



Towards Employment

Senate Bill 3: Proponent Testimony

From: Towards Employment

Delivered by: Bishara Addison, Senior Manager, Policy & Strategic Initiatives

May 26, 2020

Dear Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Bishara Addison and I live in Shaker Height's OH, represented by Representative Janine Boyd and Senator Sandra Williams. Please accept the following written testimony from Towards Employment, a workforce development agency in Cleveland OH, serving Cuyahoga County. In 2019, of the 429 individuals we placed in jobs, 422 had criminal records. We are submitting proponent testimony for SB3, which we believe has the potential to have a substantial positive impact on those with a criminal records as a barrier to employment.

As a workforce development agency that serves adults with criminal records, we know first-hand the barriers individuals face as they try and navigate the labor market. Year over year, we see a steady stream of individuals released from prison who come to Towards Employment for career services. According to a recent ODRC report, in Cuyahoga County, of the nearly 21,000 individuals released from State Prison each year, over 13% return to Cuyahoga County alone¹. Removing barriers to employment for those with criminal convictions is a key priority for our organization and is also critical for our community if we want to ensure that individuals who want to work are able, and employers who are looking to expand their talent pool with non-traditional candidates can. We remove barriers to employment by offering supportive services, referrals to community partners for non-employment related challenges, untangling un-addressed legal issues, career readiness and scholarships to technical training and connections to our employer partners who look beyond an individual's past to see their skills -- our goal is to always clear the path!

Senate Bill 3 has the potential to have a significant impact on those Towards Employment serves. Of our 422 reentry graduates last year that we placed in jobs, nearly a third had drug related offenses, mostly drug possession. According to a report from Policy Matters OH, there are 524 distinct laws – called collateral sanctions – that bar Ohioans from employment in a wide array of jobs based on a drug conviction. Of those, 56 percent apply only to felonies. Their research shows that jobs affected by collateral sanctions pay \$4,700 more on average, and are growing at twice the rate of other jobs².

We thank the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee's leadership for keeping this bill under consideration! Although SB 3 can remove barriers for many future TE participants, the most crucial element to ensuring that Senate Bill 3 has the biggest impact for Towards Employment current participants and graduates is for it to have retroactive application. This would allow for the reclassification of F4/F5 drug possession offenses (with a few key exceptions) not only to those who commit new offenses but also those that have already served their time but are still living with the impact of a felony conviction. Those are the

¹ <https://drc.ohio.gov/Portals/0/County%20Snapshots/2014%202015%202%20page%20county%20snapshots.pdf?ver=2017-05-30-151629-523>

² <https://www.policymattersohio.org/research-policy/fair-economy/work-wages/wasted-assets-the-cost-of-excluding-ohioans-with-a-record-from-work>



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individuals Towards Employment serves. This means that our participants who have already paid their debt to society would be in a better position to access employment in the growing industries in NE Ohio. As the bill stands, the participants we served in 2019 that have a felony drug conviction as a barrier to employment would not benefit from this legislation.

This kind of legislation is not unprecedented either. In May of 2019, Oklahoma's legislature, with bipartisan support, passed HB 1269, which applied the voter-approved sentencing reforms retroactively. Because HB 1269 is retroactive, it also provides the opportunity for 60,000 residents with simple drug possession felonies to have these felonies reclassified as misdemeanors.³

We strongly urge the Senate Judiciary Committee to support an amendment that has retroactive application so that individuals like our reentry graduates that we served last year with drug possession offenses benefit.

Thank you so much for your time in reading this testimony and we look forward to working with you all on positioning SB3 to have widest impact possible for those who are eager to participate in our labor market yet have a felony that prevents them from a living wage.

Best,

Bishara Addison
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³ <https://okpolicy.org/hb-1269-makes-780-retroactive-but-leaves-issues-unresolved/>