

From the desk of Rep Challegos



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rep Challegos".

**Support House Bill 3025**

**Ban the Box: End Felony-Screening in Employment Applications**

We write to support House Bill 3025, which will ban felony screening questions on employment applications. We offer a unique perspective on the importance and value of this bill. We are social workers and addiction counselors who work to help individuals build new lives from the ashes of addiction and criminality; as such, we witness first-hand our clients' struggles to gain employment as a foundation for a new way of life. We are also people who are in Recovery. We ourselves have overcome pasts of addiction and criminality, in doing so facing the exclusion and stigma of barriers such as felony screening questions on employment applications. Our combination of life experiences grant us a profound understanding of the challenges facing felony-convicted people who are trying to build new, pro-social, lives, and on this basis we support HB 3025.

In our professional and personal experiences we have observed a vicious cycle, which entraps individuals in the addicted/criminal lifestyle. Offered a second chance via referral to addiction treatment, many individuals embrace the challenge to recreate every aspect of their lives – their routines, friends, family relationships, attitudes, beliefs, and habits. The capstone of these transformations is achieving legitimate employment. Yet, as these individuals reach out to employers they find their options for legitimate work are heavily restricted by virtue of a simple check box on application forms and websites. Faced with stigma and judgment from employers, denied by the "box" the chance to tell their story and make their case, it is no surprise that for many, recidivism becomes inevitable. We further note that, given the racial disparities evident in the criminal justice system, people of color are especially oppressed by felony screening. Oregon needs to move beyond such discriminatory practices and HB 3025 will help to achieve that.

The systems that addicted/criminalized people are subject to make it very difficult for them to get back on their feet; felony screening just deepens this vicious cycle of despair. HB 3025 will help open doors for people who want to change their lives, who want to make amends for the poor choices they have made in the past. It will not instantaneously make potential employers more understanding, but it *will* create opportunities for conversations, explanations, and sincere discussion of individuals' – often inspiring – journeys and evolutions: the proverbial and essential foot in the door. It is worth considering that, to the best of our knowledge as addiction treatment professionals who work with the criminal justice population, there is no evidence that screening for felony convictions actually protects employers from negative outcomes. On the contrary, in our experience employers who make the step of becoming felony-friendly are often won over by employees who are determined, grateful, talented, and dedicated.

As professionals with criminal backgrounds, we continue to face discrimination in professional, academic, and personal domains. A felony conviction, even decades old, can still be invoked in a range of circumstances as an occasion for suspicion, interrogation, and accusation. There is no justice in forcing people who have radically changed their lives, and in our cases dedicated themselves to helping others do the same, to be forced to relive humiliation and judgment for a lifestyle long ago transformed. In this sense a felony is a kind of life sentence, one that lacks any justice. HB 3025 would help ameliorate this.

We believe that as addiction treatment professionals we cannot truly serve our clients or help them to transform their lives if we do not speak out against felony-screening practices that feed the vicious cycle of criminal relapse. HB 3025 is an important first step toward making good on the often hollow promise of a second chance for felony-convicted Oregonians, people who are profoundly disenfranchised, yet who can offer a unique and vital contribution if given a fair chance.

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