

Proponent Testimony

in support of amendments to R.C. 2953.25,

CERTIFICATES OF QUALIFICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT

found in the budget bill, HB 49

TO: Finance Subcommittee on Transportation, The Ohio House of Representatives
Chairman McColley, Ranking Minority Member Reece, Representative Green, Representative Patton, and Representative Rogers

FROM: Janet Hales, Director, Ohio Poverty Law Center (OPLC)
Patrick M. Higgins*, OLAF Justice for All Fellow, OPLC
Stephen JohnsonGrove*, Senior Staff Attorney, Ohio Justice and Policy Center (OJPC)
Joann Sahl, Associate Clinical Professor of Law, The University of Akron School of Law
Bishara Addison*, Sr. Manager of Policy & Strategic Initiatives, Towards Employment
(*also testifying in person today)

DATE: March 14, 2017

Chairman McColley, Ranking Member Reece, and committee members,

Together, our organizations enthusiastically support the improvements to Certificate of Qualification for Employment (CQE) program found in DRC's portion of the budget bill, HB 49. Strengthening CQEs allows Ohio to gain more benefits from opening the doors to employment for rehabilitated workers with criminal records. Because of our firsthand experiences with this program, OJPC, OPLC, Towards Employment, and University of Akron School of Law have learned the immense opportunity offered by the CQEs; we have also become aware of some obstacles to realizing its full potential. In addition to our support, and because of our experiences in the field, we suggest three amendments to make this part of the budget bill, and the CQE statute, even more effective:

1. Ensure that the **correct statutory definitions** are applicable to the CQE statute to match new language in the budget bill;
2. Include **federal and out-of-state offenses** in the definition of those eligible for a CQE; *and*
3. Provide **filing fee** guidance.

Imagine expanding the workforce available to Ohio businesses by 1.9 million people—people

who were once categorically and permanently barred from entire fields of work. By voting in favor of this portion of the budget, this committee can greatly improve the likelihood that ready, willing, and able workers with criminal records can meet the needs of Ohio's employers. One in six Ohioans—**over 1.9 million people**—has a felony or misdemeanor record. And that huge number of Ohio workers face an astonishing number of barriers: according to the Civil Impacts of Criminal Convictions (CIVICC) database, there are **over 900** state statutes and regulations that block people with various criminal records from employment, housing, familial relationships and many other rights and privileges. The CQE provisions in HB 49 will ensure that more individuals can become work-ready and begin rebuilding their lives.

CQEs work. Over 600 Ohioans have successfully petitioned for a CQE. Empirical and anecdotal data from the University of Akron School of Law—a pioneer with the Ohio Justice and Policy Center in representing clients seeking CQEs—indi-

cates that successful petitions for CQEs help individuals find jobs.¹ Furthermore, a study of CQE utility in Central Ohio by researchers at the University of South Carolina indicated that individuals with CQEs were significantly more likely to receive a positive response—either an interview call back or job offer—than those similarly situated without CQEs.²

Observations from the field

Ohio Justice & Policy Center

The Ohio Justice and Policy Center is one of the foremost experts in this state on the multitude of legal barriers facing Ohioans with criminal records. OJPC was instrumental in the creation of the CQE statute in Senate Bill 337 (2012). A large part of its experience is rooted in twelve years of providing free legal clinics, several times each month, to people with criminal records in greater Cincinnati. OJPC has served over 6,000 Ohioans through these clinics. Through our direct representation and our training of other service providers, 145 people in Hamilton County have obtained a CQE. We have also built and maintain the most powerful state-law tool in the country for cataloguing criminal-record-based legal barriers: The Ohio Civil Impacts of Criminal Convictions Database (<http://CIVICCohio.org>). We provide community and professional education sessions statewide on these topics.

When we see clients representing themselves on CQEs, we often see them struggle to deal with the complexity of the application process. By removing the need to find and name each legal barrier they face, this piece of the budget would allow

more rehabilitated workers to complete the process on their own and move into the labor market.

Also, like the University of Akron School of Law, we have had multiple informal conversations with federal judges and probation officers who would be more than willing to share information with a state court that was investigating a CQE applicant. We have had to turn away many excellent CQE candidates (and prospective Ohio taxpayers) because they have federal convictions. The budget bill should allow people with out-of-state and federal convictions to apply for CQEs when the out-of-state or federal court that imposed the conviction is willing to share information with the Ohio court considering a CQE application.

Towards Employment

Towards Employment is a leading workforce readiness nonprofit whose mission is to empower individuals to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency through employment. We help people prepare for a job, get a job, keep a job, and move up the career ladder through job readiness training, placement, career coaching for retention and advancement as well as offering wrap-around support services.

We serve over 2,000 people a year at different points along a career pathway. In 2016, we placed 560 people in jobs of which 320 (57%) had a criminal record. As a workforce development organization, we understand how difficult it is for individuals with a criminal record to compete in the job market. We believe, with the incorporation of our coalition's recommendations, CQEs have the potential to play a role in connecting individuals with criminal records to employment in high-demand industries in NE Ohio, with jobs that pay

¹ See *Survey Results of Ohio Certificate of Qualification (CQE) Recipients*, UNIVERSITY OF AKRON SCHOOL OF LAW (Jan. 11, 2016), <http://bit.ly/2IRPLBz>; *OSBF Supports the University of Akron School of Law's CQE Clinics*, OHIO STATE BAR FOUNDATION (Nov. 16, 2015), <https://youtu.be/mK77xGCCu4Y>.

² Peter Leasure & Tia Stevens Andersen, *The Effectiveness of Certificates of Relief as Collateral Consequence Relief Mechanisms: An Experimental Study*, YALE L. & POL'Y REV. INTER ALIA (11/7/2016), <http://bit.ly/2IS1e47>

family sustaining wages. These in-demand industries include health care, manufacturing, and IT with demonstrated skill gaps in opportunity jobs. CQEs have the potential to play a critical role in leveling the playing field for individuals with criminal records.

A substantial barrier in Cuyahoga County to filing a CQE petition is the filing fee of \$250. In 2015, Towards Employment conducted 6 CQE Clinics and completed 62 CQE petitions. Because of the filing fee, only 18 completed petitions were filed. The 18 individuals who filed represent those that were eligible for a poverty affidavit, thus waiving the \$250 filing fee.

We determined that until this steep fee was addressed, we could not continue to hold clinics to encourage our low-income clients from neighborhoods with higher rates of unemployment to apply for CQEs. We also determined that until this barrier to the process is addressed, continued outreach to employers is not helpful since filings tapered off so drastically in our county due to the court costs for CQEs.

This bill has an opportunity to widen the talent pool for employers and help otherwise qualified jobs seekers access employment opportunities. Addressing court filing fees will remove a substantial barrier for NE Ohio job seekers who desire to use CQEs to connect to growth industries.

University of Akron School of Law

The University of Akron School of Law has extensive experience with the CQE statute and its application process. Since June 2013, the law school has conducted free monthly clinics to prepare CQE applications and court sealing applications. Over 3,000 people have attended the monthly clinics in Akron, with the volunteers completing 637 CQE applications. In 2016, the clinic prepared and submitted 179 CQE petitions, most of them in Summit County, which continues to be one of the leaders in granting CQE petitions. To date, Summit

County judges have granted 142 CQEs. Only one other county in Ohio – Hamilton County – has granted as many CQE petitions (145). The success in both counties is attributable to the assistance CQE applicants receive in Summit County (University of Akron Law School) and Hamilton County (Ohio Justice and Policy Center).

House Bill 49 addresses issues that have arisen during the Akron clinics. The bill removes the current statutory requirement that CQE applicants list each collateral sanction that could possibly interfere with their employment aspirations. The bill allows applicants to make a general statement of why the individual has filed the petition and how the certificate would assist them in addition to information currently required in the CQE statute. The requirement of providing other information will not change, and includes conviction information, employment history, verifiable references and endorsements, family members supporting the reentry plan, and a summary of the reason the applicant believes the CQE should be granted. A judge considers all these factors and may request additional information if he or she believes it is needed. The budget bill addresses the need to provide relevant information to the courts while removing a highly technical endeavor that does not help courts decide whether to grant CQEs.

This small change would have huge impact for CQE applicants, their advocates, law students and volunteer attorneys, and others assisting them in the petition process by reducing the time it takes to complete a CQE application. The CQE application is sixteen pages long and is complicated. The most difficult part of the application process is identifying the appropriate collateral sanction and listing it in the petition. A court has already interpreted the inability to meet this technical requirement to disqualify an applicant. In a recent case from the 10th District Court of Appeals, *Tanskly v. O'Brien* 2016-Ohio-7068, the appellate court read the current requirements in the statute to require

the applicant to list a specific collateral sanction on his application and reversed the trial court's decision on that basis alone. Otherwise qualified applicants should not be denied a CQE because of a technical misstep that does not affect the substance of the petition. HB 49 makes an important change that will reflect the intent of the CQE.

The CQE amendments proposed in the budget will greatly expand access to the CQE process by making it available to more petitioners and streamlining the petition process. It will also allow the University of Akron Law School to continue its efforts to help people with the CQE process so they can be contributing members of their community.

Ohio Poverty Law Center

The Ohio Poverty Law Center (OPLC) advocates for evidence-based policies aimed at reducing poverty and increasing access to opportunities for low-income Ohioans. OPLC also assists and collaborates with the Ohio legal aid community as the legal aid support center for Ohio. The legal aid community provides direct legal assistance to Ohio's poorest citizens, those living at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level. Removing mandatory legal barriers to employment is critical to the livelihoods of clients who are unable to get work or licensing to improve their financial well-being.

Legal clinics sponsored by legal aid often depend on the support of volunteer attorneys, whose time and commitment are highly valued and greatly appreciated. CQE legal clinics sometimes end without volunteer attorneys, assistants, and clients being able to complete a petition due to the amount of time needed to identify each collateral consequence faced by a petitioner. By making the CQE process more streamlined, petitioners and their advocates will be able to complete and file successful petitions and use volunteer attorney time more efficiently. As a result, clients can

reenter the workforce, support their families, and take an imperative step toward escaping poverty.

Proposed Amendments

The three amendments proposed in this testimony will align language in HB 49 with definitions elsewhere in the Ohio Revised Code, expand CQE eligibility to more qualified individuals, and ensure that the CQE is accessible to low-income petitioners. A draft of sample language is attached to this testimony.

1. Definitions

The budget bill adds language to R.C. 2953.25(D)(2)-(3), which aligns the CQE with the Certificate of Achievement and Employability ("CAE"), an analogous certificate that individuals can petition for during their incarceration and serving the same purpose of removing employment and licensing barriers. R.C. 2961.21 provides the definitional language that applies to the terms used in the CAE statute, but does not currently apply to the CQE statute.

We recommend amending R.C. 2961.21, the CAE statute, so that the definitions in that statute apply to the changes made in HB 49. Without this amendment, the important changes in HB 49 may be ambiguous and misinterpreted.

2. Out-of-State and Federal Offenses

The University of Akron School of Law and OJPC have observed that many individuals seeking assistance with filing a CQE petition have out-of-state and federal convictions that are not covered under current law. Although these individuals would contribute to our economy and the needs of Ohio's employers, they cannot qualify for a CQE. Because a judge will be making the final determination on any CQE petition, it makes sense to offer this to people seeking work in Ohio regardless of where their prior offense arises.

3. Filing Fees

Filing fees can be a major barrier to filing a CQE petition. Legal aid attorneys, who often represent clients from 6-8 counties, have noted the wide range of filing fees for CQEs. The wide range in CQE filing fees results in unequal access to justice and the opportunity offered to people filing the same petition in other counties. For instance, filing for a CQE in Franklin County would cost a petitioner \$35, whereas filing in neighboring Madison County would cost a petitioner \$450. A filing fee cap and a requirement that courts accept a poverty

affidavit would further help the CQE to reach its full potential throughout Ohio. Data collected regarding the stated cost of filing for a CQE in each county is attached to this testimony to demonstrate the range of filing fees across the state. The table also provides information on the number of CQE approvals by county.

The Ohio Poverty Law Center, Ohio Justice and Policy Center, and University of Akron School of Law greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about his bill. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions that you have.



Janet Hales, Director

jhales@ohiopovertylaw.org

Patrick M. Higgins, Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation Justice for All Fellow

phiggins@ohiopovertylaw.org



Joann Sahl, Associate Clinical Professor of Law
Director, Reentry Clinic

Jasahl1@uakron.edu



Stephen JohnsonGrove, Senior Staff Attorney

sjohnsongrove@ohiojpc.org



Towards Employment

Bishara Addison, Senior Manager, Policy & Strategic Initiatives

baddison@towardsemployment.org

Suggested Amendment Language (highlighted & underlined)

I. Definitions:

- a. Revise R.C. 2961.21 Definitions regarding application for certificate of achievement and employability.
 - i. As used in Sections 2953.25 and 2961.21 to 2961.24 of the Revised Code:

II. Allow people with out-of-state and federal offenses to obtain CQEs:

- a. Sec. 2953.25(A)(6) [ln. 22654-22655] "Offense" means any felony or misdemeanor under the laws of this state, another state, or federal law.
- b. Sec. 2953.25(B)(2)(b) [ln. 22676-22684] In the case of an individual who resides outside of this state and has a conviction or plea of guilty under the law of this state, filing a petition with the court of common pleas of any county in which any conviction or plea of guilty from which the individual seeks relief was entered or with the designee of the deputy director of the division of parole and community services;
- c. Sec. 2953.25(B)(2) [insert after ln. 22684] (c) In the case of an individual who resides outside this state and has an offense under the law of another state or federal law, with the designee of the deputy director of the division of parole and community services.
- d. Sec. 2953.25(B)(5)(a) [ln. 22720-22731] A designee that receives a petition for a ~~certification~~ certificate of qualification for employment from an individual under division (B)(1) or (2) of this section shall review the petition to determine whether it is complete. If the petition is complete, the designee shall forward the petition, and any other information the designee possesses that relates to the petition, to the court of common pleas of the county in which the individual resides if the individual submitting the petition resides in this state, or if the individual resides outside of this state, to the court of common pleas of any county in which any conviction or plea of guilty from which the individual seeks relief was entered, or, If the individual resides outside the state and has been convicted of or pled guilty to an offense under the law of another state or federal law, to the court of common pleas of the county in which the individual chooses to file.
- e. Sec. 2953.25 (B)(5)(b) [ln. 22732-22745] A court of common pleas that receives a petition for a certificate of qualification for employment from

an individual under division (B) (2) of this section, or that is forwarded a petition for such a certificate under division (B) (5) (a) of this section, shall attempt to determine all other courts ~~in this state~~ in which the individual was convicted of or pleaded guilty to an offense other than the offense from which the individual is seeking relief. The court that receives or is forwarded the petition shall notify all other courts ~~in this state~~ that it determines under this division were courts in which the individual was convicted of or pleaded guilty to an offense other than the offense from which the individual is seeking relief that the individual has filed the petition and that the court may send comments regarding the possible issuance of the certificate.

**** (following portion of this subparagraph omitted for brevity) ****

III. Filing Fees

- a.** Set a cap of no more than \$100 on the CQE filing fee, and
- b.** Require courts to waive filing fees if applicants are indigent, as documented in a poverty affidavit.

Filing Fee Data

CQE FILING FEES BY COUNTY		
COUNTY	# CQE Approvals as of Feb. 23, 2017	CQE Filing Fee
ADAMS	0	\$275.00
ALLEN	1	\$100.00
ASHLAND	0	\$350.00
ASHTABULA	2	\$50.00
ATHENS	0	\$100.00
AUGLAIZE	0	\$250.00
BELMONT	0	\$150.00
BROWN	0	\$150.00
BUTLER	1	\$150.00
CARROLL	0	\$175.00
CHAMPAIGN	1	\$75.00
CLARK	1	\$105.00
CLERMONT	5	\$100.00
CLINTON	0	No fee established
COLUMBIANA	1	\$130.00
COSHOCTON	0	\$200.00
CRAWFORD	1	\$300.00
CUYAHOGA	120	\$250.00
DARKE	3	\$300.00
DEFIANCE	0	No fee established
DELAWARE	1	\$160.00
ERIE	1	\$100.00
FAIRFIELD	0	\$180.00
FAYETTE	0	\$150.00
FRANKLIN	29	\$35.00
FULTON	0	\$125.00
GALLIA	0	\$275.00
GEAUGA	0	\$250.00
GREENE	4	\$35.00
GUERNSEY	0	\$250.00
HAMILTON	145	\$150.00
HANCOCK	3	\$100.00
HARDIN	1	\$350.00
HARRISON	1	\$100.00
HENRY	0	\$150.00
HIGHLAND	0	\$50.00
HOCKING	1	\$100.00
HOLMES	2	\$150.00

HURON	1	\$0.00
JACKSON	0	\$175.00
JEFFERSON	1	\$125.00
KNOX	0	\$50.00
LAKE	11	\$100.00
LAWRENCE	0	\$200.00
LICKING	0	\$200.00
LOGAN	0	\$46.00
LORAIN	16	\$300.00
LUCAS	18	\$50.00
MADISON	0	\$450.00
MAHONING	17	\$225.00
MARION	7	\$190.00
MEDINA	3	\$350.00
MEIGS	0	\$100.00
MERCER	1	\$350.00
MIAMI	0	\$300.00
MONROE	0	\$150.00
MONTGOMERY	19	\$306.00
MORGAN	0	\$180.00
MORROW	0	\$400.00
MUSKINGUM	0	\$200.00
NOBLE	0	\$150.00
OTTAWA	0	\$28.00
PAULDING	0	\$50.00
PERRY	1	\$175.00
PICKAWAY	0	\$210.00
PIKE	0	\$50.00
PORTAGE	3	\$75.00
PREBLE	0	\$215.00
PUTNAM	0	\$50.00
RICHLAND	1	\$215.00
ROSS	0	\$350.00
SANDUSKY	1	\$100.00
SCIOTO	0	\$275.00
SENECA	1	\$350.00
SHELBY	0	\$100.00
STARK	35	\$100.00
SUMMIT	142	\$100.00
TRUMBULL	4	\$253.00
TUSCARAWAS	3	\$50.00

UNION	0	\$75.00
VAN WERT	0	\$90.00
VINTON	0	\$200.00
WARREN	2	\$50.00
WASHINGTON	0	\$300.00
WAYNE	0	\$50.00
WILLIAMS	0	\$125.00
WOOD	1	\$75.00
WYANDOT	0	\$300.00