

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 767:
Higher Education - Admissions Process - Criminal History

TO: Chair Paul Pinsky, and Members of the Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee

FROM: Caryn York, Policy Advocate

DATE: February 26, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-skill, low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. We support House Bill 767 as a means of removing educational and employment barriers for low-wage workers and non-traditional students

Education and employment are considered the most important tools for the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as to provide opportunities for individuals with criminal records to move beyond their experiences with the criminal justice system. It is well established that higher education is strongly correlated to income and is essential for the individuals who obtain the knowledge and skills that education provides, as well as their families and communities. Individuals with a criminal background, already disadvantaged in the job market, particularly need higher education to obtain the requisite knowledge, training, or skills to enter the job market and to maximize opportunities for stable employment.

According to a 2015 Center for Community Alternatives study, asking about an applicant's criminal history deters those with a criminal history from applying to college. At the time of the study, many college-entry applications, including the common application used by more than 600 colleges, asked applicants about their criminal history. Not getting a college degree can further limit an individual's ability to find a stable, well-paying job and contribute to the economy.

The fact that an applicant may have a criminal history, standing alone, should not automatically disqualify a candidate if he or she otherwise meet the minimum requirements to be admitted. New York, Texas, California, Minnesota and Arizona have eliminated the arrest/conviction question from initial applications for higher education with similar policies are under consideration in Illinois and Ohio. The State of Maryland should encourage all state residents, including those with a criminal history, to apply and secure a college education.

Senate Bill 767 simply states: "an institution of higher education may not use an admissions application that contains questions about the criminal history of the applicant." By removing the question from college applications, more qualified individuals will have a chance to obtain the education they need and deserve. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report of Senate Bill 767.