



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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### **WCC OPPOSES BILL JOB BIAS AGAINST FELONS**

Repealing a law that prevents employment discrimination against persons convicted of a crime when the offense is unrelated to their job would hamper rehabilitation, be especially harmful to minorities, and hinder employment opportunities according to the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC).

The WCC was among many groups and individuals testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 207 at an October 24 hearing of the Senate Committee on Labor, Public Safety, and Urban Affairs. SB 207 permits employers to terminate or refuse to employ any person convicted of an unpardoned felony. The WCC had earlier expressed similar opposition to an identical proposal in the State Assembly.

“The common good is served best when an ex-felon is encouraged to find a good job. Children of ex-felons benefit when their parents are working. Public safety is enhanced as stable employment reduces the risk of recidivism,” explained WCC Associate Director Barbara Sella. “Taxpayers save money when the prison population decreases. At-risk youth are given hope when they see ex-felons who are dedicated to honest employment.”

Sella noted that both the Church’s direct ministry to offenders confirms what research has demonstrated, namely that offenders with the best chance of rehabilitation are those who have a caring family, a supportive faith community, and gainful employment.

“Church volunteers of all denominations who work in prisons and in the community are instrumental in helping reconcile and rehabilitate ex-offenders,” she noted. “But in order to be most effective, they need the support of our laws and our communities. Passage of SB 207 will make their efforts more difficult because it sends a negative message.”

Sella also noted that SB 207 could disproportionately affect minorities. Though they comprise only about six percent of our state’s population, African Americans account for nearly half of our state’s prison population. “Enacting SB 207 may unwittingly serve to increase disparities for some of our poorest and most marginalized residents.”

Sella concluded by saying that Wisconsin’s Fair Employment Act (WFEA) strikes the right balance between rehabilitation and public safety. Under the law, employers have the discretion to deny work to those whose past conduct is relevant to their employment.

But in addition, the law “sends the powerful message to ex-offenders that society wants them – indeed expects them – to secure lawful employment.... [W]e see no compelling reason to change it.”

Other groups opposing SB 207 include Madison-area Urban Ministry, Project Return, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Disability Rights Wisconsin, several labor organizations, the League of Women Voters, and the State Bar of Wisconsin.

Groups supporting the bill include the Wisconsin Restaurant Association, the Alliance of Wisconsin Retailers, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the Wisconsin Restaurant Association, and Wal-Mart among others.

The committee took no action on the bill after the hearing.

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