

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1022

Labor and Employment - Postconviction Work Readiness Program

TO: Members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Consultant

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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 HB1022 as a means of reducing the impact of incarceration and enhancing employment opportunities for lower-income workers and job seekers throughout the state.

A criminal record can be both the cause and consequence of poverty and has detrimental effects on the employment prospects for the [estimated 25% of working-age Marylanders with a record](#) (pg.26). Every year, approximately 15,000 Marylanders are released from state prisons and struggle to secure a job, find a place to live and reenter society. Demographically, [71% of Maryland's prison population is black](#) (pg.20), the highest in the nation, and one out of three Marylanders returning from incarceration return to Baltimore City. The Department of Justice has [found](#) high rates of recidivism among returning citizens, with half of all returning citizens recidivating within 3 years and 60 percent recidivating within 5 years. One of the primary drivers of high recidivism rates is the inability of returning citizens to find a job: [over 60 percent of formerly incarcerated persons remain unemployed](#) one year after their release. This is mainly because more than [85% of employers perform background checks on all of their job applicants](#) and deny employment to many returning citizens based on a record. A past criminal conviction of any sort reduces job offers by half. This leaves many of the 1.5 million Marylanders with a criminal record out in the cold when trying to obtain gainful employment. A 2015 Manhattan Institute study [revealed](#) that employment, especially within the first six months of release, drastically lowers the likelihood of recidivism for nonviolent offenders. When securing employment through traditional means becomes untenable, many opt for entrepreneurial ventures, skills training, or both, to stay afloat.

House Bill 1022 seeks to address this issue by creating the Postconviction Work Readiness Program in the Maryland Department of Labor (MDL) to assist individuals who have been convicted of a felony with obtaining and retaining employment. Del. Young was wise in ensuring that the four counties serviced by the program contained the majority of returning citizens in the state. It is a great and positive way of holding the DPSCS accountable for proper re-entry. We only wish to see the program amended to include returning citizens with misdemeanors.