

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 581:

State Personnel – Applicants for Employment – Criminal History Records Checks

TO: Hon. Thomas Middleton, Chair, and members of the Senate Finance Committee
FROM: Melissa Broome, Senior Policy Advocate
DATE: February 25, 2010

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes improved economic opportunities for low-income workers, particularly job-seekers who are returning to society from prison. We support SB 581 as a means of encouraging gainful employment among individuals with criminal records.

Approximately 15,000 prisoners are released from incarceration each year. Many have little or no mainstream work experience, and most read at or below a third grade reading level when they entered prison. Without access to job opportunities, these Marylanders run a high risk of slipping through the cracks and returning to prison.

Many people with a criminal background apply for jobs for which they are well-qualified but do not have their applications even considered because of their past. SB 581 seeks to address this issue. If enacted, it would show that the State of Maryland is committed to encouraging all qualified applicants, including those with a prior criminal conviction history, to apply for state employment.

SB 581 would remove the question from state job applications that asks applicants to check a box if they have been convicted of a crime. The removal of this question from the application will enable applicants to get a foot in the door and prove their qualifications rather than be automatically dismissed because of a box they checked at the beginning of the process.

The bill in no way limits the State from conducting criminal background checks on applicants. It simply removes the question from the application so that background checks won't occur until after an applicant has been selected for an interview.

If the legislature chooses to enact SB 581, Maryland will join many other states and cities – including Baltimore City – in encouraging individuals with criminal records to apply for state employment. At present, Minnesota and Hawaii as well as Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco and St. Paul, among others, have similar policies in effect.

The fact that an applicant may have a criminal conviction history, standing alone, should not automatically disqualify a candidate if they are otherwise qualified for the job. Private employers are often asked to consider hiring ex-offenders; it is only appropriate that the State would set an example via its own efforts. For all of these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report of SB 581.