

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

William K. Stewart, Jr., Esquire
President

William Griffin
Vice President

Dianne E. Reed, Ph.D.
Treasurer

Angus R. Love, Esquire
Solicitor

Robert A. Cicchinelli, M.S.
Anita Colon

Theodore E. Glackman, M.Ed.

Bernard Granor, Esquire

Ellen Greenlee, Esquire

Julia Glover Hall, Ph.D.

Holly Harner, Ph.D.

Thomas J. Innes III, Esquire

Vicki W. Kramer, Ph.D.

David B. Kresge, Ph.D.

Keith Leaphart, D. O.

Marcia Martinez-Helfman

Duncan P. McCallum

Lisette McCormick, Esquire

Joanna Otero-Cruz

Joan Porter

Grahame P. Richards, Jr.

David Richman, Esquire

Barbara Rittenhouse

Peggy Sims

Judith Stang, D.P.A.

William Syllianteng, Esquire

Lisa Varon

Donald Vaughn

Gretchen Wiseman

Roger Zepernick

Emeritus

Norman Johnston, Ph.D.

David W. Lauder

ADVISORY COUNCIL

Alfred Blumstein, Ph.D.

Catherine C. Carr, Esquire

JoAnne A. Epps, Esquire

Paul J. Fink, M.D.

Jane Golden, Ph.D.

Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr.

Lori Grange, Esquire

M. Kay Harris, M.A.

John Kramer, Ph.D.

Marsha Levick, Esquire

Leslie Anne Miller, Esquire

Bill Moushey, M.S.

John Armand Rich, M.D., M.P.H.

David Rudovsky, Esquire

John Edgar Wideman, Ph.D.

PRISON SOCIETY

HEADQUARTERS

245 North Broad Street

Suite 300

Philadelphia, PA 19107

215-564-6005 (ADMINISTRATION)

215-564-4775 (PROGRAMS)

geninfo@prisonsociety.org

www.prisonsociety.org

November 14, 2011

The Honorable Anthony H. Williams
Pennsylvania Senate
Senate Box 203008
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3008

Re: SB 1039 PN 1231, the Criminal Background Check Act

Dear Senator Williams:

The Pennsylvania Prison Society supports SB 1039 and urges the Senate Law and Justice Committee to support this measure as well. SB 1039 provides for the Pennsylvania State Police to conduct criminal background checks requested by an employer.

The Pennsylvania Prison Society will soon be celebrating its 225th anniversary. Throughout its two plus centuries, the agency has worked with prisoners and their families to provide services and to help offenders re-establish their lives in the community when they leave prison (and 90% of the inmate population will do that one day.) One of the major program areas of the Prison Society is Re-entry. In Philly Renew, for example, we provide classes for fathers who are re-joining their communities after incarceration. (The program is carried out in conjunction with the Department of Welfare and NCCF.) Most of the men are hoping to find work to support themselves and, eventually, their families and their communities.

Our role is to help provide basic job readiness skills as well as a support network and most important, a new way to think through cognitive behavior therapy. It is difficult now for many job hunters to find work. For the formerly incarcerated, it has become a lifetime challenge.

One of the main obstacles to securing a job is the criminal background check. In Philadelphia, this will not be as difficult as it was due to the recently passed ordinance known as "Ban the Box." This will give job applicants a chance to move through the job application process without having to check the box that questions the individual's criminal history. It does not negate that question; it just moves it to a later point in the process, after the first interview, to provide the applicant entrance based on their skills instead of finding their potential tossed in the trash.

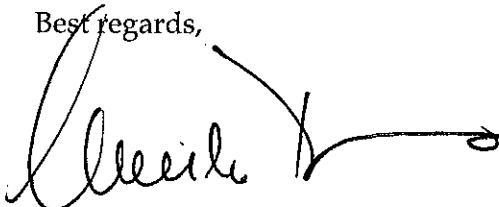
A remaining problem, however, and one that exists across the Commonwealth is the background check and who does it. This can now be obtained rather easily from different vendors accessed via the internet. "Virtually anyone with an Internet connection can find information about someone's conviction history online without his or her consent or any guidance on how to interpret or use the information." (Legal Action Center; After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry 2004.) The information obtained is not always accurate. It may not be updated. It may confuse individuals with different aliases. It may include far more information than is necessary, such as arrests, even if they were dropped. Prospective employers who see a long list of activities may toss an individual's application based on what was viewed without verifying the information. The same can be said for other PA agencies in that records may require explanation or confirmation which many employers are not equipped to do nor have time to do.

The most reliable source, both in accuracy and the information provided is that provided through the Pennsylvania State Police. By requiring the state police to do this function, many of these errors will be eliminated and more individuals will be given a better chance to seek employment opportunities. It remains the responsibility of the individual to market their skills and secure the position; but requiring the most adept agency to provide this service is another tool in expanding job opportunities.

Please contact me at the Prison Society at 215-564-6005 x113 if you have any questions or would like additional information.

We appreciate your leadership on this issue and urge the Committee to support SB 1039.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William M. DiMascio". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

William M. DiMascio
Executive Director

WD/tds