



Governor Signs Legislation to Aid Formerly Incarcerated ELECTION 2008: 50 DAYS LEFT TO REGISTER TO VOTE

In the last few weeks, Governor Paterson signed into law three bills passed by the Legislature that will help formerly incarcerated New Yorkers reintegrate back into society.

One piece of legislation eliminates the automatic disqualification of people with criminal records applying for state barber and cosmetology licenses. This barrier to employment had no relation to public safety. It was simply an arbitrary regulation that harmed both the applicant and the community. As an aside, this legislation ends the ridiculous “catch-22” situation where inmates, taught to barber in prison, are routinely denied licenses to barber once outside.

Another bill exempts non-violent drug offenders from being on parole when they are released from prison after meeting all terms and conditions of their sentence. Previously, these individuals were under the supervision of the Board of Parole. Not being on parole helps formerly incarcerated individuals both in a job search and in finding housing. The bill not only rewards people for good conduct, it allows them to register to vote in New York State since they are no longer either in prison or on parole.

A significant barrier to employment is the tendency for employers to conduct criminal background checks without the consent or knowledge of the job applicant. The result often is that qualified job candidates face unfair, discriminatory hiring practices in situations where their conviction has no connection or bearing on the job for which they applied. The governor has signed a bill that will make such discriminatory practices illegal.

Reentry Roundtable

These bills were part of the agenda of the legislative committee of the New York Reentry Roundtable. Since December 2005, the Community Service Society has been convening monthly meetings of the Reentry Roundtable. It serves as a forum to identify policies that would aid former inmates to successfully reenter society.

Earlier this year, the Roundtable held its second annual Reentry Advocacy Day in Albany to speak with legislators and staff about legislation that could aid formerly incarcerated New Yorkers and promotes their reentry into the workforce and their communities. More than 120 advocates, family members, and formerly incarcerated individuals participated in meetings with more than 30 legislators and staff.

Barriers to Employment

Removing barriers to employment is one of the Roundtable's primary legislative goals. Most people released from prison return to their home communities. With criminal records haunting their every move, they face immense hurdles trying to find a job. Without employment, without a steady income, many return to criminal activities to survive and end up back in prison.

The recidivism rate in New York State is nearly 60 percent within three years of release. There are more than 63,000 inmates in New York State prisons. Between 25,000 and 35,000 are released every year, most returning to a handful of New York City communities in high concentration. Recidivism has undermined the stability of families and communities as formerly incarcerated individuals' lack of economic opportunity undermines their reentry into society. The number of families affected illustrates a crisis that impacts every New Yorker, particularly residents of low-income communities.

Over the years, research by the Community Service Society has documented the large numbers of Black male New Yorkers who are jobless. Many are unaccounted for in the government's unemployment statistics because they have long ago given up trying to get a job.

An often overlooked factor for the low rate of jobholding for Black men is a high rate of incarceration. An estimated 16.6 percent of Black men nationally are current or former state or federal prisoners – a rate six times that of White men. The effect of a felony conviction on job prospects for Black men is disastrous. And it feeds into the racial discrimination that still exists in our society.

Research was conducted where Black men and White men – with equivalent resumes of education and experience - posed as applicants for entry-level jobs. The White men admitted to having a criminal record; the Blacks no record. The results: White men with criminal records had a better chance of getting a job offer or a callback after an initial interview than Black men without records. Black men with criminal records were only about one-third as likely to get a job offer as White men with criminal records.

Register to Vote

Many government programs could be affected by the outcome of the November election. Will you be voting on Election Day?

In order to vote in the city, you must be a U.S. citizen, a resident of New York City for at least 30 days, and 18 years of age before the election. But before you can vote, you must register. The general election this year is on November 4. In order to vote, you must be registered by October 10.

If you are not yet registered to vote, you can register in person at the Board of Elections in your borough. You can also register by mail. Call 212-868-3692 to get an application through the mail, or pick up an application at your local post office, public library, or motor vehicle office.

Once registered, you will receive a voter notification card that will indicate where your polling place is located.

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