

Good morning distinguished members of the General Assembly:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 5207. With its passage some of the 200,000 people in this state who have lost the opportunity to secure meaningful employment due to a felony conviction will have hope. When a person is convicted in court and given a disposition of paying a fine, completing community service, being incarcerated or entering a program that should be the only debt that they should have to pay. A felony should not hold a lifetime consequence. According to the Universal Human Rights doctrine denying individuals a right to work is a crime against humanity.

A felony conviction equates to "Jim Crow on life support". It is a systematic mode of discriminating against a certain segment of our society; an excuse not to hire. Studies have shown that not everyone with a felony is not treated alike. A perfect example is our former governor who led a corrupt administration in government, was convicted, and incarcerated yet upon release almost immediately was able to obtain employ at another government agency. A just law should work for all of us.

When one has paid their debt to society he/she should be allowed to restore their lives and employment is one of the basic needs for doing so. When policies are implemented that deny people with felonies legal employment then policymakers must take some responsibility for forcing that individual into crime.

I have no illusion that this bill alone will deter employers from discriminating. One important lesson that I have learned from American history is that while one entity struggles to bring about positive change there is a segment of our society operating in "backrooms and boardrooms" working to minimize or deter change from occurring. I recognize the importance of a shift not only in the legislative process but also in the mindset. Changing current policy requires just and compassionate policymakers. With that said I remain inspired to support the bill and hopeful that its passage will be a step in the right direction.

The late Dr Martin Luther King Jr once made a statement that "An individual has not started living until he/she can rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity". It is something that I live by which is why this piece of legislation is so important for me to support. Far too many people cycle in and out of prison because upon release they return to the ways that brought them into the system in the first place, and not always by choice. Many times it comes out of a desperate need to provide for themselves and their families.

As I write this I am reminded that this is Black History month and that it took 50 years (1926-1976) of work launched by Harvard graduate Dr Carter G Woodson to bring the celebration into existence. I pray it will not take 50 years to end a practice that has devastated the lives of millions in this country.

Pass House Bill 5207 in this session and give hope to those who have been harmed by a discriminatory policy that has crippled the livelihood of millions for at least three decades. More importantly I pray that you will not compromise the language until it has become a meaningless piece of legislation.

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