



Testimony of Ellen Small, MSW
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Before the Labor and Public Employees Committee
In support of HB 5207 An Act Concerning Criminal Background Checks for
Prospective State Employees

February 25, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Prague, Representative Ryan, and members of the Committee. My name is Ellen Small, and I am the Coordinator of CABHN, the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am here today **in support of HB 5207 An Act Concerning Criminal Background Checks for Prospective State Employees.**

CABHN is a network of organizations—individuals, providers, advocates, and grassroots community organizations—collectively devoted to helping individuals and families meet their basic needs.

One of the issues of greatest concern to our members is community reentry for people who have been incarcerated. How can we help people coming out of prison secure housing? How can we meet their treatment needs? How can we help reunite them with their families? And, perhaps most importantly, **how can we help people who have criminal records—the majority of which are for non-violent offenses—secure employment?**

To be quite candid, these are some of the most challenging and heartbreaking stories I have ever heard. Mothers who made a poor choice out of desperation to provide for their children, now faced with the impossibility of finding a job due to their criminal background. Fathers who made a mistake when they were young who now have the opportunity to be a part of their child's life, but struggle to be their family's provider because their criminal background blocks them from even getting a foot in the door at most jobs. People who have made mistakes, who have accepted the consequences for those mistakes, and who now seek to live a positive, hard-working life and care for their families.

Each of these people I have met in my work has something very important to offer any employer who will give them a chance – *to judge them for who they are now, not who they were in the past*. They don't want our judgment, nor our sympathy. **All they want is a chance.** A chance to prove themselves just as capable as the next guy. A chance to work hard and earn a decent living. **This bill is an important step toward giving them that chance.**

HB 5207 is critical to the stability of one of our state's most vulnerable populations because it:

- 1.) **Gives individuals with criminal backgrounds a chance to be evaluated for a position based on their skills and qualifications, rather than the mistakes of their past.** By delaying the criminal record check until a later stage in the hiring process, we increase the likelihood that an individual will be offered a position as they have already been deemed otherwise qualified for the position. Often, people who have to check "yes" to the question "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" on the initial application never even get considered for the position. This bill will help them to have a fair chance of getting their foot in the door.
- 2.) **Increases the opportunity for an individual with a criminal history to obtain gainful, stable employment giving them purpose and consistent income.** When people return from prison and are able to meet their needs and the needs of their family, they are more likely to maintain their work ethic and less likely to recidivate. Without employment people face economic desperation as they are unable to meet even their most basic needs. This bill offers them greater access to jobs.
- 3.) **Reduces the stigma associated with having a criminal history.** As the State of Connecticut commits to evaluating individuals based on their merits rather than their mistakes, it sends a message to private employers throughout the state that people with criminal backgrounds can actually prove to be extremely valuable and productive employees, increasing the likelihood they will reform their own hiring practices.

Connecticut faces an important opportunity to join with several other states, including Hawaii and Minnesota, and many municipalities nationwide, who have recognized the valuable contributions people who have been incarcerated have to offer to our state's workforce in adopting a "Ban the Box" hiring reform policy.

I urge you to adopt HB 5207 and delay the criminal background check for individuals applying for state jobs until the later stages of the hiring process.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important bill.