

Thursday, May 2, 2019

Matt Smith, President
Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce
House Democratic Policy Committee
Joint Public Hearing with Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus on Clean Slate
Community Empowerment Association; 7120 Kelly Street; Pittsburgh, PA 15208

Good afternoon, I am Matt Smith, president of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, the advocacy arm of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. I would like to thank Chairman Sturla, our host Rep. Gainey, and all the members of the House Democratic Policy Committee and Legislative Black Caucus for the opportunity to speak with you today about the significance of your passage of Clean Slate legislation and the value and importance the Pittsburgh region business community places on criminal justice reform. Such reform is a pathway to opportunity and a crucial part of our strategy to address our region's workforce shortage and create an economy for all. On behalf of the business community, I applaud the bipartisan efforts of all our elected officials who worked so hard to draft and pass the clean slate legislation that Governor Wolf signed into law last June 28 as the Clean Slate Act of 2018, as well as Act 95 of 2018, criminal justice reform related to driver's license that went into effect last week.

Criminal justice reform is a unifying issue – one that brings public and elected officials, regardless of party; business and labor; community, religious and social justice organizations; and academic and philanthropic communities – among many others, together. We must continue to embrace this unity and define a path forward that opens doors – not only to society, but also to opportunity.

The Clean Slate legislation opened doors to many hardworking women and men who want an opportunity to move beyond their past and create better lives for themselves and their families. The work we did together to help create these new opportunities should make us proud, and the business community in the Pittsburgh region applauds the efforts of many of you on this committee for leading the way. Thank you.

Government shouldn't stand in the way of individuals who want jobs and the businesses who want to employ them. We, as a civil society, must be willing to give a second chance to women and men who have worked hard to earn it. Clean Slate, which allows for the automatic sealing of criminal records for certain individuals with misdemeanor convictions, allows potential employers to look past minor mistakes and focus on the qualifications of the individual. Prior to the passage of this legislation, those with past criminal records — including those who have worked hard for a second chance — often had a tougher time obtaining a job than those without a criminal record. Roughly three million of our fellow Pennsylvanians have a criminal record of some kind, which means without the Clean Slate law, many of these people would continue to have a harder time getting a job at a time when Pennsylvania's businesses are searching for qualified workers. This legislation is win for all Pennsylvanians and our businesses.

The business community supports efforts to develop policies that move people toward gainful employment – not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because there is a direct impact on our economy by providing access to a full, competitive labor pool.

The Allegheny Conference on Community Development's watershed report entitled "Inflection Point" projected an 80,000-person regional workforce shortage by 2025 - as the Baby Boomers retire and new skill sets rise in demand. To address this shortage, while continuing to grow the jobs needed to fuel our economy, we must continue to tap into all the available talent in our region and develop smart policy that creates pathways for individuals convicted of low-level offenses who have remained crime-free. Smart policies now, like the Clean Slate Act, will help create strong workforces tomorrow.

Like Clean Slate, driver's license reform removed barriers to access. In 2017, the state suspended about 40,000 drivers' licenses for non-violent, non-driving offenses. That meant that 40,000 people were no longer able to carry out the daily function of errands, picking up or dropping off their children at school or an after-school program, or carrying for an elderly family member. Beyond that, it meant that 40,000 Pennsylvanians could not check the box on an employment application that they had a valid driver's license or be forced to take a leave from a position that requires a valid drivers' license. This had a direct impact on their ability to gain and keep employment as well as the employers looking to hire them. Moreover, wages for those affected increase sharply when they have a driver's license. For example, in the building trades, it is a requirement for many higher-paying jobs to possess a license. These positions are more likely to offer health insurance and other benefits that further smooth the roadway for re-entry to society. It's a win for workers and a win for Pennsylvania.

Thanks to the bipartisan support of our elected officials in Harrisburg – this is no longer the reality in Pennsylvania. Non-violent, non-driving related offenses no longer result in a suspended driver's license.

As we are working to strengthen our communities and propel our economy into the future – we need to build off our successful work together with Clean Slate Legislation and Drivers' License Reform to create a next generation economy that is truly for all. We, at the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce and the Allegheny Conference, look forward to working with you to take that next step to help people rejoin the workforce, not just society.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions you may have.