



As Washington state looks to remove institutions that disproportionately harm minorities and immigrants, legislators should remove occupational license barriers for those who have served their time and are looking to get a job.

The impact of occupational licenses on low-income workers and immigrants has long been recognized. As the Obama Administration reported in 2015, “Lower-income workers are less likely to be able to afford the tuition and lost wages associated with licensing’s educational requirements, closing the door to many licensed jobs for them.”¹ They went on to note that, “Immigrants must often complete duplicative and costly requirements in order to acquire a U.S. license in their chosen career.”

In Washington state, there is an additional burden on those who have finished serving time for a criminal conviction.

Currently, many occupational licenses prevent people with criminal records from being licensed, even in areas unrelated to their conviction. Removing licensing restrictions for jobs unrelated to their conviction would reduce recidivism and provide an opportunity to become self-sufficient.

Research from Arizona State University found, “Successful entry into the labor force has been shown to greatly increase the chances that a prisoner will not recidivate. Yet government-imposed barriers to reintegration into the labor force – particularly occupational licensing requirements – can be among the most pernicious barriers faced by ex-prisoners seeking to enter the workforce.”²

Other states, including Illinois and Tennessee have already taken this step. Tennessee recently passed legislation noting that the state “...shall not deny an application for a license, certificate, or registration, or refuse to renew a license, certificate, or registration, solely or in part due to a prior criminal conviction that does not directly relate to the applicable occupation, profession, business, or trade.”³

Legislation to reduce these barriers was adopted unanimously by the State House last year.⁴ In the next legislative session, the State Senate should follow suit, with one additional clarification that aligns this effort with the protections established under the certificate of restoration of opportunity.

¹ “Occupational Licensing: A framework for policymakers,” The White House, prepared by the Department of the Treasury Office of Economic Policy, the Council of Economic Advisors, and the U.S. Department of Labor, July 2015, at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/licensing_report_final_nonembargo.pdf.

² “Turning shackles into bootstraps: Why occupational licensing reform is the missing piece of criminal justice reform,” Policy Report, No. 2016-01, Center for the Study of Economic Liberty at Arizona State University, by Stephen Slivinski, November 7, 2016, at <https://research.wpcarey.asu.edu/economic-liberty/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CSEL-Policy-Report-2016-01-Turning-Shackles-into-Bootstraps.pdf>.

³ “Senate Bill 2465,” State of Tennessee, at <http://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/110/Bill/SB2465.pdf>.

⁴ “HB 2356 – 2019-20, Reducing barriers to professional licensure for individuals with previous criminal convictions,” State of Washington, <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=2356&Year=2019>.

The Washington Policy Center and Columbia Legal Services are pleased to join in support of these changes that will give people in our community a chance to make their lives better and become self-sufficient.

Sincerely,

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