



April 12, 2009

## It's time to revamp city's hiring policy

Dear Mayor and City Council,

The Ohio Justice & Policy Center (OJPC) is publicly calling for the City of Cincinnati to end its blanket policy of denying employment to otherwise qualified applicants with felony convictions.

The city currently shuts out even the most qualified job applicants if they have a criminal record - no matter how old or irrelevant that record is. Yet people with records are often (though certainly not exclusively) concentrated in our lowest-income neighborhoods. These citizens have extremely limited opportunities even if they have excellent credentials.

Without meaningful jobs, re-offending and all the community effects of that re-offending are more likely. And because these people have been consigned to virtual unemployability, they (and often their families) are more likely to become a further drain on social services.

A revamped and responsible city hiring policy will significantly impact that destructive pattern. At least 14 cities and counties around the country - including Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., and Chicago - have refined their hiring policies to allow for individualized consideration of each job applicant. OJPC is eager to help the city craft a similar policy that can distinguish criminal records that are old or irrelevant from those that are salient.

In addition to responsibly opening the doors to city employment, the city's leadership will create a positive ripple effect among other employers across the region.

OJPC client Gene Mays was denied employment as an electrician with the city because of two felony drug convictions. He had been a star student in a Cincinnati high school - both in the classroom and on the basketball court. Ranked No. 1 in his class, Mays was kicked off the basketball team during his senior year for using marijuana. His life then spiraled out of control. After graduation, Mays began selling drugs to support his habit, earning him a stint in the Ohio prison system.

But after hitting bottom in October 1997, Mays turned his life around with help from Narcotics Anonymous. Since then, he has been drug- and alcohol-free. In 2001, Mays enrolled in a five-year electrician training program. He graduated No. 1 in his class.

In 2006, Mays took and passed the City of Cincinnati's Civil Service exam but was later denied a position with the Metropolitan Sewer District based solely on his felony record. OJPC is handling Mays' appeal.

What is clear from this story is that it is not only Mays who would be better off if he were employed by the city. The city would have an exceptional employee. And the broader community would be better off if people like Mays were in stable, good-paying jobs and paying taxes. There simply is no downside to making the hiring policy more intelligent.

Given our region's desperate need for smart-on-crime solutions that save resources, the positive public-safety and economic effects of this kind of hiring policy change cannot wait.

We stand at the ready to assist in any way we can.

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