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Proponents Suggest Tweaks For Inmate ID Card Bill

A plan to ensure former prisoners have documents needed to enter the workforce could be improved with a few minor changes, a handful of proponents told a Senate panel Tuesday.

Under the proposal ([SB 198](#)), which received its second hearing in the [Senate Small Business & Economic Opportunity](#) Committee, the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections would be required to submit applications for state identification cards for individuals who would otherwise exit its facilities without them.

The agency also would be required to help departing inmates in their efforts to collect other documents needed for employment, as well as with job interview skills and resumes.

Heather Jarvis, who was recently released from the Ohio Reformatory for Women after serving a 10-year sentence, said the legislation "could be a game changer" for former inmates.

She questioned, however, whether language requiring ODRC to assist with interviews and other job skills should be broadened to allow outside entities to meet those mandates.

"Tasking the Ohio Department of Corrections with coaching on resumes and mock interviews would be a further burden to their workload, and we need hands-on structure and support to make this type of preparation effective," she said. "Also, as correctional staff, they might not have the skills or networks to prepare returning citizens for employment and workplace interviewing. Outside organizations have a deeper understanding because serving these populations and linking people to employment is their primary goal."

[Sen. Al Landis](#) (R-Dover) asked about the current demand for job-related training in state prisons.

Jarvis said inmates can wait six months to three years to receive certain career-preparation services.

Wendy Tarr, executive director of reentry non-profit Accompanying Returning Citizens with Hope, said the legislation could serve to "strengthen our communities by reducing recidivism and promoting successful reentry into society."

Tarr called on lawmakers to tweak the bill to also require DRC to provide former inmates with their educational and programming reports upon release, as well as documentation of their certificates of achievement for employability and qualification for employment, if applicable.

Gary Daniels, chief lobbyist for the ACLU of Ohio, said the group is "deeply supportive" of the legislation but believes some questions must be addressed before it can reach its "full potential."

"First, with so many people constantly exiting and entering Ohio's prisons, any combination of factors could render SB198 much less effective than intended," he said. "Will SB 198 overburden prison staff, especially with so many current, but unfilled, jobs in our system? Will prison staff be experienced, and properly trained, to lend needed assistance with resume writing and job interview skills for, and specific to, (soon to be) formerly incarcerated people?"

Chair [Sen. George Lang](#) (R-West Chester Twp.), the top sponsor of SB198 with [Sen. Nathan Manning](#) (R-N. Ridgeville), asked how the bill could potentially affect recidivism rates among former inmates.

Daniels said the legislation could allow people to "hit the ground running" after exiting prison. He said even minor hurdles, like the lack of an identification card, can occasionally trip up individuals hoping to move past their prior offenses.

Will Kuehnle, associate director with the Catholic Conference of Ohio, said the legislation would help ensure the state's criminal justice system serves "its restorative purpose."

"Providing applications for identification cards, copies of training records, a birth certificate, and other documents that assist a returning citizen in obtaining employment will yield manifold benefits, both for those involved in the justice system and beyond," he said. "The individual benefits from the dignity and ennobling effects of a job, decreasing the likelihood of recidivism."

Kevin Werner, policy director at Ohio Justice and Policy Center, called the bill "precisely the type of intelligent reform that Ohio needs as our state marches on toward being the most business-friendly state in the nation."

"This legislation recognizes that the workforce of tomorrow includes that person who made a mistake, but who has turned the corner and is eager to join the workforce, contribute to the economy and provide for herself and her family," he said.

Michael Shields, an economist with Policy Matters Ohio, called the bill's ID and mock interview requirements for inmates "a meaningful step toward helping them to reenter the workforce" in written testimony.

Lang said he believes this is the first time in his legislative career that the left-leaning PMO has supported one of his bills, jokingly referring to it as a "monumental event."

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