



MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony for SB 171

Senator Mary Felzkowski

Committee on Housing, Rural Issues and Forestry

October 18, 2023

Good afternoon Chairman Quinn and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 171, which will require the Department of Corrections to include training on rental readiness in its prerelease reentry programming.

Last session, a joint legislative study committee was formed with the purpose of reviewing impediments to employment and job training for individuals who are incarcerated or recently released. Through the exploration into this topic by the members of this committee, several paths to increasing offender employment opportunities were brought to light. One of the largest concerns that was brought to the attention of the committee is the difficulty for recently released individuals to find housing, which is a vital first step in reintegration after incarceration. Testimony from several landlords provided an explanation – many are worried that they could be liable if residents are harmed or damage to property occurs. This bill was designed to create protections for these landlords, as well as offer an opportunity for the recently released to learn how to be good tenants.

DOC offers reentry programming to assist individuals who are leaving confinement in a DOC facility and entering into a period of supervision in the community. This reentry assistance programming often includes training and education, an assessment of needs, and a plan for successful reentry into the community. This bill will establish an additional program offered by DOC that will be available, with the purpose of teaching rental readiness to offenders. At the end of this program, which can receive consultation from WHEDA, city or county landlord-tenant training agencies, or other interested organizations or agencies, a soon-to-be-released offender will receive certification that they passed the course.

To go along with this program, immunity from civil liability will be provided to landowners who rent to certified persons, in certain instances when harm or damage occurs due to a certified individual's intentional acts or omissions. One final aspect of this legislation will provide WHEDA with the ability to establish a bonding program for the purpose of covering damages that occur within a limited time, caused by individuals who have been issued a certification of rental readiness. The two-pronged approach of this bill, to both prepare offenders for becoming rental tenants, and to protect landlords from certain liabilities, will hopefully be another step in the right direction toward increasing offender employment opportunities.

I am grateful to the vice-chair of the joint study committee, Rep. Schraa, for his work on this legislation, as well as the effort and input provided by Leg. Council and our fellow committee members. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.



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Testimony on Senate Bill 171

Chairman Quinn and members of the Committee on Housing, Rural Issues and Forestry, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 171. This legislation addresses the need for housing to achieve and keep gainful employment.

Temporary emergency shelter is not sufficient for an employee to be rested, clean, dressed appropriately, and without baggage to report for work on time every day. Stable, affordable housing is hard to find, especially for a person coming back from prison. Often, they are disqualified from Section 8 low-income housing. With many applicants for an apartment or house, the landlord may hesitate to accept the application of a person with a criminal history due to worries about liability for criminal actions or property damage. That is why the Legislative Council Study Committee on Increasing Offender Employment Opportunities proposed this bill to help address these concerns.

The first thing that the bill requires is for the Department of Corrections to develop a rental readiness program as part of its programming for reentry. Inmates who complete this program successfully will receive a certificate of rental readiness.

This certificate of rental readiness has two benefits for the property owner. First, the landlord will be immune from civil liability arising from the actions of the tenant. In addition, the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority will be authorized to develop a bond program to pay for any damage or repairs to the property.

This program only applies to properties that are approved by the Department of Health Services and is limited to 12 months within the first 24 months of release. By then, the tenant will have had the opportunity to establish a positive rental history.

The bill does not provide funding for that bond program, so that issue must be addressed in a separate bill or in the next budget.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill I will be glad to answer any questions you might have.