



Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1022:

Labor and Employment - Postconviction Work Readiness Program

TO: Chair Luke Clippinger and Members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Ioana Stoica, Policy Advocate

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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. **JOTF supports House Bill 1022 as a means of expanding access to capital and skills training to those experiencing barriers to employment due to their criminal record.**

A criminal record can be both the cause and consequence of poverty and has detrimental effects on the employment prospects for the 25% of working-age Marylanders with a record. 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, 72% of Maryland's prison population is black, 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: up to 60 percent of formerly incarcerated persons remain unemployed one year after their release. This is mainly due to the fact that more than 70% of employers perform background checks on all of their job applicants and deny employment to many returning citizens on the basis of 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. When securing employment through traditional means becomes untenable, many opt for entrepreneurial ventures, skills training, or both, to stay afloat.

Entrepreneurial development programs for formerly incarcerated individuals report dramatically lower rates of recidivism, and self-employment can provide economic stability for those who are otherwise locked out of the labor market. 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. Entrepreneurship should be one of the tools that returning citizens have access to as they re-enter society.

Similar programs across the country have successfully deployed entrepreneurial development to reduce recidivism by helping returning citizens secure employment and start businesses. In Texas, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program—which has graduated more than 2,300 returning citizens—has helped 100

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percent of its participants secure employment within 90 days and has helped its participants start more than 360 businesses. In Oregon, the state Department of Corrections found that participants in the Lifelong Information for Entrepreneurship Program were 41 percent less likely to recidivate. Defy Ventures, which operates in New York, California, Connecticut, Colorado, Washington, and Illinois, reports an 82 percent employment rate and a less than 5 percent recidivism rate for its released graduates.

With House Bill 1022, a Postconviction Work Readiness Program would be instituted to provide dedicated services for individuals who have been convicted of a felony with obtaining and retaining employment. As JOTF works in partnership with many justice-impacted businesses and nonprofits to provide services to the community, we welcome all efforts to expand employment access and entrepreneurial training to the returning citizens. We respectfully ask for a **favorable report on House Bill 1022**.

For more information, contact:

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