



Legislation Text

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Introductory*

City of Baltimore Council Bill R (Resolution)

Introduced by: Councilmember Stokes

A Resolution Entitled

A Council Resolution concerning Request for State Action - Ban the Box for College Applications

For the purpose of calling on the State of Maryland to take all necessary steps to eliminate questions about criminal background from Maryland college applications to ensure that all Marylanders get a fair chance at improving themselves and their communities by pursuing a college education.

Recitals

Baltimore has been a leader in efforts to ensure that returning ex-offenders are given a fair chance to find jobs by banning the practice of screening out all individuals with criminal histories in the early stages of job applications. These efforts have given countless ex-offenders a real chance to turn their lives around through gainful employment.

Unfortunately, ex-offenders seeking to improve their lives by pursuing higher education all too frequently still face the same kinds of stigmatizing questions on their college applications that are now banned from employment applications. In fact, a recent study found that nearly half of all Maryland colleges asked applicants to disclose their criminal history, and most schools requesting this information have been found to funnel those who check “yes” for questions asking about criminal history into alternate admissions processes with more arduous requirements.

Merely asking these questions, and making applicants aware of the difficulties they’ll face in navigating the specific requirements imposed on would-be students with criminal histories, is a significant deterrent to even attempting to enter college. Studies indicate that as many as two-thirds of applicants who check “yes” for questions asking about criminal history fail to complete their applications.

Preventing otherwise qualified people from pursuing higher education merely because of past circumstances that they have already paid their debts to society for serves no legitimate purpose, undermines public safety, and has disproportionately negative impacts on some of our most disadvantaged communities. Studies that have looked into crimes on campus have not shown any correlation between campus crime and policies designed to screen out those with criminal histories, but studies have shown that post-secondary education significantly reduces recidivism amongst ex-offenders by helping them to break out of the cycles of hopelessness and limited opportunity that breed criminal activity.

Further, the unacceptable reality that structural problems in our society leave individuals from predominately minority or low-income communities overrepresented amongst ex-offenders, and underrepresented on college campuses, means that these policies further disadvantage precisely the people and communities that could benefit the most from the opportunities that a college education can provide.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance seeking to discourage the use of criminal record screening questions. At that time, then U.S. Education Secretary John King said, “Those who have paid their debt and served their sentences deserve an equal chance to learn and thriveRather than asking how do we limit opportunity, we should be asking how do we broaden opportunity, how do we ensure that our educational institutions welcome all students who want to improve themselves?”.

With the change in leadership at the U.S. Department of Education, there can be no assurance that they will continue to lead efforts to limit the use of criminal background questions on college applications. This important effort may have to be handled at the State level going forward. Maryland can continue to be a leader in providing real opportunities to ex-offenders to put their pasts behind them and become productive members of their communities by banning the use of unnecessary criminal record screening questions on applications to our colleges.

Now, therefore, be it resolved by the City Council of Baltimore, That the Council calls on the State of Maryland to take all necessary steps to eliminate questions about criminal background from Maryland college applications to ensure that all Marylanders get a fair chance at improving themselves and their communities by pursuing a college education.

And be it further resolved, That a copy of this Resolution be sent to the Governor, the Honorable Chairs and Members of the Baltimore City House and Senate Delegations to the Maryland General Assembly, the President of the Maryland Senate, the Maryland House Speaker, the Chancellor of the University System of Maryland, the Mayor, and the Mayor’s Legislative Liaison to the City Council.