



JOTF Works

JOTF HELPS TO SECURE BIG WINS FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS, BUT THERE IS MUCH MORE WORK TO BE DONE

By Melissa Chalmers Broome

JOTF's hard work during the 2007 legislative session has helped to change laws that will reduce barriers to employment and ensure that work supports remain intact for Maryland residents. Three bills have become law.

Reducing the impact of a criminal record:

In Baltimore City, approximately 1,600 people are arrested and released each month without being charged. Until now, even though they weren't charged with a crime, the arrest would appear on a criminal history record. As a result, innocent people were often prevented from getting jobs.

Working closely with the sponsor, Delegate Keith Haynes (Baltimore), and other advocates, JOTF helped to pass a bill that automatically expunges an arrest without charge from public record. Though the bill failed in 2006, this year it passed unanimously in the Senate and with strong support in the House.

Creating more incentives to pay child support:

Research indicates that many low-income, non-custodial parents accumulate a child support debt to the state that they are unable to repay. This debt serves as a huge disincentive for working in the mainstream economy where their wages may be garnished.

Overwhelming debt can also turn parents away from participating in the lives of their children financially and socially.

JOTF addressed this major barrier to employment inherent in our child support system by working closely with Delegate Kathleen Dumais (Montgomery County) and Senator Jennifer Forehand (Montgomery County) and other advocates to establish the Child Support Payment Incentive Program. The program eliminates past debt owed to the state by non-custodial parents if they pay their current required child support. The new law will result in more money for children, more mainstream employment for their parents, and more child support collected by the State.

The bill, which failed last year, passed unanimously in the House and Senate, and will make Maryland the first state in the nation to have a statewide child support debt leveraging program.

Increasing unemployment insurance benefits:

Unemployment insurance allows workers to pay bills while they find suitable employment, however, Maryland's system ranks among the least generous in the nation. The new law will increase the maximum benefit level by \$40 starting in October 2007, raising it from \$340 to \$380 per week. The increase is only the second passed by the legislature in the last five years.

Despite these legislative victories, several bills of great benefit to working families did not succeed this year. JOTF will return to Annapolis next January to continue promoting the following:

Flexible Sick Leave Workers shouldn't have to choose between caring for a sick family member and keeping their job. Nationally, only 1 in 3 workers can use earned sick days even to care for their sick children. JOTF supported legislation sponsored by Delegate Ann Marie Doory and Senator Robert Garagiola that would have required employers to allow employees to use their already accrued sick days to care for a child, spouse, or parent. The bill failed in the Senate Finance Committee.

Adult Education Nearly 1 in 3 adults in Maryland need adult

education services – high school diploma, GED or English as a Second Language. JOTF supported a bill sponsored by Senator PJ Hogan and Delegate Sheila Hixson that would create a funding formula to produce a reliable funding stream and increase the state's investment in adult education. The bill failed in the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

Economic Development Every year Maryland gives millions of dollars in tax credits to businesses for economic development purposes that include the creation of new jobs. The state however, does not collect information to determine whether the businesses actually create the jobs. JOTF supported legislation sponsored by Senator Verna Jones that called for the Department of Business and Economic Development to increase its reporting and disclose the number and quality of jobs created by public subsidies. The bill failed in the Senate Budget and Taxation committee.



Melissa Chalmers Broome, JOTF Senior Policy Advocate (top right) joins bill sponsors Senator Jennie Forehand and Delegate Kathleen Dumais as Governor O'Malley signs a bill that encourages parents to pay child support and reduces barriers to employment.

PRISONER RELEASE IN MARYLAND: NO VALID ID AND NO MONEY

By Andrea Payne

Imagine being dropped into a city with \$3, the clothes on your back, maybe a resource list and a few personal items.

Unfortunately, this is what thousands of Marylanders face each year when they leave prison to start a new life.

When prisoners leave the system, we want them to reenter society and become productive, responsible citizens. We want them to get jobs, find stable homes, support themselves, and live healthy lives. And this is what they want for themselves. Yet, we offer people leaving prison so little assistance that a successful transition is almost impossible.

No Valid ID:

Maryland releases a large number of prisoners onto the street without a valid ID—no driver's license, no state ID, no social security card; not even a birth certificate. All many have is a Department of Corrections ID that the Motor Vehicle Administration will not always accept—and as of 2008, cannot accept under the new federal Real ID act restrictions.

One problem is that the DOC does not keep IDs on file, and therefore does not return them when prisoners are released. Instead, the prisoner must request to have any ID they came in with "sent out" to a friend or family member. If they do not make this request, their ID will eventually be destroyed.

More permanent documents like birth certificates and social security cards are usually left on the outside, and can be difficult for ex-offenders to track down once they are released. DOC will work with inmates to obtain new copies of these documents, but this system also has snags.

First, inmates must take the initiative to ask for help from DOC case managers—they are not offered assistance. Second, it costs money to

get a new birth certificate, and many inmates don't have the \$12. The final snag is timing. Vital Records will not take birth certificate requests until at least six months before release, and sometimes the document is simply not processed in time.

Without a valid ID, a person will have difficulty finding a job, finding housing, or applying for assistance programs. "In the City of Baltimore and the State of Maryland there are a limited number of programs that service inmates and ex-prisoners. One of the keys to success is providing residents with identification. Without ID Marylanders cannot receive legitimate employment, health/social services, or even some of the basic needs that you and I take for granted. The result is that ex-offenders will once again return to their

communities making the same mistakes that they did in their past and return to the state's prison system," explains Felix Mata of the Baltimore City Ex-offender Initiative.

Empty Pockets:

Before ex-offenders address these barriers, they must deal with more immediate needs such as food, temporary shelter, and transportation. Unfortunately, prisoners are often released with minimal resources, and sometimes nothing at all.

Most prisoners released in Maryland receive a nominal amount of "gate money." The amount varies depending on where the prisoner is released from. Facilities in rural areas, such as the prison in Hagerstown, may provide up to \$50. This is intended to pay for a bus ride back home and maybe a meal or two. If you are released in Baltimore City you will receive only \$3 in gate money, if you receive anything at all. Realistically, all this pays for is the local bus.

This is not enough to pay for food, not enough to pay for additional bus rides while searching

for a job, and certainly not enough to pay any rent. If ex-offenders do not have a program to support them, or friends and family members willing to provide extensive help, it is nearly impossible to make a smooth transition.

Some returnees have it slightly better. In Montgomery County, a Department of Corrections ID serves as a temporary bus pass and library card. At the very least, these ex-offenders can look for a job and access some basic resources. Those who participate in a work release program or assignments with the Maryland Correctional Enterprises (the state's prison work program) will also leave with small paychecks.

Because the barriers to successful reentry are so high, one in four of the 12,696 prisoners released by the Maryland Department of Corrections in 2002 had returned to prison by the end of 2003. After three years, nearly half had returned to prison. Maryland needs to stop this revolving door. Locking people up again and again hurts communities and costs taxpayers to the tune of about \$30,000 per inmate per year.

Ensuring that people leave prison with proper documents and emergency resources are just the baby steps. In the bigger picture, we need more services to help inmates prepare for life after prison, more programs for ex-offenders as they reintegrate, and better policies relating to employment, housing, and criminal records.

High Hopes, Empty Pockets

Most prisoners released in Maryland return to Baltimore City. What does the moment of release look like for these ex-offenders?

- On the day of release, only 39% of returnees are met at the prison by friends or family
- Only 14% have a bus ticket or money intended for transportation
- 15% leave without any money at all
- The average prisoner comes home with \$40
- 11% have no photo ID—not even a DOC ID
- Only 29% have a state ID or a driver's license

Source: Visher, LaVigne & Travis. "Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry." Urban Institute, January 2004.

JOTF WELCOMES OUR TWO NEWEST BOARD MEMBERS:

Tanya Terrell & Ellen Yerman. Tanya is the executive director of Empower Baltimore Management Corporation, the nonprofit organization that stimulates economic growth and access to employment for residents in the Empowerment Zone. Ellen Yerman is executive director of Career Services and Cooperative Education at Villa Julie College. To read more biographical information about Tanya and Ellen, please visit our website at www.jotf.org

CAR OWNERSHIP: LUXURY OR NECESSITY FOR LOW INCOME PEOPLE?

By Gerald Ford

For low-income residents in the Baltimore region, lack of transportation can be a major barrier to accessing job training, education and employment opportunities.

Those who are unable to afford a car are often left immobile and isolated. Without a job they cannot afford to buy a car, and without a car they cannot access many of the region's job openings or take part in a training course.

Recent research shows that there is a correlation between car ownership and economic opportunities. Welfare recipients and other low-income individuals who own cars are more likely to be employed than those that do not. According to the report "Car Ownership, Employment, and Earnings" by Steven Raphael and Lorien Rice (2002 Journal of Urban Economics), welfare recipients who own cars are employed for more hours and earn more than those that do not own cars. Owning a car frees the worker from the schedule, fixed routes and unpredictability of public transportation.

Making do without a car requires poor households to rely on others or on the local public transit system. Public transit can work well in dense urban areas. Yet according to the December 2005 Brookings Institution Policy Brief, "High Cost or High Opportunity Cost? Transportation and Family Economic Success" by Margy Waller, fewer than 5 percent of workers take public transportation to work, while nearly 88 percent commute by car. Despite significant public investment in public transit, usage continues to decline as a percentage of urban travel. Add to this, many new jobs are located in the suburbs, and public transit rarely takes central city residents all the way to the door of suburban employers.

The impact of a lack of transportation affects residents in very real ways. In the City of Baltimore, only 62% of residents have a driver's license compared to 88% of Maryland residents overall. Many jobs have long since moved out of the central city and into the suburbs and more distant places. Moreover, job growth in Baltimore pales in comparison to the growth experienced in surrounding counties.

The costs associated with getting a license and owning a car can be daunting for low-income residents. Just to get a license, a Maryland resident must pay approximately \$300 for driver's education, which is required by the state, \$50 for a learner's permit, and \$30 for a driver's license. In addition, state law requires drivers to have car insurance. In Baltimore, the minimum car insurance typically costs over \$70 per month or \$840 per year. In addition, according to the Maryland Office of the Attorney General, the costs of gas, oil, and maintenance add hundreds of dollars each year. These costs leave low-wage workers feeling stranded. They can't obtain a good job without adequate public transportation or a car, but they can't afford a car and few good suburban jobs are transit accessible. For example, a person working full-time for \$7 an hour (approximately \$14,500 per year) is unlikely to be able to be able to afford the costs of getting a license let alone the costs of car ownership.

Lack of viable mass transit options and the high cost associated with driving are a very real impediment to low wage residents in the Baltimore area. If we are to make significant gains in helping low-income workers lead better lives we must either improve our mass transit system so they have a reliable way to get to and from their jobs or we must find a way to make car ownership more affordable.



Recognizing the importance of a car to residents' ability to obtain and maintain employment, JOTF and its partners help participants in our JumpStart program to purchase a car at a discount rate and with a low interest loan from Vehicles for Change. Sean Rock (left) receives the keys to his new car from Martin Schwartz, President of Vehicles for Change. To learn more about Vehicles for Change or to donate a car, please call 410-242-9674.



HELP US KEEP CHUGGING ALONG!

Less than 3 months left! Please help us to reach our fundraising goal. If you would like to support our efforts to help low-income workers and job seekers please contact jessica@jotf.org or call 410-234-8040.

Job Opportunities Task Force

231 East Baltimore Street

Suite 1102

Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

SAVE THE DATE! JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE BROWNBAG DISCUSSION

Sponsored by the Open Society Institute

BAN THE BOX: Ending Employment Discrimination Against Formerly Incarcerated People

Other cities have removed the "box" on job applications where prospective employees are asked to check "yes" or "no" to indicate if they have ever been convicted of a crime. Banning the box helps to reduce employment discrimination against people who have been convicted of a crime. Come find out if this is a good idea for Baltimore and if so, how we can make it happen.

May 16, 2007

12:00 – 2:00pm

University Maryland School of Law
500 W. Baltimore Street, Room 107

To RSVP call (410) 234-8046 or e-mail
melissa@jotf.org

JOTF is a 501c(3) non-profit organization. If you would like to support our efforts to help low-income workers and job seekers please contact jessica@jotf.org or call 410-234-8040.

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