

Heather Jarvis
Proponent Testimony
Senate Bill 198
February 26, 2024

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Wilkin, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Small Business and Economic Opportunity Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on Senate Bill 198.

My name is Heather Jarvis I was recently released from the Ohio Reformatory for Women after serving a ten-year prison sentence. I am testifying today to support Senate Bill 198 and advocate specifically for the language changes that would require government and/or nonprofit workforce development reentry organizations to assist in creating a resume and conducting a practice job interview.

While inside I completed a lot of different rehabilitation programs and workforce development. The programs that made the biggest impact on me were the ones that were facilitated by community-based organizations. Outside organizations were more knowledgeable on the topics, held active relationships in the community, and were also more passionate about the resources and assistance they were offering. The fact they took the time to come into the prison to help us created a different morale in the groups. Incarcerated people need to meet with people who are on the “outside” to help us with our reentry plans and to give us hope. I always left these groups feeling worthy, motivated, and educated. I felt like it was possible and I really could change the trajectory of my life. Unfortunately, groups facilitated by outside organizations were limited and inaccessible to most of the population due to long waitlists.

My experience while incarcerated is that the system is often understaffed and overburdened with duties. Tasking the Ohio Department of Corrections with coaching on resumes and mock interviews would be a further burden to their workload, and we need hands-on structure and support to make this type of preparation effective. Also, as correctional staff, they might not have the skills or networks to prepare returning citizens for employment and workplace interviewing. Outside organizations have a deeper understanding because serving these populations and linking people to employment is their primary goal. Also, outside organizations can offer linkage to reentry services and employment leads for individuals for when they are released, providing tangible relationships we can rely on.

I was lucky to be involved in a program called Embark that modeled what you are hoping to accomplish with the language of this bill. They helped support us with resume writing, preparation for employment, and linkages to employers that they have developed positive relationships with and are willing to hire us on release. However, of the 2,000+ women incarcerated at the Ohio Reformatory for Women only 18 individuals are served by this program a year.

My reason for being here and advocating is that I want wider access to these types of services for the general population. I was changed by the caring approach of the volunteers. In a way that I still carry with me today. I see this bill as an avenue to support that.

I have been out of prison since October 25th, 2023, and in these months I have utilized numerous things I learned. When asked in an interview about the gap in my work history, I was prepared and confident in my response. When asked to explain my felony, I had already thought through how to explain my mistakes in a way that led me to seem an asset and not a risk. I am in support of Senate Bill 198 and believe this bill could be a game changer in helping returning citizens secure employment and thus reducing recidivism in Ohio. Not only will it provide the tangible documentation needed for employment, but also the skills and support we need to confidently approach employers during the job search.

I strongly urge the committee to support Senate Bill 198 and support expanding the much-needed reentry support of all returning citizens in Ohio. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.