

February 20, 2012

Testimony of Midge Purcell, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy, Urban League of Portland on SB 1548

I am Midge Purcell, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for the Urban League of Portland and I am here to speak in support of the Fair Employment Opportunity Act, SB 1548.

It's a bill that would prohibit employers from explicitly stating in job ads that the unemployed need not apply. We all know what the jobless rate in Oregon is and that 4 out of 10 Oregonians experience long term or multiple cycles of unemployment. We believe that this is yet another barrier to unemployed Oregonians desperate to get back to work. And that it should be removed.

We have been asked whether the practice actually exists and unfortunately it does. A recent informal sampling of online job postings conducted by the National Employment Law Project shows that the practice of excluding unemployed job seekers persists; such ads were found on CareerBuilder.com, Indeed.com, Monster.com, and Craigslist. Staffing firms accounted for about half of all the postings that used discriminatory language in the NELP survey. And my own perusal of job listings found similar "must be currently employed" language on our very own Worksource Oregon jobs listing site.

All Oregonians who are currently unemployed will benefit from SB 1548. In particular, women who are trying to re-enter the workforce after raising children or caring for family members face particular barriers. Also, workers from communities of color and rural areas who tend to face higher levels and longer periods of unemployment.

The Urban League is supporting this bill because we want to see all Oregonians with a fair chance to get back to work. Our constituents, the African American community continue to experience higher unemployment rates than the general population and are more likely to experience multiple spells of unemployment over the course of his or her working years. This is true across all educational backgrounds.

This is just a small step. Eliminating disparities in employment is the most direct way to address Oregon's rising poverty rates, falling median household income, the growing number of foreclosures and the multitude of poverty-related conditions that have a high cost to society.

Where disparities in employment persist, we would like to see it addressed a multiple levels; removal of barriers to entering the workforce; but also the creation of job training opportunities, access to living wage jobs and a commitment to creating and sustaining a healthy, diverse workforce.

This bill is modest. It will not prohibit employers from taking relevant experience into account and choosing the best candidate for the job. Instead, it creates a common-sense provision and sends a crucial signal to long-term unemployed workers that Oregon will help them get back to work. It will help employers to adhere to best practice.

We urge you to support this bill.