



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: State Representative Brett Davis, Chair  
Members, Assembly Committee on Education

FROM: Barbara Sella, Associate Director

DATE: March 27, 2007

RE: Assembly Bill 30—Felon Bias

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The Wisconsin Catholic Conference appreciates the opportunity to provide informational testimony on Assembly Bill 30, which would permit public and private schools to refuse to employ or to terminate from employment an unparoled felon.

Our interest in this legislation is twofold. First, we strongly believe that all children deserve a safe environment in which to learn. There are multiple threats to the safety of our children outside the school doors. We applaud efforts to maintain a safe place within all schools. And we support the provisions of current law that permit employers to deny a job to a person who has been convicted of a crime that is related to the job he or she is seeking.

We also believe in public policies that foster restoring both victims of crimes and offenders to full participation in the community. In 1999, Wisconsin's Roman Catholic bishops issued *Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin*. In their statement, the bishops stress the importance of mercy and forgiveness and call for society to exercise mercy as a means of furthering the rehabilitation process. The bishops also emphasize that public policies and responses must be fashioned in ways that heal victims betrayed by crime and restore dignity to offenders.

An important part of ensuring that felons regain dignity is access to employment opportunities that allow them to support themselves and their families.

We believe that AB 30, as currently drafted, is broader than necessary to achieve its goals. As drafted, AB 30 limits the ability of offenders to secure gainful employment even when their crimes are unrelated to the position they are seeking or to the life and security of our children.

As an alternative, we invite you to consider an approach suggested in 2001 in the form of Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 to 2001 AB 4. This alternative is based on the provisions of Wis. Stat. sec. 118.19, governing teacher licensure which provides that the state superintendent may not license a person as a teacher if the applicant has been convicted of a felony (Class A, B, C or D) under Chapter 940 (which addresses crimes against life and bodily security) or Chapter

948 (which addresses crimes against children) until six years have passed since the conviction and the person establishes by clear and convincing evidence that he/she is entitled to a license.

Inasmuch as teachers have the most unsupervised face-to-face contact with our children it seems unreasonable to place a greater barrier to employment before other employees who have less access to children. At the same time, limiting this bill to crimes mentioned in 118.19 also provides more clarity as to which offenses warrant denying employment.

Finally, we urge you to consider the impact of AB 30 on people of color. Though less than ten percent of our state's population, minorities account for nearly half of our prison population. Unemployment among African-American men is still more than double that of white men. It is important to assess how this bill will affect that statistic.

Last week, on March 22, a joint hearing of the Assembly Corrections and Courts Committee and the Senate Judiciary and Corrections Committee heard invited testimony on the issue of prisoner re-entry. The strong sentiment of most in attendance was that more needs to be done to help with the re-entry and reintegration of ex-offenders. Legislation like AB 30, unless amended along the lines we have suggested, would make such reintegration efforts more difficult.

We believe current law in this area has served us well. Wisconsin continues to have lower crime rates than the rest of the nation. Clearly, the fact that a felon can't be denied a job unless his crime is related to the position he seeks has not made Wisconsin a dangerous place to work or live. Rather, one can argue that our crime rate is lower because our laws make it easier for ex-offenders to support themselves upon completion of their sentence.

We appreciate the opportunity to offer this informational testimony on AB 30. We respectfully request the committee to carefully consider the ramifications of a bill that could contribute to significant recidivism rates in Wisconsin.