



Business leaders voice support for criminal justice reform in Michigan

Business leaders say reform efforts address skills gap, improve state's economy

LANSING — Representatives of Michigan's business community explained why entrepreneurs, hiring managers, executives and other business leaders are becoming increasingly open to hiring people with a criminal past and are among the strongest backers for criminal justice reform in Michigan, according to panelists who took part in a Zoom discussion Wednesday. The discussion, co-sponsored by Lansing-based nonprofit Safe & Just Michigan and the London-based Responsible Business Initiative for Justice, brought together Cascade Industries Senior Lean Manufacturing Manager **Jahaun McKinley**, Fifth Third Bank Chief Investment Strategist **Jeffrey Korzenik**, Abcor Industries Assistant Production Manager **Jon Meyer**, and Talent 2025 Workforce Development Project Manager **Tammy Britton**. Safe & Just Michigan Executive Director **John S. Cooper** moderated the panel discussion.

Michigan has seen several pieces of criminal justice reform legislation passed into law or advanced in the Legislature in the past few years, including the passage of [objective parole](#) in 2018, the creation of a [medically frail parole policy](#) in 2019, and the pending legislation for [Clean Slate expungement reform](#) and the bills stemming from the [Michigan Joint Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration](#). These measures have found a broad base of support — both among a significant number of bipartisan legislators in Lansing, and also among the public. Organizations as diverse as the ACLU of Michigan, Americans for Prosperity, Michigan Faith in Action, the Michigan League for Public Policy and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy have supported some or all of these reforms.

“Business groups have been increasingly active in supporting criminal justice reform, and this has been important to building legislative support for reform in the legislature — both because businesses have influence, but also because businesses can help make the policy case for reform,” Safe & Just Michigan's Cooper said. “The business community can communicate that the criminal

justice system is expensive and ineffective at preventing crime, that it keeps people locked out of opportunity and the job market, and that it reduces productivity and economic growth.”

Added **Celia Ouellette**, chief executive officer of Responsible Business Initiative for Justice: “Companies are increasingly taking action around criminal justice reform. It makes good business sense that once someone has served their time, they should be able to return to the workforce. And if the system is creating barriers, it’s natural that businesses are interested in using their platforms and leverage to remove them. The value of business engagement is profound. Whether it’s hiring, advocating for change, or promoting policies that make our communities more safe and equal, when businesses speak they have real impact.”

Michigan has often struggled to find people qualified to fill certain jobs, such as skilled trades workers and health care professionals. Licensing laws that are structured to prohibit anyone with a criminal past from obtaining a requisite license and screening questions on job applications that rule out anyone with a conviction have deepened the skills gap while leaving a potential source of skilled, trained and work-ready employees untapped.

“Changes to the criminal justice system are an important part of increasing the economic health and talent pool of West Michigan and its employers,” Britton said. “We know over 700 West Michigan employers are committed to hiring formerly incarcerated individuals and would welcome fewer barriers to the hiring process.”

It’s not just the worker and business owner who succeeds when someone with a record obtains a good job, however. People who hold good-paying jobs can provide for their families and achieve economic stability. Unfortunately, people with a criminal record struggle with unemployment rates that hovered around 25 percent *before* the COVID-19 crisis struck. As more people with a criminal record find good-paying jobs, they participate more fully in local economies, which benefits everyone.

“Michigan businesses have so much to gain from second chance hiring,” Korzenik said. “When done right, this is a talent pipeline that produces unusually engaged and loyal employees — a recipe for productivity and profit. Beyond that microeconomic argument, there are greater issues at stake — we all prosper when everyone is given a chance to lead lives of contribution and meaning by earning a good paycheck. At this particular time, it is also important for the business community to show that the free enterprise system can help solve important societal problems.”

Business leaders often say they have practical reason for hiring the formerly incarcerated and people with felony convictions: they make good employees. Studies show that people with a criminal past have lower turnover than other employees. And sometimes, training programs they participated in while they were incarcerated or after their release provided them with exactly the skills an employer needs.

“Supporting an initiative to put Second Chance citizens to work does not imply that you support the behavior that lead to incarceration,” McKinley said. “It does, however, mean that you support the system necessary for recovery and transition and that is the right thing to do”.

Meyer has traveled from Abcor Industries’ factory in Holland to the Capitol in Lansing twice to advocate for Clean Slate legislation. Abcor, which manufactures powder-coated wood products, has found many benefits from adding formerly incarcerated people to its workforce. Formerly incarcerated people have benefitted from Abcor’s willingness to hire them, too — including Meyer himself.

“I will not be defined by my criminal history, nor will I allow anyone else to be here at Abcor. No one should be judged for the rest of their life on the worst night of their life,” Meyer said. “Now that I manage the human resources for Abcor, I have the privilege of giving some returning citizens an opportunity to prove themselves. Prison doesn’t define who we are, but it can help shape us into who we want to be.”

A video of the webinar will be available on Safe & Just Michigan’s YouTube channel the following week at bit.ly/YouTubeSJM.

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Safe & Just Michigan (www.safeandjustmi.org) works to advance policies that end Michigan’s over-use of incarceration and promote community safety and healing. We partner with Michigan organizations and leaders from across the political spectrum, including business and community leaders, faith communities, crime survivor organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals, prisoners and their families, as well as Michigan taxpayers statewide.

The Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (<https://www.responsiblebusinessinitiative.org>) is a network of businesses and campaign partners who are leading the way in building fair systems of justice, driving forward equality and promoting human rights. RBIJ offers opportunities for networking, dialogue, and sharing insights — at meetings, events and through introductions. We provide a shared voice and platform for justice-engaged business champions.