Nearly 200 Groups Urge President Obama to Take Executive Action Adopting Fair-Chance Hiring Reforms for People with Records

Criminal Justice Reform Emerges as Leading Bipartisan and Economic Issue

Washington, D.C.—In a letter to be presented to the White House today, nearly 200 civil rights, faith-based organizing, criminal justice, and social justice reform groups are calling on President Obama to take immediate executive action to ensure that federal agencies and contractors remove unnecessary barriers to employment for qualified job candidates who have an arrest or conviction in their past.

“Now is the time to take executive action to open employment opportunities for the growing numbers of Americans who have been unfairly locked out of the job market because of a record,” urges the letter, which is part of an initiative organized by All of Us or None, a membership organization of the formerly incarcerated; the PICO National Network, the nation’s largest faith-based organizing network; and the National Employment Law Project (NELP), an advocacy group for low-wage workers and the unemployed.

The letter builds on growing bipartisan momentum around the country for fair-chance hiring reforms. Fourteen states, the District of Columbia, and 100 cities and counties have embraced so-called “ban the box” hiring policies, as documented in a recent NELP report (the “box” refers to the check-box that asks about conviction history on job applications). The initiative was endorsed in a recent New York Times editorial, which concluded, “These measures would bring the federal government much closer to becoming a ‘model employer.’”

In addition to presenting the letter today, representatives of NELP, PICO, All of Us or None, and the Southern Coalition for Social Justice will meet with White House and Labor Department officials to urge the President to use his executive authority to take immediate action to adopt fair-chance hiring policies. On Thursday, criminal justice reformers from around the country, including lawmakers, elected officials, academics, and advocates, will convene in the nation’s capital for the Bipartisan Summit on Criminal Justice Reform. The conference will feature a diverse slate of speakers, including Pastor Mike McBride, director of PICO’s LIVE FREE campaign to stop gun violence and mass incarceration of young people of color, and Georgia Republican Governor Nathan Deal, who recently signed an executive order applying ban-the-box to the state’s hiring process.

Among the early supporters of the initiative were the American Civil Liberties Union and The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights—two organizations with a deep commitment to criminal justice and racial justice issues.

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, stated, “Decades of over-criminalization have disproportionately harmed communities of color, leaving millions of Americans with lifelong barriers to economic security. In fact, a young Black man is more likely to be incarcerated than employed. A fair-chance hiring executive order would allow qualified, rehabilitated job-seekers with records a fair shot at federal jobs and the opportunity to contribute to our communities.”

Ruthie Epstein, legislative policy analyst with the American Civil Liberties Union, said, “Hiring practices that severely limit people with criminal records from consideration for employment make it that much harder for
them to get back on their feet, and often result in them entering a revolving door back into the criminal justice system. It’s time for the federal government to step up as a model employer by expanding access to federal jobs for qualified workers who have past arrests or convictions.”

Currently, 181 groups, representing a broad cross-section of organizations and individuals committed to fair hiring of people with arrest and conviction histories, have signed in support of the initiative and are urging immediate executive action. The signers include groups that represent formerly incarcerated people, multi-racial and multi-religious faith-based communities, the labor and business communities, and model reentry programs, as well as civil rights leaders, criminal and social justice reform experts, and leading activists and scholars.

Nearly one in three adults in the United States has a criminal record that will show up on a routine criminal background check, creating a serious employment barrier for communities of color hit hardest by decades of over-criminalization. A federal-level fair-chance hiring policy would have far-reaching impact, as nearly one in four U.S. workers is employed by a federal contractor, a subcontractor, or the federal government. Major national corporations, such as Walmart, Target, and Home Depot, have already adopted fair-chance hiring policies. President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Task Force also endorsed fair-chance hiring policies.

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