



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Members, Senate Committee on Labor, Public Safety, and Urban Affairs

FROM: Barbara Sella, Associate Director

DATE: October 24, 2011

RE: Senate Bill 207, Employment of Unpardoned Felons

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) thanks you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 207, which would permit employers to terminate or refuse to employ any person convicted of an unpardoned felony.

Our stance on criminal justice issues is guided by the social teaching of the Catholic Church and the insights gained from long experience ministering to prisoners, ex-offenders, crime victims and their families. Several principles of Catholic teaching lead us to oppose this bill: 1) respect for the human person, 2) common good, 3) option for the poor and marginalized, 4) solidarity, and 5) reconciliation and rehabilitation.

Our experience in the Department of Corrections' (DOC) Religious Practices Advisory Committee (RPAC) and the Church's direct ministry confirm 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. (The RPAC, of which the WCC is a founding member, includes DOC staff and representatives of other faith communities. It has been meeting regularly for about a decade to advise the DOC on issues of religious liberty and prisoner reintegration, as well as to learn from the DOC about the specific challenges facing prison staff and offenders.)

Church volunteers of all denominations who work in prisons and in the community are instrumental in helping reconcile and rehabilitate ex-offenders. 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. It will make currently employed ex-felons fear that they can be terminated at will and diminish the hopes of those who seek employment.

In our view, 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. 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 rather than indolence or crime.

Another serious problem we see with this bill is that it 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.

Respect for human dignity requires that people have the opportunity for and the responsibility of productive work. We believe current law does just that. While giving employers the discretion to deny work to those whose past conduct is relevant to their employment, it sends the powerful message to ex-offenders that society wants them – indeed expects them – to secure lawful employment.

Laws serve not just to punish wrongdoing, but also to guide society towards its highest goals. The Wisconsin Fair Employment Act (WFEA) achieves this dual purpose and we see no compelling reason to change it.

For all these reasons, we urge you not to advance SB 207.