Dear Members of the Committee on Labor and Public Employees,

I am a Connecticut resident writing to ask for your support of H.B. 5237, an Act Concerning Fair Chance Employment, removing the question of former incarceration on hiring forms for all employers in the state of Connecticut. This bill supports equality of opportunity in hiring practices by significantly reducing the potential for unjust, often racially driven discrimination against formerly incarcerated people. Furthermore, H.B. 5237 breaks down a crucial barrier in the reentry process thereby promoting reintegration and reducing recidivism. I firmly believe this bill will lead to a better Connecticut, and I urge you to support it during this legislative session.

For individuals with a criminal record, trying to get a foothold in this discriminatory job market can be incredibly challenging. Research has shown that finding a job is a critical first step in returning to the community after prison and leads to significant reductions in recidivism rates; however, employers currently use the "box" as a means for eliminating that possibility for people with convictions. For example, a recent study done by the National Institute of Justice demonstrated that a criminal record "reduced the likelihood of a callback or job offer by nearly 50 percent." By delaying the process of the background check until after a conditional job offer has been made, this bill would drastically curtail employment discrimination against ex-offenders.

The disparate impact on communities of color because of these discriminatory policies is especially important. In their investigation of prisoner reentry, Devah Pager and Bruce Western found that the "penalty for having a criminal record suffered by white applicants was approximately half the size of the penalty for black applicants with a criminal record." The implications of this finding for hiring processes indicate that these policies not only discriminate against formerly incarcerated individuals but also work to exclude communities of color from job opportunities. By continuing to permit the usage of the "box" on employment forms, Connecticut participates in unlawful racial discrimination and contributes to cycles of incarceration that have a disparate impact on communities of color across the state.

Opponents of the bill argue that removing the criminal prescreening process could compromise safety. The successful ban the box ordinance in New Haven and the proposed legislation for the state of Connecticut, however, does not prevent background checks; rather, it proposes to move the background check until after the applicant has been given a conditional job offer. The proposed bill, as a result, ensures that employers will not discriminate in their hiring practices based on an assumption that all applicants with a criminal record are inherently unqualified.

Unemployment is one of the largest contributors to recidivism among Connecticut's formerly incarcerated population. Research has shown that eliminating this major hurdle for people with a criminal record significantly reduces the likelihood of a return to criminal activity. Successful reentry and the reduction of returns to Connecticut prisons also removes the financial burden of housing thousands of inmates from the state. We cannot emphasize the importance of this bill enough; it is only through a concerted effort between the private and public spheres – between government and business – that we can begin to reduce recidivism and successfully reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals into our communities.

Sincerely,

Emon Datta

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3/01/16