



# OHIO JUSTICE & POLICY CENTER

*Reclaiming Lives. Renewing Communities. Restoring Justice.*

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April 8, 2009

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## **An Open Letter Asking for a Responsible Change to City Hiring Policy**

Dear Mayor and City Council,

The Ohio Justice & Policy Center (OJPC) is publicly calling for City of Cincinnati to end its blanket policy of denying employment to otherwise qualified applicants with felony convictions. This is not just about people with criminal records getting a fair shot at city employment; this is also about improving community safety and overcoming systemic poverty.

The city currently shuts out even the most qualified job applicants if they have a criminal record—no matter how old or irrelevant that record is. Yet people with criminal records are often (though certainly not exclusively) concentrated in our lowest income neighborhoods. These citizens have extremely limited opportunities to get jobs even if they have excellent educational and other credentials. Without meaningful jobs, re-offending and all the recurring community effects of that re-offending are more likely. And because these people have been consigned to virtual unemployability, they (and often their families) are more likely to become a further drain on scarce public and non-profit social services.

A revamped and responsible city hiring policy will significantly impact that destructive pattern. At least 14 cities and counties around the country— including Midwest cities such as Battle Creek, Michigan; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; and Chicago, Illinois—have refined their hiring policies to allow for an individualized consideration of each job applicant. OJPC has thoroughly researched these and is eager to help the city craft a policy that can distinguish criminal records that are old or irrelevant to the applied-for position from those records that are salient. In addition to responsibly opening the doors to city employment, the City's leadership on this issue will create a positive ripple effect to other employers across the region.

## Open Letter Asking for a Responsible Change to City Hiring Policy

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The best example of how a more thoughtful policy could improve an individual's life as well as the entire community is OJPC's client, Gene Mays. Mr. Mays was denied employment as an electrician with the City because of two felony drug convictions. He was a star student in a Cincinnati high school—both in the classroom and on the basketball court. Ranked number one in his high school class, Mays was kicked off the basketball team during his senior year for being caught using marijuana. His life then spiraled out of control. After graduating from high school, Mays also graduated to harder drug use. Addicted to cocaine, Mays then began selling drugs to support his habit, earning him a stint in the Ohio prison system. But after hitting rock bottom in October 1997, Mays turned his life around with help from Narcotics Anonymous. Since then, Mays has been drug and alcohol free. In 2001, after four years of sobriety, Mays enrolled in a five-year electrician training program. He earned glowing recommendations from his supervisors and graduated number one in his class. In 2006 Mays took and passed the City of Cincinnati's Civil Service exam but was later denied a position with the Metropolitan Sewer District based solely on his felony record. OJPC is handling Mays' appeal of the Commission's decision while he has found temporary, lower-paying work.

What is clear from his story is that it is not only Mr. Mays who would be better off if he were employed by the city. The City would have an exceptional employee if it were not for the current blanket restriction on people with felony records. And the broader community would be better off if people like Mr. Mays were in stable, good-paying jobs and paying taxes. There simply is no down side to making the hiring policy more intelligent.

Mayor, we know that you and certain members of council have expressed an interest in improving the reintegration of people with criminal records for the benefit of the entire community. We are offering you a concrete opportunity to take intelligent action on this now. Given our region's desperate need for smart-on-crime solutions that save rapidly dwindling public resources, the positive public-safety and economic effects of this kind of hiring policy change cannot wait. Now is the time for you to act. We stand at the ready to assist in any way we can.

Very truly yours,

David Singleton,  
Executive Director & Attorney at Law

and

Stephen JohnsonGrove,  
Attorney at Law

Cc: Cincinnati Enquirer