Grassroots & National Advocates Launch Initiative Calling on President Obama to Embrace Fair Chance Hiring Reforms

Over 100 Localities and States Pave the Way for Federal Action

New York, NY—Worker advocates, faith-based organizers, and the formerly incarcerated joined together today to launch an initiative urging President Obama to take executive action to ensure that employment opportunities with federal agencies and contractors are open to qualified job-seekers with arrests or convictions in their past. “Fair chance” hiring policies that reduce unfair hiring barriers against people with records and help employers tap into undiscovered talent have been adopted in more than 100 cities, counties, and states, paving the way for federal action.

The initiative is being jointly 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 with more than 1,000 religious congregations in 200 U.S. cities; and the National Employment Law Project, a research and advocacy group for low-wage and unemployed workers. The groups will partner on a series of activities and events over the coming months.

In a report released today, “Advancing a Federal Fair Chance Hiring Agenda,” the National Employment Law Project (NELP) makes the case for federal action that builds on the momentum in the 13 states, the District of Columbia, and the 96 cities and counties that have adopted “ban the box” and other fair chance hiring measures.

In support of the initiative, the three groups also released a sign-on letter for organizations around the country to urge President Obama to take immediate executive action. Early signers include the ACLU, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, actor/activist Danny Glover, Michael Hannigan, the president and co-founder of Give Something Back Office Supplies, JustLeadershipUSA, the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, and other notable individuals and organizations.

Almost one in three adults in the United States has a criminal record that will show up on a routine criminal background check, which creates a serious barrier to employment for communities of color hardest hit by decades of over-criminalization, according to NELP’s report. Nearly one in four U.S. workers is employed either by a federal contractor, a subcontractor, or the federal government. With the labor market now recovering, the federal government should waste no time in ensuring that job applicants with past convictions can fairly compete for jobs.

Dorsey Nunn, who has championed the rights of the formerly incarcerated as a founding member of All of Us or None, and serves as executive director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, stated: “What we are asking for comes down to the simple proposition that
formerly incarcerated citizens should be entitled to the same active participation in the government, including our taxpayer-funded jobs, that belongs to everyone else. We pay taxes, too. It’s part and parcel of the process of achieving the full restoration of our rights.”

Pastor Michael McBride, who leads the PICO National Network’s Live Free campaign, which is committed to addressing gun violence and mass incarceration of young people of color, believes that the current state of America’s economic and justice systems contributes to racial discrimination that further erodes the moral character of our nation. “‘Ban the Box’ measures are a step forward in fixing a justice system that is inefficient and ineffective and that leaves us unwilling and unable to see the humanity and value of black and brown lives,” said McBride. “How can a child, a man, or a woman seek opportunity, act on their potential, or be optimistic about their future, if they are not also free and safe to strive for a better tomorrow?”

“Nearly 50 years ago, Dr. King challenged our nation to recognize that ‘now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality,’” said Maurice Emsellem, director of NELP’s Access and Opportunity Program and co-author of the report. “Without opening up employment opportunities for the large numbers of Americans who have been unfairly locked out of the job market because of a conviction, the nation will never realize the promise of economic opportunity.”

The NELP report comes on the heels of the State of the Union address in which President Obama talked about restoring the link between hard work and opportunity for every American. The report details a specific agenda for reform by the Administration, which includes an Executive Order extending model fair chance hiring to private employers that contract with the federal government and a Presidential Memorandum directing federal agencies to close major gaps in the hiring process that undermine the efforts of qualified workers with a record to access federal jobs.

Elected officials across the political spectrum have embraced criminal justice reform and fair chance hiring measures specifically, mostly recently including ban-the-box legislation signed by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie that extends to private employers. In 2014, four states and 38 cities and counties (42 jurisdictions) enacted fair chance reforms—more than double the jurisdictions that did so in 2013.

Today, over 100 million people live in an area where fair chance hiring is in effect. Six states now extend their fair chance hiring reforms to private sector employers, and a growing number of major corporations, including Walmart, Target, and Home Depot—three of top five retailers in the nation—have adopted such policies as well. New campaigns are underway in key states, such as Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, and Washington, and in major cities, including Los Angeles, New York City, Portland, Dallas, and Orlando.

President’s Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Task Force also endorsed fair chance hiring. The task force report recommended “implement[ing] reforms to promote successful reentry, including hiring practices, such as ‘Ban the Box,’ which give applicants a fair chance and allow employers the opportunity to judge individual job applicants on their merits as they reenter the workforce.”

DOWNLOAD THE REPORT: Advancing a Federal Fair Chance Hiring Agenda: Background Check Reforms in Over 100 Cities, Counties & States Pave the Way for Presidential Action

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