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“Aid reintegration of ex-prisoners”

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Travis County commissioners made a heroic move this week, opening the doors to thousands of former prisoners who have hit a brick wall when seeking employment.

The barrier? That little box on a county job application that asks if the applicant has been convicted of a crime. The banning of that box, a seemingly small gesture, will speak volumes to those trying to lead productive, law-abiding lives after spending time behind bars — and to local lawmakers throughout the nation.

Critics charge that the move coddles offenders, lowers job-screening standards and puts the public at risk. But hard-nosed pragmatists know otherwise. As research shows, aiding the successful reintegration of former prisoners into the community is smart public policy.

The truth is, in Texas, roughly 95 percent of people sent to prison eventually return home. The choice for policymakers boils down to either supporting released prisoners' efforts to make good in society or leaving them without resources, increasing the odds that they will commit new crimes and return to prison. The first approach costs a fraction of the price of a prison bed and has the public safety advantage of preventing new victimizations in the community. The alternative leads to more crimes, breaks up more families and costs taxpayers more money.

Evidence supports the argument that employment makes a real difference for the formerly incarcerated. According to a study of 352 Texas prisoners by the Urban Institute, only 13 percent of those employed after release returned to prison within a year, less than half the share (28 percent) of their jobless counterparts.

With a unanimous vote, the commissioners set the stage for what could be the first of many steps toward boosting employment for people leaving prison. The next logical step would be for the City of Austin to ban the box on its job applications as well.

State regulations and licensing requirements that bar certain employers from hiring felons should be also reviewed. It's ludicrous to deny someone a landscaping job because of a conviction for check fraud. Yet in Texas, that and many other illogical, antiquated prohibitions remain on the books. Revisiting these rules with an eye toward creating job opportunities for the formerly incarcerated would demonstrate a true dedication to public safety.

Another important role the state can play is to ensure that convicted felons have the skills and abilities to find and keep jobs. Sadly, research shows that only one in three of those released from Texas prisons participates in employment readiness, job training or GED programs in the community in the first nine months after release. It's no wonder that

released prisoners cite finding a job as their greatest re-entry challenge. These men and women need to be prepared for the job opportunities that emerge from the county's latest efforts; otherwise, failure awaits and employers will be disillusioned or — worse yet — disinclined to take a risk on the next former prisoner who crosses their threshold.

Make no mistake: The road to successful prisoner reintegration is not an easy one. If public officials focus solely on employment at the expense of other critical re-entry needs, such as addressing substance addiction, mental illness and housing, their efforts are sure to fail. What good is a job if it only supplies funds to support a drug habit? If a former prisoner suffers from depression that goes untreated, what are the odds she or he will keep a job? How can we expect a homeless person or shelter dweller to report to a job on time, day in and day out, without a safe place to stay?

Indeed, re-entry's many challenges must be addressed together. Fortunately, Travis County is poised to do that. Through the leadership of the district attorney's office and the community-based collaboration of the Austin/Travis County Re-entry Roundtable, meaningful partnerships across city and county human services and correctional agencies have been forged. With continued leadership on the part of county commissioners, these efforts can yield a humane and successful approach to public safety.

La Vigne, a senior research associate in the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center, is the coauthor of 'Returning Home: Exploring the Challenges and Successes of Recently Released Texas Prisoners.'