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Norwich Asked To Give Second Chances For Prior Offenders

Advocates argue for removing criminal record 'box' from city's employment form

By **Claire Bessette** Published on 10/7/2008

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Norwich - Arguing that one of the biggest hurdles convicted felons face when they get out of prison is finding a job, advocates told the aldermen Monday that the city should remove “the box” on employment applications that asks whether a person has a criminal record.

Prior to the regular council meeting, several nonprofit agencies advocating that Norwich join an effort called “Think Outside the Box,” made their case, saying it would forward the cause of public safety, because convicts who can't jobs are more likely to reoffend.

Representatives from the Connecticut Pardon Team, the Clean Slate Committee and Greater Hartford Legal Aid said the change would not prevent the city from asking for criminal background checks on applicants, but it would move the question to later in the process, after applicants are “otherwise qualified” for the position. The groups also want the policy change to apply to vendors who apply for contracts with the city.

”This is not about hiring sex offenders to drive buses,” Laresse Harvey of A Better Way Foundation, parent of the Clean Slate Committee, assured the council.

Following the presentation, city Human Resources Director Thomas Dawkins reviewed the current process for job applications. The “box” now is question No. 7 on the city application - “pretty prominent,” as Sara Parker McKernan of the Legal Assistance Resource Center put it.

But Dawkins said city officials don't even look at that information until later in the process. First, applications are reviewed for education and experience in relation to the available job. Those who qualify are invited to take a written test.

The names of those with the top scores are then forwarded to the department head for interviews. That's where questions about criminal backgrounds would be asked, Dawkins said.

McKernan suggested the city remove the box and substitute a separate form that could be given to finalists after the initial interviews.

Alderman Robert Zarnetske asked Dawkins if the box asking for criminal records were removed, would it change the application process. Dawkins said it would not.

”It might not be there much longer,” Zarnetske said, to the applause of the advocates in the audience.■

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