



Strategies and Solutions for 21st Century America

Testimony of William B. Simpson
Chief Executive Officer, Open Door America
Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
2 East Miller Senate Building, Annapolis, Maryland
Tuesday, January 28, 2020, 1:00 p.m.

In Support Of

Senate Bill 0157 - Employers of Ex-Offenders – Liability – Immunity

Sponsor: Senator Robert Cassilly, District 34, Harford County (R)
Chairman: Senator William C. Smith, Jr., District 20, Montgomery County (D)
Vice Chairman: Senator Jeff Waldstreicher, District 18, Montgomery County (D)

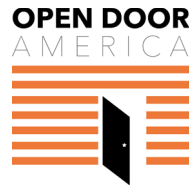
Testimony

Good afternoon Chairman Smith, Vice Chairman Waldstreicher, Sponsor Cassilly, and the entire committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Senate Bill 157.

Incorporated in 2006, Open Door America addresses intergenerational poverty, systemic underemployment, and mass incarceration. Our 14-year history includes inner city after-schools, workforce development training with public assistance families, diversionary programming for Maryland drug dealers, and prisoner reentry initiatives in Baltimore City and Howard County. Since 2009, we have focused on young adult parents entrapped by low wages and high rents in low social capital communities. We are a strong advocate for leveling the playing field for entry-level workers, especially those with criminal records and public assistance histories who face social barriers and cultural biases in their pursuit of the American dream.

In 2020, under the *Maryland Justice Reinvestment Act*, the *Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention*, and Director Jack Kavanaugh of the *Howard County Department of Corrections*, Open Door America is providing 20 "returning citizens" with 12 months of fulltime "living wage" employment supported by weekly case management and life coaching, tailored information & referral (I&R) services, and critical housing and transportation support. In partnership with the *Coastal Sunbelt Companies* of Jessup, Maryland under the leadership of Chief Executive Officer John Corso, we are providing daily onsite onboarding assistance to these 20 new employees. Our model is based on research that finds 50 percent of all hourly workers in the United States fail in their jobs in the first four months of employment.

America is in critical need of these kinds of partnerships. Studies show 60 percent of ex-offenders are still unemployed 12 months after release. Twenty-seven percent of former inmates never gain lawful employment. The *Society for Human Resources Management* reports that 74 percent of employers will not extend job offers to nonviolent felons and only four percent will hire persons with violent felony records.



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America is a nation drowning in a sea of mass incarceration. With only five percent of the world's population, we are the global leader in incarceration with 25% of its prisoners. Thirty-one U.S. states have higher incarceration rates than the world's number two incarcerating nation, El Salvador. One in three U.S. adults is arrested by the age of 23 and 100 million Americans have permanent criminal records. Per prisoner, the nation is spending \$33,000 annually. Maryland is spending \$44,000. Altogether, the United States spends \$182 billion annually on mass incarceration, including \$81 billion on public corrections agencies. By comparison, the federal government spent less than \$6 billion dollars on all forms of cancer research in 2017.

A *Department of Justice* study of 68,000 prisoners released between 2005 and 2014 found that five in six ex-offenders were rearrested at least once during the nine-year study. Forty-four percent were rearrested during the first year after release, 68% within three years, 79% within six years, and 83% percent within nine years. In Maryland, of the 1,900 inmates exiting 24 state-run facilities in 2017, 45% (850) returned to prison within 12 months, costing the state over \$37 million in reincarceration expenditures.

Although the national unemployment rate has fallen below four percent, ex-offenders as a group are currently jobless at the dismal rate of 27.3%. For African American men and women with criminal records, the unemployment rate is a staggering 35% and 44%, respectively.

Conclusion

As each of you knows, there are no perfect solutions. No single piece of legislation is going to fix the mess we now find ourselves in. Perhaps there are good reasons why this legislation failed a year ago in this body. I hope we are not voting to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

From our perspective, having worked with over 900 impoverished households and over 250 ex-offenders in East Baltimore, government needs to do everything it can to encourage employers to hire ex-offenders. Businesses willing to take a chance on ex-offenders are the closest thing we have to a silver bullet. That's because they are also the same businesses who will hire welfare recipients and other entry-level workers. No amount of public assistance or private charity can ever hope to rival the individual or societal impact of one employer offering one ex-offender a job. Maryland desperately needs SB157 to pass, in some form or another. These businesses deserve to be protected by the Maryland government. SB157 should be the easiest moment of bipartisan cooperation in the 2020 General Assembly.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before your committee.