

JOTF 2017 State Policy Agenda

JOTF advocates legislation and budget proposals that can improve the economic opportunities of Maryland's low-wage, low-income workers and their families. Our advocacy work stems from recognition that a healthy Maryland economy requires public policies that meet the workforce needs of employers and promote fair and equitable access to economic opportunities for all Marylanders.

During the 2017 state legislative session, JOTF will support the following legislative and budget initiatives that promote education, training and employment advancement opportunities for low-wage workers and job-seekers, the successful reentry of workers with a criminal record, workplace benefits and supports, and best-practice hiring policies:

JOTF SIGNATURE PRIORITIES

Maryland Healthy Working Families Act - Earned Sick Days

Everyone gets sick and everyone deserves time to recover without risking their economic stability, yet 39 percent of American workers are unable to earn paid sick days. Amongst low-wage workers, the people who can least afford to take unpaid time off when sick, nearly two-thirds lack access to this basic benefit. In Maryland, more than 750,000 of our neighbors are forced to make impossible choices: go to work sick, send an ill child to school or daycare, or stay home and sacrifice much-needed income or, worse, risk job loss.

The Working Matters coalition, of which JOTF is a founding member, will reintroduce the Maryland Healthy Working Families Act in 2017. The proposed legislation would allow workers to earn one hour of paid sick leave for every 30 hours worked, up to a maximum of seven days per year for full-time workers.

Criminal Record Expungement – Non-Convictions

The ability to secure stable employment is crucial to the successful reentry of those individuals that have experienced incarceration. Unfortunately, a criminal record can serve as an insurmountable barrier to securing gainful employment and other critical resources, even if the record did not result in a conviction. A 2009 study funded by the National Institute of Justice examined more than 80,000 criminal records and found that there is a way to actuarially estimate a point in time when an individual with a criminal record is at no greater risk of committing another crime than other individuals of the same age. In other words, after a period of time, possession of a criminal record becomes wholly irrelevant in hiring decisions.

Given that recidivism declines steadily with time clean, JOTF will continue to support the following legislation that seeks to eliminate the impact of non-conviction records on workers and job seekers:

1. Repeal of the Unit Rule

Employers often refuse to hire applicants with criminal records, even if the person was never convicted. Under current Maryland law, criminal records with charges that did not result in a conviction are eligible for expungement. Unfortunately, Maryland's "unit rule" permanently prohibits expungement of eligible charges if all charges within a unit are not eligible for expungement. This means that acquittals and other favorable dispositions become ineligible for expungement if a conviction is also contained within a unit. JOTF will

support legislation allowing for the expungement of any charges within a unit that would otherwise be eligible for expungement, regardless of other ineligible charges.

2. Automatic Expungement – Acquittal, Dismissal, Nolle Prosequi (Non-Convictions)

A significant number of Maryland job-seekers do not benefit from laws that would allow them to clear their criminal records because they are unaware of how to access expungement or cannot afford the required court fees. To ensure that all eligible Marylanders can access expungement services, JOTF will support legislation that would allow for the *immediate* expungement of certain non-convictions (acquittals, dismissals, and nolle prosequi) after a required three-year waiting period, or sooner under specified circumstances. Protections will be in place for those individuals seeking expungement relief but must retain portions of the record for purposes of citizenship.

Ban the Box – College Applications

Each year approximately 15,000 inmates return from prison to communities across Maryland. Their criminal record and low education levels are enormous barriers to mainstream employment. By adopting policies that will promote the long-term employment of former inmates, we can help ensure that these Marylanders find legitimate work, contribute to the economy, and turn their lives around.

JOTF has long supported and led efforts to eliminate the arrest/conviction question from initial job applications that requires prospective employees to check a box indicating that they have been arrested or convicted of a crime. Given the strong correlation between education and income, JOTF will support efforts to eliminate the arrest/conviction question from the initial college applications of those educational institutions that are recipients of state aid.

Pretrial/Bail Reform

An individual charged with a crime, who poses no serious risk to public safety but lacks stable employment or family connections, should not be detained simply for limited financial resources. Unfortunately, this occurs often. Individuals are arrested, charged, and detained. Not because they are a danger to public safety or flight risk, but because they are poor and cannot afford bail. This means that the employment of detained pretrial defendants is significantly jeopardized, if not terminated, including any other family obligations, for a crime for which they have not been found guilty.

Given the impact that any length of incarceration can have on working families, JOTF will support legislation and administrative efforts to reduce the use of pretrial detention and the imposition of ‘money bail’ for defendants who do not pose a serious public safety risk or flight risk.

Elimination of Partial SNAP/TCA Ban – Felony Drug Convictions

As more Marylanders are forced to turn to the state for assistance in meeting their basic needs during these difficult economic times, it is important to ensure that the state’s safety net programs are protected. Moreover, it is equally important to ensure that these programs do not impose punitive restrictions that are counterproductive to the securing self-sufficiency for working families.

Under current Maryland law, SNAP and TCA eligible recipients are subject to a temporary one-year suspension of benefits if they are convicted of a felony drug offense while applying or are receiving SNAP and/or TCA benefits and random drug testing during the suspension. No other offenses trigger suspension of these benefits, only drug offenses. During the 2017 session, JOTF will support legislation seeking to eliminate the partial ban on SNAP and TCA eligibility if convicted of a felony drug offense.

JOTF ACTIVE SUPPORT

Post-Secondary Access and Affordability

For low-income students seeking a more affordable path to obtaining training and credentials necessary for employment, it is well-established that community colleges are essential in providing a critical access point. However, because these programs are non-credit, short term programs, they often do not qualify for federal financial aid.

Currently there are no state scholarships for non-credit programs of study, presenting a major barrier to low-income individuals who are seeking training to qualify for middle-skill jobs and careers. JOTF will support legislation aimed at expanding need-based aid to include non-credit courses at community colleges.

Adult High Schools

JOTF's mission supports increasing access to educational opportunities for non-traditional students. JOTF is an appointed member of the Task Force to Study the Adult High School Concept established as a result of 2016 legislation. The Task Force will generate recommendations and possible enabling legislation for a pilot to allow Maryland adults to obtain a high school diploma in an education and training setting. JOTF supports the creation of this type of model that will set adult learners on a path toward economic opportunity.

Education, Training, and Workforce Development

Maryland's low-income workers need access to training in order to advance in the workplace and obtain jobs with family supporting wages. In these challenging economic times when jobs are scarce and employers are looking for workers with specific skills, it is even more important for the state to increase its investment in training and hiring, and to develop strong employment pipelines that allow low-skill workers to advance through training and into the workforce.

During the 2017 session, JOTF will actively monitor the state budget, focusing specifically on the Employment Advancement Right Now (EARN) Program and Adult and Correctional Education (including access and affordability of GED Testing). JOTF will also support meaningful initiatives that expand apprenticeships, on-the-job training and adult basic education.

Auto Insurance Affordability

Mobility is key to getting ahead. We live in a regional economy, where services and jobs are not always located near home. In fact, almost half of all workers in Maryland travel to another county for their job. While having a car is critical, the high costs associated with insurance put ownership out of reach for many families. Moreover, insurance premiums are largely determined using non driving related factors, effectively jeopardizing the ability to secure and maintain car insurance as required by law.

This legislative session, JOTF will continue to support efforts that seek to establish a low cost car insurance state pilot program and removal of credit reports as means to determine auto insurance rates.

Unemployment Insurance

Unemployment insurance (UI) is meant to serve as a safety net for workers who lose their job through no fault of their own. Providing benefits helps ensure that hardworking families can meet their basic needs while dealing with the sudden hardship of job loss. UI also helps to stabilize Maryland's economy in times of recession as it ensures that individuals who are unemployed are still able to participate actively in the economy as consumers. In 2017 JOTF will work to advance legislation that ensures 1) the preservation of a strong, accessible UI program in Maryland; 2) that the solvency of Maryland's UI Fund is maintained; and 3) prevents exemptions for workers in specific occupations.