



Ohio should provide documents necessary for life after imprisonment

Testimony on SB 198 before the Senate Small Business and Economic Opportunity Committee

Michael Shields

Good morning, Chair Lang, Vice-chair Wilkin, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the committee. My name is Michael Shields and I am an economist at Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization with the mission of creating a more prosperous, equitable, sustainable and inclusive Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Senate Bill 198 would provide Ohioans leaving prison with government ID and other documents they need to navigate post-prison life. It would require the Department of Rehabilitation & Correction to provide people with federal and state identification including a Social Security Card for those having a Social Security Number, and a state identification card or temporary identification card issued by the Registrar of Motor Vehicles. To help them obtain work, they would receive a resume, and copies of any work and vocational training records completed while incarcerated. They would also notification if they are eligible to obtain any state occupational license. Besides providing ID and other documents, the bill would ensure that Ohioans are given a practice job interview. Providing Ohioans with these documents and a mock interview is a meaningful step toward helping them to reenter the workforce as they return to their communities.

Finding a job is one of the most important steps in determining that a person will successfully adjust to life after leaving prison, and a protective factor against recidivism. Yet my research has shown that as of 2018, Ohio had some 850 laws and administrative rules that limit job opportunities for Ohioans with convictions who have already served their time. These rules restricted access to one in four Ohio jobs. Legislators have begun to take steps to mitigate the harm they have caused, and SB198 would be another step in the right direction.

Being locked out of legitimate work increases the likelihood that a person will commit another crime. Through interviews with people having a prior conviction, my research documented career hopes dashed by collateral sanctions. One man, Otis, could not become a nurse after a fistfight in his twenties resulted in an assault conviction; by the time I met him he was the custodial guardian of his grandchildren and at risk of losing his home. He had never committed another crime. Virgil, another person Policy Matters interviewed, was a community college student with plans to become a gym teacher when he was convicted of marijuana possession. Knowing that his conviction put his career plans out of reach, he never went back to school. Virgil believed that by limiting the opportunities open to him, his conviction changed the direction of his life. After release, he incurred a string of subsequent convictions, including for writing bad checks and other crimes associated with financial desperation. Their stories are documented in [my 2018 report on the harm done by Ohio's over-broad restrictions on job options after release](#).

The current scope of Ohio's so-called "collateral sanctions" is not known, because the Civil Impact of Criminal Convictions (CIVICC) database that once chronicled a comprehensive list of them is no longer funded and thus not being updated. What is known is that this problem has grown so severe that this legislature has taken steps to roll back workplace barriers it previously imposed in recognition that blocking formerly convicted people from finding work prevents successful reentry and puts communities at risk.

The 2020 Fresh Start Act (HB 263), revised occupational licensing procedures to bar license issuers from making blanket prohibitions on obtaining a license, such as excluding anyone with a felony conviction. They can still bar applicants

whose conviction was for a violent or sex crime. Otherwise, if they deny an applicant based on a conviction, they must show that the conviction is directly related to performance of the job. The Fresh Start Act marked important progress, because three quarters of Ohio's job-related collateral sanctions are related to occupational licenses: Some 630 rules or statutes as of 2018. SB 198 builds on that progress by informing Ohioans when they exit state prison of their qualification for an occupational license.

Besides occupational licenses, access to a driver's license can be critical to obtaining, performing and traveling to a job. My research identified 36 rules or statutes limiting Ohioans' ability to obtain a driver's license or register a car following a conviction. **I recommend amending SB198 to explicitly require that the form of state identification provided to Ohioans is a driver's license for those eligible.**

While SB 198 is intended to help Ohioans leaving prison to find employment, it will have other benefits as well. The identifying documents Ohioans will have upon prison release are also necessary for obtaining housing, opening a bank account, qualifying for credit and for any public benefits to which they are entitled.

I urge you to advance SB 198 out of committee and to pass it in a full vote of the legislature. Thank you.