

Helping released felons get jobs Bill making it easier to gain professional licenses heads to gov.

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FULL TEXT

The Senate has given final passage to a bill making it easier for people with criminal records to obtain professional licenses in their chosen careers.

"My opinion has always been that if you commit a crime in this state and you are sentenced and you serve your sentence to its completion, then I don't believe you should be held to any higher account when it comes to occupational licensing," said Sen. Rob Sampson, R-Wolcott.

The bill requires licensing agencies to consider three things when denying a person's licensure based on a felony conviction: the nature of the conviction and its relationship to the individual's ability to perform the associated duties of the job; information about the person's rehabilitation; and the time passed since a person's conviction or release from prison.

The bill passed 35-1 in the Senate, with Sen. Paul Cicarella, R-Wallingford, casting the only no vote. It was approved by the House on April 21 on a 138-9 vote. It now heads to Gov. Ned Lamont.

The measure is a result of a yearslong effort to ease the burdens the formerly incarcerated face after they serve their sentences or complete their time in state supervision.

State Sen. Julie Kushner, D-Danbury, co-chair of the Labor and Public Employees Committee and co-chair of the council that has studied these issues since 2019, was the proponent of the bill. Kushner said the state has an obligation to address the challenges faced by people with criminal records when they try to reenter the workforce. "I learned that, in fact, there are over 550 statutory obstacles for persons who have been formerly incarcerated in our state laws and that many of those have expired," Kushner said. "In the sense that they're no longer relevant or valid, and they just make it harder for a person who's been incarcerated to reenter and establish themselves." Sampson said he understood why there would be concerns about the bill, but said people who serve their time should be able to "return back into society's good graces".

Cicarella said he couldn't support the bill because he was worried people who committed dangerous, violent crimes would gain licensure in fields that would put them in a position to inflict further harm on vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and children.

"I am a huge advocate for workforce development and second chances, and I was hoping to get some answers to the concerns that there was a way to protect the general public," Cicarella said.

Manuel Sandoval, a Smart Justice Leader with the ACLU of Connecticut, said he respects Cicarella's concerns but thinks it distracts from the overall benefits of the bill.

"That's one hypothetical versus a million people that are gonna be able to get jobs now that wouldn't have been able to get jobs otherwise," Sandoval said. "If we can get employed, then we don't have to be worrying about housing, we don't have to worry about not getting good jobs."

Sandoval, who is hoping to become a licensed clinical social worker and is currently studying for the exam, said, thanks to this bill, those previously incarcerated, like he was, will be able to help people with similar life experiences.

"I will be able to help my community, which has been previously impacted, previously disenfranchised," he said. "I have a lived experience that people that have books don't. They can only read what I've been through in books,

where I can actually relate and lead with empathy and compassion".
Jessica Bravo is CT Mirror's reporting intern for the 2022 spring semester.

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