

Testimony in Support of House Bill 268 and Expanding Access to Certificates of Qualification for Employment (CQE)
Joseph Martinez

Chairperson, Vice Chair, Ranking Member, and members of the Ohio Senate,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of House Bill 268 and efforts to expand access to Certificates of Qualification for Employment. My name is Joseph Martinez, and I stand before you not just as a professional but as someone who represents what rehabilitation, recovery, and second chances can truly look like when given the opportunity.

For 16 years, I struggled with substance use and contributed to the very problems that our systems are working to address. In 2021, I made the decision to enter treatment. I completed multiple levels of care and began rebuilding my life. I chose to give back to the same community that helped save my life.

I became a Certified Peer Recovery Supporter and began working in a treatment center, supporting individuals battling addiction. I advanced my credentials, continued my education, and today I work as a counselor at Behavioral Concepts of Ohio, serving individuals and families impacted by mental health and substance use disorders. I am also currently a senior at Walden University pursuing my Bachelor of Social Work.

Despite my recovery, my service, and my professional growth, I encountered a major barrier. In 2024, I applied for my Chemical Dependency Counselor Assistant Preliminary certification and was denied due to a prior offense. I was advised to pursue a CQE, something I had never heard of before. I followed the process. I filed a petition. I went through the legal system. My request was denied. I then pursued expungement, which was ultimately granted, but only after navigating a complex, confusing, and discouraging system.

My story is not unique. Across Ohio, countless individuals have done the work to rehabilitate their lives, live ethically, and actively contribute to their communities, yet still face unnecessary barriers to employment. These barriers do not just impact individuals. They impact families, communities, and our workforce. House Bill 268 is a meaningful step forward. By allowing individuals to apply for a CQE one year after release, instead of requiring years of waiting, this

legislation removes unnecessary delays that can discourage progress and hinder reintegration. It aligns with the Certificate of Qualification for Housing program and recognizes that individuals who are working to rebuild their lives should have a fair opportunity to demonstrate their rehabilitation.

Barriers to employment increase the likelihood of recidivism and limit individuals' ability to contribute positively to society. When individuals are given reasonable opportunities, they do not just benefit themselves. They strengthen their communities, support their families, and help address critical workforce shortages, especially in fields like behavioral health. The CQE is designed to recognize rehabilitation and reduce barriers. House Bill 268 enhances that purpose by making the process more accessible while still maintaining judicial oversight and accountability.

I am living proof that people can change. More importantly, I represent many others across this state who are working every day to rebuild their lives and give back. This legislation is not just about me. It is about creating pathways for all individuals committed to rehabilitation and ready to contribute to their communities. I ask you to see individuals like me not for the worst thing we have done, but for the consistent, daily work we have put in to become who we are today. House Bill 268 gives people that chance. Not just to work, but to belong, to contribute, and to prove that rehabilitation is not just possible, it is powerful.

Thank you for your time and consideration.