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COLUMBUS – As Ohio and the nation struggles to recover from the worst recession in generations, it is estimated that 65 million American workers will be excluded from the workforce. Why? Simply due to having a criminal record.

State Representative Sandra Williams (D-Cleveland) has introduced legislation to help Ohioans recover from the worst recession in a generation by removing obstacles to employment for those with a criminal record.

“Oftentimes when an applicant lets an employer know that he or she has a criminal record, the employer will no longer consider the applicant for a job, no matter how qualified. This happens at entry level jobs and jobs that require much more experience,” said Williams. “Obtaining stable employment, the lifeline to integrating ex-offenders into society and reducing recidivism rates, remains a barrier for those who have a criminal record. Even if the criminal offense was unrelated to the occupation, many employers did not further consider hiring a candidate with a criminal record.”

House Bill 169, sponsored by Williams, revises the conditions under which certain boards and commissions may deny a professional license to a person who has committed a criminal offense. Currently, a license may be denied, revoked, suspended if a person has committed certain criminal offenses, even if it is unrelated to the profession.

HB 169 will amend the current language so that a license may be denied, revoked or suspended only if the criminal offense is related to the person's occupation.

Williams notes that the state operates 24 Ohio Penal Industries in 16 prisons. The program employs inmates and provides useful skills and experience. Vocational programs offered include accounting, auto mechanics, computer repair and carpentry. According to the Corrections Department, 34 percent of released inmates return to prison within 3 years, with the lack of employment opportunities frequently listed as a factor.

Over 26,000 inmates are released each year from the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections. Approximately 6,000 inmates return to Cuyahoga County each year.

"In many respects House Bill 169 is an equitable solution for the ex-offenders and the State. It provides an opportunity for those with a criminal record to continue to work in the field that they have training if the offense was unrelated and it saves the state money by reducing the recidivism rate and the cost of incarceration," said Williams.

House Bill 169 is currently in the State Government and Elections Committee, where it had its first hearing last month.