

To the distinguished members of the Labor Committee:

My name is Raymond Wallace, Executive Director of Guns Down, Books Up, and I am here today to urge the passage of HB 5237, An Act Concerning Fair Chance Employment.

As a young man in my early 20's, I found myself making a lot of bad decisions. During a football game, as a fight had broken up, I picked up the football and started walking away. Police officers shortly pulled up and charged me with robbery. In a separate incident, I was in a truck with 6 of my friends and a gun was found under the driver's seat. The cops charged all 6 of us for possession. I ultimately did 3.5 years in a Connecticut penitentiary for these misdeeds. I was around 30 when I was finally released, and it's been a struggle ever since.

To live in Connecticut you need to make at least \$20 an hour to survive with a family and kids. I applied to jobs all across New Haven and Connecticut in order to support myself and my family. In many cases I would be given an interview and feel confident on my chances only to be turned away after seeing that I had a record. On several occasions, I was escorted out of the office after a background check. These incidents would crush my confidence for weeks, knowing that without my record I would've received the job. I went back to doing what I knew best, dealing drugs. Let me make this crystal clear, I in no way wanted to resort to this. I had to feed my family and survive, and under my circumstances this was the only avenue I had at the time.

Six years ago, after seeing a close friend of mine gunned down right in front of me, I decided to start a non-violence non-profit, Guns Down, Books Up, aimed at children. Seeing all the hardship I had gone through because of some stupid decisions in my youth, I was committed to helping kids in New Haven avoid the same path.

We did a variety of things from feeding the homeless, feeding the elderly, holding book fairs, establishing youth sports leagues and youth mentoring programs and we eventually grew to holding an annual summer festival called Unity Youth Weekend.

We accomplished these things on a shoestring budget, usually with the help of a few compassionate benefactors in the community. Even though I was ecstatic in being able to help the youth in my community, after couple years I considered closing down the organization. I was never able to find consistent full time work, and the pressure mentally and financially was becoming an impossible burden. While I wanted to continue helping my community, I felt like the community had given up on me.

I think everybody needs a second chance. I know there are a lot of good people who have made mistakes that could really contribute to society if they are given another opportunity.

I am an exception. Even though I spent most of my adult life without consistent work, I was lucky that some people believed in me and gave me the opportunity to succeed. I was eventually offered a position to run after school mentoring programs in New Haven schools from my work with Guns Down, Books Up. Most people will never be that fortunate.

Still to this day I am struggling. The work I do manages to pay the bills but an anxiety and uncertainty about my future still exists. This bill will help me and so many others like me become valuable members of the community once again.

I urge you to pass HB 5237, An Act Concerning Fair Chance Employment.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Raymond Wallace  
Executive Director, Guns Down, Books Up