

Event educates locals about the Ohio Fair Hiring Act



Anna Jeffries, Reporter

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(Photo: Anna Jeffries/The Advocate)

GRANVILLE – Billie Bibow has been applying for jobs for eight years and has never gotten an interview.

She's been forced to take odd jobs — including spinning a sign on the side of the road for \$5 an hour — to support her son.

Bibow grew up working on cars and would love to become a mechanic. But every time she fills out a job application, she has to check the box admitting she has a criminal record.

The choices she made when she was a teenager resulted in several felonies, which have kept her from finding steady employment.

So when she found out the Newark Think Tank on Poverty was planning a luncheon Thursday, bringing county leaders and employees together to talk about House Bill 56 — also known as the Ohio Fair Hiring Act — she knew she wanted to be part of the conversation.

If passed, the bill would limit the use of criminal records for hiring in the public sector. Employers will still run a criminal background check, but not until after the applicant has passed the civil service exam, interviewed and has been given a job offer.

Employers can still reject applicants, but they must explain why their criminal record is relevant to the job, said Stephen JohnsonGrove, deputy director and attorney at the Ohio Justice and Policy Center.

"There are 1 in 6 people in Ohio with misdemeanors or felony records," he said. "That's a lot of our neighbors. We are shooting ourselves in the foot if we keep them perpetually unemployed."

At Thursday's event at Denison University, Bibow said she hoped the measure is passed.

"I hope the public sector falls in and then private employers fall in step so we can put people back to work and give them hope," she said.

When the Newark Think Tank started asking people what the top obstacles were for people trying to get out of poverty, one of the top issues was discrimination against people with felony records, said Lesha Farias, one of the group's organizers.

They decided to bring together local employers, including representatives from Denison University and Licking Memorial Hospital; officials from social service agencies; politicians, including Rep. Scott Ryan; and representatives from the court system to educate them about House Bill 56, she said.

With concerns about overcrowding in jails and prisons, the bill offers one way to keep people from reoffending and getting back into the system, said Allen Schwartz, a Think Tank organizer.

Not all felony records are the same, and a person with a drug conviction from 10 years ago should not be treated the same as someone who just committed an aggravated robbery, JohnsonGrove said, especially if they are the best candidate for a job.

House Bill 56 will give people with criminal records who want to work the chance to talk to employers face-to-face and show how they've turned their lives around.

"Many employees use criminal background checks, and if they see a felony, it's game over," he said. "With this law, they would take a deeper look at an individual's qualifications. It gives them a fair shot. Instead of just a piece of paper, you are a person."

Ten Ohio cities and counties have implemented the fair hiring policies outlined in House Bill 56. After listening to Thursday's discussion, Newark City Councilman Jeremy Blake said he wants to try to make Newark the eleventh.

Blake said he plans to take a proposal to the council in the next few weeks to have the city's employment application changed to move the criminal background check until later in the process.

"If the city does it at the local level, maybe other big employers can voluntarily do it," he said. "Maybe (the city) can be an example."

One of the panelists, Mary Sutton, said she knows there are other people like her out there who just want to work.

Although she was convicted of a drug-related felony, she got her GED certificate and started taking classes at Central Ohio Technical College after she was released from prison.

She was struggling to pay her bills until Denison University took a chance on her and gave her a job interview, ultimately offering her a position.

"I am proof that it works," Sutton said "Now I can write my own rent check, which is pretty cool."

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