



Hall to challenge fellow Atlanta Council members to hire homeless

By [Leon Stafford](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

7:47 p.m. Sunday, October 17, 2010

When Erica Merriwether lost her accounting job at an Atlanta law firm in July 2008, she thought it wouldn't take long to find a similar position.

She was wrong. After searching for months, instead of finding vacancies, she found other accountants who had lost their jobs as well.

The year spiraled downward and the mother of two lost her home and her car and, by the end of 2009, was living in a homeless shelter.

"I got contract work here and there, for a couple of weeks, or maybe three, but it wasn't enough," Merriwether said.

Then in February, her path to full-time work began when she was hired as an administrative assistant for Atlanta City Councilman Kwanza Hall, through First Step Staffing, a three-year-old temp agency that focuses on helping homeless people get jobs.

"It made a huge difference in my life to go through First Step and City Hall," Merriwether said.

At Monday's Atlanta City Council meeting, Hall is expected to challenge his colleagues who may have vacancies on their staffs to go beyond speeches in their support of the homeless and hire through First Step or a similar program.

"If everyone can help one or two people, this can go very far," said Hall. "This is about addressing the issue from a different angle. People think

Hall said he hired Merriwether at about \$12 an hour for an opening on his staff. He said he is not suggesting Council members create jobs, but hopes they will consider the homeless for positions that are open. How each Council member structures the job is up to the member, he said. Unlike other areas of Atlanta city government, the Council did not undergo recent job cuts.

First Step conducts the vetting and background checks on the homeless, but it did not pass on that cost to Hall's office. Hall paid Merriwether's wages, plus about \$2 an hour to First Step.

First Step founder Greg Block said the agency's workers include homeless people from a variety of backgrounds: Some are long-time workers who never expected to be without shelter, some are veterans, and there are people with substance abuse problems and people with felon records.

Companies that hire from First Step are aware of the agency's mission and do so because they believe in it, Block said.

One of the biggest challenges for the homeless looking for a job is establishing a work history, Block said. Employers are skeptical of large gaps of times between jobs. Other barriers include lack of a permanent home address or a telephone number. That's especially difficult for those who have been incarcerated.

"Good luck finding a job or someone who will rent you a place when you get out of jail," Block said.

Hall said his goal was to be a bridge for Merriwether, offering her a job for three to six months while she searched for permanent work. He didn't reveal her personal circumstances to others in his office in an effort to let her work speak for itself.

The plan worked, he said. Merriwether was hired as an accountant at the Rosewood Hotel at the Mansion on Peachtree in late August. They did not know her living situation at the time, but hired her for abilities, said spokeswoman Miller Jackson.

"I'm so much more humble today because of what I went through," said Merriwether, who is back in a home of her own. "I try to remember that experience and know that nothing is promised to us."

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