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Aldermen vote to 'Ban the Box'

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Lacey Gonzales and Victor Zapana

Staff Reporter, Staff Reporter

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The **Board of Aldermen** on Tuesday approved a proposed ordinance that will end what it terms "unfair discrimination" against former convicts on government employment forms.

The board voted 22-1 for the ordinance — a progressive piece of legislation colloquially referred to as "Ban the Box" that legislators from many cities across the nation are currently pursuing. It expunges question 5a, which requires that applicants include notice of their prior convictions, from city-related job application forms. The legislation also removes the question from job application forms at vendors that have contracts with the city.

Although one alderman expressed concern about the policy's potential burden on small businesses, representatives from state reentry organizations and ex-felons who sat in the aldermanic chambers applauded the vote and said they hope the legislation will be replicated on the state and federal levels.

"This legislation will not give any special advantage on hiring an ex-offender," Ward 8 Alderman Michael Smart said. "But it would give them a foot in the door."

The approval of "Ban the Box" marks the single most substantial New Haven community services reform since the passage of the Elm City Resident Card — a municipal identification card accessible to all residents, including illegal immigrants — in the summer of 2007.

The Human Services Committee of the Board of Aldermen voted unanimously at a public hearing Feb. 3 to approve the ordinance before it was passed to the full board for approval.

At the aldermanic meeting Tuesday, a group of about 20 people, including city residents and state prison reentry reform activists, held signs in support of the legislation ("Give Everyone A Change to Get a Job. Ban the Box!"). They cheered when the board approved the ordinance.

For 31-year-old James Toles, the approval was a moment of quintessential bliss. A convicted felon who spent five months last year in the Gates Correctional Institution in Niantic, Conn., Toles said he will definitely apply for a city position with the "Ban the Box" policy because the ordinance "definitely increases my chances."

The approval Tuesday night was expected, although it did not come without any objections. Ward 12 Alderman Gerald Antunes had serious reservations over one provision of the ordinance.

Antunes, a Democrat who voted against the legislation Tuesday, said it would create an unnecessary burden to small businesses who often do not have the resources to self-research applicants' criminal histories. The ordinance requires businesses that provide goods and services to the city to have a policy similar to "Ban the Box."

By requiring the smaller businesses to complete a criminal history check instead of having the information presented on the employment form, Antunes said he believed the legislation forces these businesses to spend resources that they do not have.

Still, he added, had the ordinance only applied to **City Hall** work forms, he would have voted in support of the legislation.

The "Ban the Box" policy has been discussed in many city meetings since August, when it was first proposed by a colloquia of local community experts, including Community Services Administrator Kica Matos and City Hall consultant Deborah Marcuse '97 LAW '08.

Across the nation, several major urban centers have implemented some form of the "Ban the Box" policy — some extending the ordinance to public housing applications. In Connecticut, Bridgeport, Norwich and Hartford each have similar policies. Some state activists, including like Jacqueline Caron, founder and CEO of the ex-felon social service organization Connecticut

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