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Newark poised to join entities dropping 'felon' box

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By [Eric Lyttle](#)

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NEWARK, Ohio — The man identified himself only as No. 373882.

He said it was his former prison identification number and was, in reality, the only identification the city of Newark, and most of the rest of the world, really cared about when it came to finding a job.

A box, near the top of most employment applications, asks, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Checking the box, many feel, is a sure path to the employment-prospect discard pile.

Former Inmate 373882 called it "a second punishment by way of sanctions and restrictions."

"Once released from jail, prison or probation, you're faced with the stigma of being classified as a felon, a law-breaker," he told a Newark City Council committee, "which promotes not being viewed as trustworthy in the eyes of the community and places a mark on a guy like me applying for a city job."

The former inmate was one of 10 people who addressed the council's personnel committee on June 29, imploring the city to remove that particular box from its job applications.

Newark appears to be the latest in a growing number of public and private employers who agree with former inmate No. 373882 and are joining a national movement dubbed Ban the Box.

"We're hoping that Newark can be a part of the momentum," said Councilman Jeremy Blake, who introduced the proposal, which is expected to pass a full council vote on July 20.

That momentum includes Gov. John Kasich's executive order, which took effect last month, to remove any questions pertaining to criminal records from all applications for state agency jobs.

Ohio became the 17th state to do so (and Oregon has since instituted a similar policy to become the 18th state to ban the box).

Blake says the movement should more accurately be called Delay the Box because it doesn't prohibit background checks; it only delays them until an applicant is actually being considered for a position.

"Taking this box off of this application is giving us the chance to sit in front of an employer and tell our story, not the story that society has already put upon us, to show who we've become and to show what we can do," Tina Cole told Newark's council committee. She served six years in the Ohio Reformatory for Women on three drug charges before her release in October 2014.

Other cities, including Akron, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton and Youngstown, have removed the prior-convictions box in recent years.

Columbus removed any questions about criminal records from its applications years ago, before the Ban the Box movement, said city spokeswoman Tyneisha Harden. Applicants for police and fire positions are exceptions, Harden said, because federal law prohibits ex-felons from carrying firearms.

years

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Franklin, Cuyahoga, Hamilton, Lucas, Stark and Summit counties also have scrubbed their applications of questions about criminal records. Commissioner Marilyn Brown led the Franklin County effort, which removed the question from county applications in June 2012, becoming among the first in Ohio to do so.

“These people run their sentence, serve their time. We let them out and tell them not to come back and then block every attempt for them to get jobs,” Brown said. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

Additionally, House Bill 56, the Ohio Fair Hiring Act, introduced in February, passed unanimously out of the Commerce and Labor Committee on June 24 and moves on to consideration of the full House.

It would prohibit all local government employers from including questions about an applicant’s criminal background on any applications. It would not apply to any private employers.

According to the Ohio Justice and Policy Center, a nonprofit law and advocacy group, 1.9 million Ohioans — or 1 in 6 — have a misdemeanor or a felony record. And more than 25,000 are released from Ohio prisons each year.

Many of those being released did work in prison to help them become more prepared to contribute to society.

“I don’t know how many of you have visited an Ohio prison, but good things happen in prison,” former inmate Cole told Newark’s council committee.

“Inmates make and serve 9,000 meals a day in the women’s prison. Inmates clean the dorms. The inmates are teachers and tutors. They do all of the lawn care and plant all of the flowers.

“If you want to lay around and watch soaps all day and eat ramen noodles, you absolutely can do that,” Cole said. “But a lot of us don’t.

“A lot of us get up at 6 a.m., have our beds and our areas ready at 7 a.m. and are at our job by 7:30 a.m., and we work

40-hour weeks for \$18 to \$22 a month. That’s our state pay. But we still get up, and we do it every day because we want to change our lives. We don’t want to be the same person that we used to be.”

“We want people to be reformed,” said Franklin County Commissioner Brown. “But the box is a barrier. What else are they going to do when they get out and they can’t get a job?

“I can sell this on so many levels. It keeps our communities safer. It’s economically sustainable. We don’t want people getting out of prison and then immediately needing our social safety nets. I don’t want to pay your benefits. I want you to be a tax-paying citizen. And that’s often what they want, too. It’s the right thing to do.”

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