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## Legislation would help offenders find work

Second of a two-part series

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If you want to know the problems with Massachusetts' criminal offenders filing system, talk to Siddiq Turner, but if you want to know the solutions, she knows all about those, too.

Now 43, Turner's criminal record has followed her since she was in her early 20s, when she was arrested for possessing marijuana. She paid a \$25 fine, served probation, and has carried a stigma ever since.

Turner is among the ex-offenders who are improving their professional skills and trying to get jobs through the **Boston Staffing Alliance**, a new nonprofit staffing agency in Roxbury, one of the many grass-roots approaches to solving a problem that looms large in Massachusetts with nearly 3 million people in the state's official criminal records database.

She blames her failure to get steady work largely on her criminal record, but also partly on her job skills, which she admits are lacking, and partly on the raw fact that it gets tough to stay motivated to look for work when she either gets declined or no response at all.

"It's depressing. Frustrating. It's a battle," Turner said. "It's like you're free but not free."

Turner presents the classic case facing an odd group of bedfellows — grass-roots advocates, state legislators, some law enforcement agencies, the Associated Industries of Massachusetts and others — that has aligned to fix the state's criminal offender records system, known as CORI.

For advocates, the concern is that ex-offenders like Turner end up unemployed for years, dependent on family support or social services. For employers, the concern is that hiring ex-offenders can jeopardize workplace safety and business integrity.

Together, they have been grappling to find a compromise on a series of deep questions about the CORI system — how long an offender's records should remain open for scrutiny, who should have access to the state's database of criminal records, how much employers should know about an offender in the early stages of the interview process.

The Massachusetts Senate passed CORI legislation last November as part of a larger crime package that reform supporters are hoping the House of Representatives will take up this session. The fate of the bill in the House — including whether it will be voted on during this session — has been touch and go.

However, sources said, there are recent signs of promise that the crime bill will make it through the House by summer with at least most of the Senate's CORI reform elements intact.

"I'm just hoping and praying we get the bill out. It was so well-received in the Senate," said Sen. Harriette Chandler, D-Worcester.

The CORI legislation is nothing short of compromise. To start, it reduces the number of years that offenses would be available on the CORI database, cutting felonies from 15 years to 10 and misdemeanors from 10 years to five. Meanwhile, the legislation would provide employers with some liability against negligence if they rely on the CORI database and hire an ex-offender who subsequently commits a crime on the job.



Varda Halidi, manager of the Boston Staffing Alliance, is working to help people with criminal records find good jobs.

The legislation would require the state to commit funds to clean up the CORI database, ensuring the accuracy of the data and making it accessible online for employers at a lower fee than they now pay third-party firms that, in many cases, search criminal records by hand in courthouses throughout the state. All employers would have permission to log onto the new CORI database, compared with the 3 percent of employers currently permitted access.

Under the new data system, criminal records automatically would be sealed at the end of the 10- and five-year waiting periods. That means older criminal records would no longer be available for employers and cases that are dismissed would not be included.

And any revenue the state earns from employers making CORI requests eventually would go toward job training for ex-offenders. The Executive Office of Public Safety and Security estimates the revenue from a new CORI system could reach \$20 million per year.

“Training and work-related skills have to be first and foremost,” said Bradley MacDougall, AIM’s associate vice president for government affairs. CORI reform alone, he said, “is not an economic development initiative or a job creator.”

The legislation also would prevent most employers from asking job candidates to identify themselves immediately as ex-offenders. Instead, the information would emerge as part of a standard CORI background check and, at that point, could create a dialogue between the applicant and employer about the ex-offender’s rehabilitation.

But with the state legislation still hanging in the balance, grass-roots efforts like the recently launched Boston Staffing Alliance — which is operated by the Boston Workers Alliance — continue to hold the most promise for ex-offenders who have found the job hunt futile. Hunter, for one, has been looking actively for several years, has sent out at least 100 résumés and queries, and remains unemployed.

Despite the challenges in finding work for ex-offenders, Varda Halidy, manager of the Staffing Alliance, is determined to place upwards of 24 people in jobs this year. She is meeting with companies now with an eye toward matching them with the agency’s clientele.

“I’m hoping we’ll have more companies than people (looking for jobs), and I’ll have to start searching for people,” said Halidy. “The more companies that are socially responsible and want to take on people, the better. Maybe a company doesn’t have any openings but when they think of me, they’ll call.”