

Testimony before the Labor & Public Employees Committee
In Favor of HB5207
February 25, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Prague, Representative Ryan, and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee. My name is Jennifer Garrison, a resident of South Windsor who is greatly affected by the Ban the Box initiative.

The ban the box initiative is something near and dear to my heart. I work for the Chrysalis Center's Employment Support Network; an employment program that helps Department of Corrections clients gain permanent and meaningful employment. Each and every one of the ex-offenders that we service have a felony on their record. As an Employment Specialist I deal with "the box" every day.

According to renowned criminologist Richard Freeman, 600,000 ex-offenders were released into civil society in 2001. The study titled "Recidivism of Prisoners Released" completed in 2003, shows that two-thirds of released prisoners are re-arrested and one-half are re-incarcerated within three years of release from prison. These figures grow even higher when looking at the same population over a decade – 75-80% will be re-arrested with no employment.

Our clients want to work, and they are as diverse as any other part of the population. We have individuals with college degrees and others who are in need of getting their GED. We have engineers, roofers, line cooks, medical assistants, and landscapers. Our clients are very capable people who want to support themselves and their families. Unfortunately that awful box on applications is getting in the way of many of our clients gaining employment.

The box makes it very easy for employers to discriminate against very experienced and qualified individuals. That box screens out my clients before they ever get an opportunity to tell an employer how they are qualified, and what an asset they could be to the organization. Plain and simple that box discriminates.

In days gone by applications asked for race. That practice often screened out minority applicants as "undesirable." That practice is now illegal. Employers are forbidden to discriminate against an individual based on race. The same can be said for sex, disability and a number of other traits. Why is it still legal to discriminate against a job seeker who has a past?

Once the race question was removed from applications, we got a more diverse workforce. That is not to say that there is no longer any discrimination based on race, unfortunately discrimination is still a problem. But, applicants now have an opportunity to present their skills and experience to an employer. That is all we are asking for today. We want job applicants with a felony record to have the same opportunity as everyone else to obtain a job.

America is the "land of opportunity," but our clients are often forbidden to take part in that dream. They are not allowed to realize their full potential because they are forever punished for making a mistake. They are not in a position to provide for their families. They frequently become a burden to their families and the system.

Alan McKenzie, co-founder of Street Smart Ventures and Fresh Start Enterprises, decided to build an entrepreneurial work crew program that integrates education, vocation and mentoring skills by utilizing local entrepreneurs and vocational trainers within the community. The intent of this program is not only to train and get jobs for ex-offenders, but to help them successfully integrate into regular society. Cities like Bridgeport and New Haven have already implemented this program among the ex-offender populations and recorded a 95% success rate within these tough inner-city communities. Mr. McKenzie empowers ex-offenders and encourages them to become a part from Connecticut's workforce. Unfortunately once these very well trained and experienced individuals hit the outside workforce, they are again greeted by "the box." They are once again judged and shunned and discriminated against by our society.

As stated earlier the rate of recidivism of ex-offenders who can not find gainful employment is staggering. Just this week I had a client that was remanded to prison. This individual was trying so hard to find a job. He was in our office multiple times each and every week looking for employment. He followed every lead we gave him, and found several more opportunities on his own. This man is a very talented chef with many years of experience. He had an amazing resume, but the box often kept him from getting the opportunity to present himself to employers.

I don't want to see another individual return to the streets to feed their family. I don't want to see any more people going back to prison because no one will even give them the opportunity to interview for a job that they are qualified for. I don't want to see another crying child reach out for mom or dad as they go away for earning money the wrong way, because no one would let them do it the right way. In short, I don't want to see that box on any more applications.

BAN THE BOX!!!

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Jennifer Garrison
78 Steep Road
South Windsor, CT 06074
(860) 818-4085