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# MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12<sup>TH</sup> SENATE DISTRICT

## **Testimony on SB 169**

Senate Committee on Labor, Regulatory Reform, Veterans and Military Affairs

Senator Mary Felzkowski

12<sup>th</sup> Senate District

August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Good morning Chairman Testin and Committee Members,

Thank you for taking the time to hear testimony on Senate Bill 169, which would establish a hotline for employers looking to hire former offenders.

This bill is fairly straightforward. It directs the Department of Workforce Development to establish and maintain a toll-free hotline for employers who are interested in learning more about hiring, or are looking to hire former offenders.

This bill is a product of the Legislative Council Study Committee on Increasing Offender Employment Opportunities, which I was fortunate enough to chair. Over the course of our work, the committee engaged with individuals who have re-entered society post-incarceration, social agencies and non-profits who work to help former offenders find jobs, and employers who are seeking to expand their workforce with this population of formerly incarcerated individuals, that oftentimes falls through the cracks in the job hunt process.

One thing that became clear to our committee was that there are countless Wisconsin employers, large and small, more than we would have guessed, that have an interest in integrating former offenders into their workplace- they just don't know where to start. The hotline created in this bill would be a one-stop shop for employers to learn about incentive programs available to them, access any resources the state may provide on hiring former offenders, and connect them with work-release programs that could suit them. This bill directs the department to also create a webpage with relevant information for employers to access.

I'm proud that my committee came up with this idea, because I see this as a very multi-functional bill. Not only does this bill help our employers tap into this pool of potential employees at a time when they desperately need workers, more importantly, it paves the way for a former offender to gain stable employment that puts them on the right track, restores their self-reliance and their dignity, and keeps them from circumstances that may lead them to re-offend.

If a call to this hotline helps ease the concerns of even one uncertain employer, it can enable a Wisconsinite looking to re-enter society to do so with a much greater chance of success.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I'm happy to take any questions.



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August 17, 2023

TO: Senate Committee on Labor, Regulatory Reform, Veterans and Military Affairs  
Senator Patrick Testin, Chair

FR: Susan Quam, Executive Vice President

RE: Support of SB 169

Thank you, Chair Testin and members of the committee, for the opportunity today to testify on behalf of our 7,000 member locations. The Wisconsin Restaurant Association (WRA) supports SB 169, which is common sense legislation to create a hotline for employers interested in hiring individuals with a conviction record.

We are an industry of second chances and upward mobility. The sky is the limit for those who enjoy hospitality, working with others and being in a fast-paced environment. Restaurants are a refuge for many employees. In fact, one-third of all people had their first job in a restaurant. We hear many stories from people in that one-third, who state how the restaurant owner was like their second parent who provided great insight on how to work with others. In many cases restaurant staff form a strong, supportive family atmosphere that helps people forge a career path for themselves, both inside and outside of the restaurant industry. This same atmosphere is also a place that helps people who need a second chance to thrive and find success.

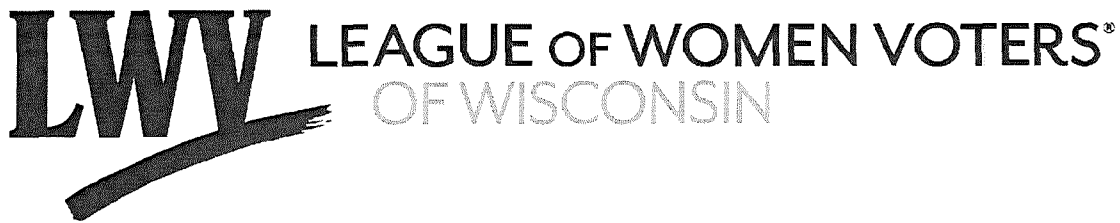
With the current labor shortage in Wisconsin, many businesses are looking for qualified employees. Data from the National Restaurant Association indicates that we are still 10,000 workers behind 2019 numbers, and we were short employees in 2019 already. Many of those businesses are small businesses, who do not have the luxury of human resource departments or employment recruiters to help them find staff.

This bill creates a hotline for business owners to call and get clear information about programs to hire justice-involved individuals who are looking to start a new life. A hotline allows businesses representatives to ask questions and talk to a person who is knowledgeable about the programs available. Websites are great and we all use them to get valuable information out to the public – the WRA has a very robust members only site that is full of valuable information on laws and regulations. But, we have a large portion of our membership that still wants to talk to a human being to ask their questions – not just look it up on a website. That is why we have our AskWRA hotline and we receive 40-50 calls and emails each week asking regulatory questions.

We know that a hotline with a person on the other end of the phone will be a valuable tool to not only help businesses hire new workers, but also help the justice-involved find the resources they need.

We urge your support of SB 169 and I am happy to entertain any questions.

*The Wisconsin Restaurant Association (WRA) represents over 7,000 restaurant locations statewide and represents all segments of the restaurant and hospitality industry. Our membership includes food establishments of all types and sizes, such as seasonal drive-ins, supper clubs, diners, bars, locally owned franchisees, fine-dining, and hotels/resorts. Over 75 percent of our membership are independent restaurants or restaurant groups. Regardless of ownership type, all restaurants are the cornerstones of their neighborhoods and communities. Restaurants not only provide great food, drink, and hospitality, they support schools, teams, charities and churches with fundraising and donations. They provide meeting places to celebrate, mourn and organize, or just provide a safe, tasty meal for a busy family.*



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To: 2023 Senate Committee on Labor, Regulatory Reform, Veterans and Military Affairs

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin submits this statement in support of SB 169/AB 180. This bill was prepared for the Legislative Council Study Committee on Increasing Offender Employment Opportunities. It requires the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) to establish a hotline, operating during normal business hours and staffed by DWD employees, to assist employers seeking to employ individuals with a conviction record. The bill requires DWD to provide information and assistance relating to available incentives and programs under state and federal law for employing individuals with a criminal record, including individuals participating in certain work release programs.

The League's positions support restoration of rights and employment opportunities for ex-offenders:

The offender should be treated like the non-offender in all regards except where inherently inconsistent with the prescribed punishment. For the ex-offender, this should include restoration of civil rights, elimination of restrictions on employment except where related to criminal behavior, and elimination of restrictions on political activity.

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Employment contributes to food and housing security, reduces the risk of recidivism, and enhances the wellbeing of the community. Providing and staffing the hotline would assist employers who are facing a labor shortage and seeking responsible employees. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Wisconsin's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate stayed at the record-low rate of 2.4% in May, 2023. This common sense proposal is cost effective: the Fiscal Estimate from DWD is that the annual cost will be \$115,000.

The League joins with Cicero Action, Madison Area Technical College, and the Wisconsin Restaurant Association to urge that this bill be adopted.

8/28/2023

**Testimonial in Support of Wisconsin Senate Bill 169 - Empowering Second Chances through Employment**

I am writing this testimonial to express my support for Wisconsin Senate Bill 169. As a concerned citizen who believes in the power of second chances and the importance of reintegration, I am truly excited about the potential positive impact this bill can have on our community and its members who are striving to rebuild their lives after facing challenges.

Senate Bill 169's focus on creating a hotline for employers interested in hiring individuals with a conviction record is a significant step toward fostering inclusivity and providing opportunities for those who have paid their dues to society. The establishment of this hotline demonstrates the state's commitment to creating a supportive environment that encourages employers to consider individuals with conviction records for employment.

By providing employers with information and assistance on available incentives and programs under state and federal law, this bill equips them with the necessary tools to make informed decisions about hiring individuals with criminal records. This initiative not only benefits employers by potentially expanding their talent pool but also contributes to reducing recidivism rates and promoting a safer society.

Furthermore, the hotline's connection to work release programs is a commendable aspect of the bill. By assisting employers who are interested in hiring individuals participating in such programs, the bill encourages the successful reintegration of these individuals into the workforce, reducing the likelihood of re-offending and providing them with a meaningful chance to rebuild their lives.

In conclusion, Wisconsin Senate Bill 169's establishment of a hotline for employers interested in hiring individuals with a conviction record is a crucial step toward creating a more inclusive, compassionate, and productive society. By providing a platform for second chances and offering resources to both employers and individuals seeking reemployment, this bill embodies the values of justice, opportunity, and community support that Wisconsin stands for.

I urge our esteemed legislators to pass Senate Bill 169 and contribute to the betterment of our state by giving deserving individuals a chance to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to our workforce and communities.

Sincerely,



Eli Rivera

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414-213-3945



From: Jakob Dupuis, Public Safety Policy Analyst

To: Senator Committee on Labor, Regulatory Reform, Veterans and Military Affairs

Re: Support for Senate Bill 169

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Cicero Action writes to the Committee in support of Senate Bill 169, a bill to establish a hotline for employers interested in hiring individuals with a conviction record. Steady employment is the top predictor of successful reentry, yet ex-offenders face significant barriers in finding work.

95 percent of our nation's prisoners will one day be released from prison. [8 in 10](#) will be re-arrested within six years. Finding and maintaining gainful employment is the strongest predictor of the likelihood of recidivating.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, more than [1 in 4](#) formerly incarcerated people are unemployed.

Within three years of being released from WDOC, [52 percent](#) of individuals will be rearrested, [34 percent](#) reconvicted, and [32 percent](#) reincarcerated. [8 in 10](#) people nationwide who failed to complete probation and returned to prison did not have jobs. The Missouri Department of Corrections found unemployed ex-offenders recidivated at a rate [three times](#) that of employed ex-offenders.

The State of Wisconsin should support those employers and potential employees who want to bridge the gap between prison and productive society. Employers are seeking to fill good-paying jobs, and former inmates want to work. In addition to supporting successful reentry, individuals with a criminal record have a [much longer job tenure](#) and are less likely to quit their jobs voluntarily.

Wisconsin can support this process by establishing and maintaining a hotline for employers seeking to hire formerly incarcerated individuals and keep them out of jail. Wisconsin faces a [labor shortage](#) in the coming years, and this is one step to remedy the issue. This bill aligns with the values of Cicero Action, aligns with the available data on successful reentry, and makes sense for the economy of Wisconsin.

Thank you for your consideration. Please call us if you have any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Lageson and C. Uggen, "How work affects crime and crime affects work over the life course," in C. L. Gibson and D. M. Krohm, eds., *Handbook of life course criminology: Emerging trends and directions for future research* (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 201-212.; C. Uggen and S. Wakefield, "What have we learned from longitudinal studies of work and crime?" in A. Liberman, ed., *The long view of crime: A synthesis of longitudinal research*. (New York: Springer, 2008), pp. 191-219.