

# People with felony records struggle to find work

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(Photo: Sara C. Tobias/The Advocate)

Tina Blay has a similar thought each time she fills out a job application: What's the point?

Blay, 33, has a felony conviction on her record. If she could explain in-person what happened, she thinks employers would be more apt to give her a chance, she said. As is, she gets to the bottom of the application, and there it is: "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Blay is required to check yes, and from there, she might as well toss her application in the trash, she said.

"I feel pretty much doomed before I fill it out," she said. "If you look up my felony right now, it looks like I was in the house, holding a gun to someone's head, and I wasn't even on the property."

Nationwide, there's a movement called Ban the Box, a group of activists hoping to knock criminal history questions off job applications.

In Ohio, House Bill 56 — also known as the Ohio Fair Hiring Act — would limit the use of criminal records for hiring in the public sector. Employers would still run background checks, but they would wait until applicants had already gone through the interview process. That way, according to the bill's supporters, someone who might be a great candidate won't get overlooked because of a past conviction, even if the conviction has no relevance to the job.

House Bill 56 is in the House's Commerce and Labor committee. It would not affect private employers.

Blay finally found a job a few weeks ago, but it's janitorial work for only 10 hours a week, she said — not nearly enough when she and her fiancé have five children among them.

"We're struggling pretty badly here," she said. "It's been an ongoing struggle for two years now. ... I hate asking for help all the time, but in the last two months, I've had to call churches and ask for help with food and the rent."

## A fair shake

Ohio prisons have long faced overcrowding, with officials pushing for alternatives to prison sentences, particularly for low-level drug offenders. The problem is, options are few for people getting out of prison, leaving them with little recourse but to reoffend and get tossed right back in, said Leshia Farias, a local anti-poverty activist.

The offenders served their time and were released, but the punishment continues because no one wants to hire someone with a record, Farias said.

"It precludes people from ever getting an interview," she said. "And it's incredibly discouraging."

Farias is part of the Newark Think Tank, a nondenominational group searching for solutions for people struggling with poverty. One of the Think Tank's missions is Ban the Box because if people had better luck getting jobs, some of their other issues might dissipate as well, Farias said.

Farias has heard stories from some in the Think Tank who have nothing to do after meetings but wander around or hope a friend will take them in for a few hours. People accuse them of being "lazy, shiftless, no good — but when we get below the surface, there's nothing farther from the truth," Farias said.

"It just made me realize the difference in lifestyle between those of us in the middle class and those who have been thrown away in our society and just have nothing. And there's no way for them to get anything because we've labeled them."

## Pressing on

There was a defining moment that set 58-year-old Donald Lee on the path toward recovery. He had just gotten out of prison and was at a court hearing when the judge looked at him and said, "You have to decide, Mr. Lee, what you love more: your drugs or your kids."

Lee chose his children — first, because he truly loves them more than anything, he said, and second, just to prove the judge wrong.

"I didn't get clean till I was 47," he said. "That was my start: March 22, 2003."

Lee grew up in Newark and has been here most of his life. His convictions are all centered around addiction, but he earned his GED certificate in prison, and now, he's studying chemical dependency at Ohio Christian University, hoping to use his past struggles to benefit others as a counselor.

Lee also heads up a subcommittee at the Think Tank dedicated to helping people transition from prison to society. The group does some lobbying — members recently traveled to Columbus for a fair hiring rally — but it's more about supporting each other and offering tips of where and how to job hunt with a felony record, Lee said.

“The message is always, if you've been convicted of a felony, they won't hire you. That's pretty much a fact,” he said. “If you've been convicted, it's going to be tough to get a job. But we know tough doesn't mean impossible.”

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### **Looking for work?**

If you're hunting for work with a felony conviction, the Newark Think Tanks has a few suggestions:

- Network: Ask your friends who are working if they can find you a spot somewhere.
- When you go for an interview, be prepared to educate the employer about government programs that offer tax breaks for hiring someone with a conviction. Bring paperwork on the programs to show the interviewer if you can.
- Partner with a program specifically geared toward helping people with convictions find jobs.

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