

# Newark to vote Monday on giving inmates second chance

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(Photo: Sara C. Tobias/The Advocate)

NEWARK – When Tina Cole talks about her past, she finds honesty is the best policy.

Cole recently moved into her own apartment with her two children — the first place she has paid rent for on her own since she left prison in October. She served six years for selling drugs, a fact she did not hide from her landlord.

“I was a horrible person, but I changed,” Cole said. “I came out a totally different person than when I went in.”

Like finding an apartment, Cole said, the biggest challenge to finding a job for former inmates is a criminal record. Because there is a box to check indicating whether a job applicant has a criminal history, too many former inmates never get a chance to tell their story.

Former inmates will still have to survive background checks, but Cole hopes removing the box would get them in the door to be able to explain what their crime was and how they’ve recovered from it.

On Monday night, the Newark City Council will vote on legislation to remove the checkbox indicating a criminal record from job applications within the city. This initiative has already been adopted by Ohio state governmental agencies.

The Newark Think Tank on Poverty has championed this cause in Newark, and Denison University and Licking Memorial Hospital have pledged their support of the initiative. In a personnel committee meeting on June 29, Newark Service Director David Rhodes said the city was “very supportive” of the initiative.

“It’s going to open the doors for so many good people to go out there and get good-paying jobs,” Cole said.

Cole argues that inmates are primed for the working world when they leave prison.

Inmates work regular hours, 40 or more per week, and they run the prison, she said. From preparing meals to janitorial duties, everything inside the prison is done by inmates.

It’s the discipline that got her back on track. She said it might be harder for addicts to change their ways behind bars, but for Cole, she’s glad to be rid of her involvement in Mexican drug cartels, selling methamphetamines, cocaine and marijuana.

“It was pretty scary stuff, and I got out of it,” Cole said. “If I could get out of everything I got out of, anybody can do it.”

When Cole left prison, she moved into her mother’s house, where her two teenage kids had stayed while she was in prison. She divorced, she changed her name, and she set out to rebuild her life with only two pairs of sunglasses to her name.

“I was very lucky because I was hired by Kindway before I even left prison,” she said.

Cole makes clay jewelry for Kindway and also works part time at the Sparta.

“It’s paycheck to paycheck, but everything is paid,” she said.

Cole now works about 60 hours a week, juggling her two part-time jobs, and she said she has been very grateful for the support she has had along the way.

Cole said she will definitely be at the city council meeting Monday to see whether the legislation passes.

“I think it’s very important because society put a stigma on convicted felons, that they’re horrible people,” Cole said. “But taking this box off that application gives us a chance to go and tell our story. It’s our chance to say: ‘Hey, yeah, I did that. But I went to prison and I came home a better person.’”

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