may also be a liability as he runs for a second term in the era of Donald Trump. The Wisconsin Senate campaign spotlights the larger importance of 2016, and Mr. Johnson could be caught in an anti-Trump downdraft.

The senator and former plastics-making executive isn’t one to put an extra brush of varnish on a situation. Yet in an interview at his campaign headquarters in Waukesha, he says the Joseph Project is far more meaningful than mere politics: ‘It is a joy, being able to participate in that, seeing people’s lives be turned around. That’s true conservative values

and they work. You outsource compassion to the federal government, that doesn't work so good. You show your compassion here in your community, one person at a time."

The Joseph Project began amid a confluence: Mr. Johnson was traveling around Wisconsin, and, he says, "not one manufacturer could hire enough people. But we've got all this inner-city unemployment, guys, how can you make that connection?" Meanwhile, Pastor Smith and Mr. Owens heard an appeal from the Sheboygan County Economic Development Corp., which was trying to fill 4,000 factory jobs. They made a tour of companies like Nematik (auto parts), Pace (aluminum die casting), Kohler (bathroom fixtures) and Johnsonville (sausage).

Sheboygan County is more than an hour's drive north of Milwaukee, and already on the ride back Mr. Owens and Pastor Smith were formulating a plan. They drew on the insights of the black conservative intellectual Bob Woodson, who in his 2007 book "The Triumphs of Joseph" chronicled "local people finding local solutions to their local needs in their communities. These were not big-name organizations and big-name foundations; these were small ministries, small nonprofits started in someone's church, started in someone's attic, and they went out and did the work," Mr. Owens says.

The duo figured they could connect unemployed or underemployed Milwaukeeans with the Sheboygan companies and use church vans that were unused during the workweek for transportation. They devised a week-long curriculum of workshops, taught by church members and Mr. Johnson's Senate staff as a constituent service. The workshops focused on "soft skills," like how to interview, the work ethic, financial and time management, and conflict resolution, Mr. Owens says. "We're not teaching them how to weld, how to type—"

"The simple things," says Pastor Smith.

Admittance to the Joseph Project is competitive, and Mr. Owens and Pastor Smith set high expectations and vet candidates. Those who persevere are promised an interview with an HR department on Friday, nothing more.

Fifteen people took part in the first class in October 2015, and 13 were offered a job and began work. Of the 130 people who have completed the program, 77 are now working with another 28 offers pending. Wages are well above the minimum, running between \$12.80 and \$18.50 an hour, and the vans run five shifts a day and average 12,000 miles a month.

Economically speaking, the Joseph Project removes friction from the labor market and solves a human-capital problem for employers. Since the best type of skills training happens on the job, for workers the program helps break "the cycle of poverty and despair," as Mr. Johnson puts it.

The project also has better recruiting and retention outcomes than the notorious archipelago of federal job training. Before a modest 2014 reform, there were 47 overlapping such programs. The Government Accountability Office found that only five could show any positive effects, and even those were "small, inconclusive or restricted to short-term impacts."

"Some of them go as far as giving you a really nice certificate of completion and attached to that pretty certificate is a piece of paper with a bunch of companies' names on it," says Pastor Smith. "You can get that out of the Yellow Pages. That has no value, you know what I mean?"

"Relationships—that's where the value is, and that's what we do, and that's what sets us apart," he says. Companies over time are coming to trust applicants with the Joseph Project imprimatur. Mr. Johnson's involvement includes helping to broker these relationships—17 companies now participate.

Mr. Johnson's endorsement, in turn, has encouraged companies to show case-by-case flexibility on criminal backgrounds. A 2007 University of Wisconsin study found that by age 30-34 only 38% of men in 53206 had not spent time in a state correctional facility. "Are the owners of these companies willing to say, let's give this guy another shot?" Mr. Owens asks. "He said he wants to work. He has the same probationary period like everybody else. . . . He may have some bumps and some bruises. But what you've got are some tough-minded, gritty people who will not give up, who will not tap out easily. They've been through challenges before, they see the opportunity and go for it."

"Almost all these individuals are in a position where they've got to put their pasts behind them and move forward," explains Mr. Johnson. "Probably for the first time in his life not only does he have the dignity of earning his own success, but he has that added dignity and joy of doing something that's going to benefit somebody he doesn't even know."

Because success builds on success, the faith-based program teaches a sense of spiritual solidarity. "The Joseph Project is really bigger than just you," Mr. Owens says. "It's really about the next person behind you, keeping the door open for the next person behind you."

Pastor Smith adds: "The Joseph Project is making impacts on people's lives. Because there is a thing called the Joseph Project, because of all the hard work that the senator is putting in, because of the people behind the scenes, that the church does, guess what: Somebody is going to eat tonight."

"Of all the stuff I've done in six years, if nothing else, this was worth it," Mr. Johnson says of the Joseph Project. "I'm telling you, this [running for re-election] is such a negative process. It is: the frustration and not being able to get stuff done and the negative campaigning, the way they try to destroy your character. This was worth it."

This election may test Mr. Johnson's proposition, and among Republican political analysts the race inspires ambient dread. He's probably the most vulnerable GOP senator after Illinois's Mark Kirk. Democrats need to retake four seats to control the now 54-46 chamber if Hillary Clinton wins the White House.

Mr. Johnson was elected in the 2010 tea-party wave, defeating 18-year incumbent Russ Feingold in one of that year's biggest upsets. Now Mr. Feingold is back, and presidential election years tend to bring out Democrat-leaning voters in Wisconsin. The last Republican to win the state was Ronald Reagan in 1984. Then again, no ousted senator has won a direct re-match since 1934.

Democrats are trying to wrap Mr. Trump around Mr. Johnson like a boa constrictor, and the New Yorker is exceptionally unpopular in the Badger State. In the Marquette University poll released this week, he's viewed favorably by 27% of registered voters. In the same poll, Mr. Feingold is beating Mr. Johnson, 49% to 43%.

But the race has narrowed in recent months, and Mr. Johnson is running as an independent, pragmatic outsider keyed in on solving problems particular to Wisconsinites. He supports Mr. Trump over Mrs. Clinton. "Some people you disagree with more than others, but my

approach really throughout my life, throughout my business career: I concentrate on the areas of agreement. It's far more productive," Mr. Johnson says.

He raised \$2.8 million in the most recent quarter, which puts him in a top-three league with the GOP fundraising powerhouses Rob Portman and Pat Toomey, and he portrays Mr. Feingold as a career politician whose ambition to return to Washington is a little unseemly. "This is no different from 2010. I knew I was down. Ended up winning by five," Mr. Johnson notes.

"When I get in front of people, I can convince them. I think they see my true intentions here, which is to solve these problems. I'm not doing this because I want to be a U.S. senator . . . Truth of the matter, I'd rather go home. Who wouldn't? Well, Russ Feingold. What normal person? I miss my old life. This is a grind, but it's an important grind. I know there aren't enough people in Washington, D.C., who aren't worried about their re-election."

Standing in the Greater Praise parking lot, Orlando Owens loops his forefinger around in the air and notes that, whatever you say about Republicans, Ron Johnson isn't the author of this. The first-term senator didn't board up the businesses, or cause the bad schools, the violence or the lack of economic opportunity. But he's trying to work his way to a better answer than the liberal Milwaukee status quo of Russ Feingold and all the Democratic aldermen and county executives. He deserves more time, Mr. Owens says.

The greatest political misfortune of 2016 may have nothing to do with the White House. It will be if Mr. Trump takes decent men like Mr. Johnson down with him as collateral damage.

Mr. Rago is a member of the Journal's editorial board.