

# More Than a Background

## Removing Barriers to Employment and Access to Vital Identification

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Justice-impacted people face structural barriers to employment that delay reentry success, weaken workforce participation, and undermine public safety. Two of the most persistent barriers are discrimination based on criminal records and lack of access to vital identification documents required for work, housing, and benefits.

The **More Than a Background** campaign is a multi-state, policy-driven effort led by the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) to remove these barriers through fair chance hiring reforms and vital documents access. Grounded in lived experience and evidence, the campaign advances practical legislative solutions that expand access to quality jobs, strengthen economic mobility, and improve reentry outcomes.

CEO urges policymakers to advance fair chance hiring and identification reforms as core components of modern reentry and workforce systems under **Opportunity 2030**.

### BACKGROUND

Each year, more than 600,000 people return home from incarceration ready to work and contribute to their communities. Yet many are excluded from employment opportunities due to policies and practices unrelated to job performance or public safety.

Criminal background checks are frequently used as blanket screening tools, disqualifying qualified candidates before their skills or experience are considered. At the same time, many people leave incarceration without valid identification — or face months-long delays and fees to obtain it — preventing them from completing employment verification, enrolling in benefits, or securing housing.

These barriers are not accidental. They are the result of fragmented systems, outdated policies, and inconsistent implementation that delay opportunity at the moment it matters most.

### THE CHALLENGE

#### Hiring Barriers

Justice-impacted jobseekers are routinely denied employment due to the overuse of criminal background checks, even for jobs unrelated to a prior conviction. This practice shrinks the labor pool, increases turnover, and keeps willing workers sidelined.



## THE CHALLENGE (CONT.)

### Documentation Barriers

Without state-issued identification or vital documents, individuals cannot:

- Complete I-9 employment verification
- Enroll in SNAP, Medicaid, or other benefits
- Open bank accounts or secure housing

Delays in accessing identification increase instability and the risk of reincarceration — despite strong motivation to work.

## LIVED EXPERIENCE SNAPSHOT

Justice-impacted people consistently report that employment barriers — not lack of effort — are the biggest obstacle to reentry.

In CEO's **State of Your State** survey:

- 67% of respondents lost a job opportunity due to their criminal record
- 18% lost 11 or more job opportunities over time
- 38% reported leaving incarceration without necessary identification documents

These barriers delay employment and stall economic mobility.

## WHY BARRIER REMOVAL IS ESSENTIAL TO REENTRY

Employment is one of the strongest predictors of successful reentry. When people are able to work:

- Recidivism rates decline
- Families stabilize
- Communities experience improved public safety

Fair chance hiring and access to identification ensure that people are evaluated based on qualifications and readiness — not past involvement with the justice system.

Removing these barriers does not lower standards. It allows workforce systems to function as intended.



POLICY SOLUTIONS

Fair Chance Hiring Reform

Policymakers should advance legislation that:

- Delays criminal history review until later in the hiring process
- Prohibits blanket exclusions based on conviction history
- Requires individualized, job-related assessments

These reforms expand the labor pool while preserving employer discretion and public safety.

Vital Documents Access

Policymakers should ensure people leave incarceration with — or can immediately obtain — valid identification by:

- Streamlining pre-release ID issuance
- Eliminating unnecessary documentation requirements
- Improving coordination between corrections agencies and motor vehicle departments

Multi-State Implementation via More Than a Background

Through the **More Than a Background** campaign, CEO and partners are advancing reforms in states including Colorado, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Oklahoma — ensuring policy change translates into practice.

BY THE NUMBERS

 <p><b>600,000+</b> people return return home from incarceration each year</p>	 <p><b>67%</b> report losing a job due to their criminal record</p>	 <p><b>38%</b> lack necessary identification upon release</p>	 <p>Employment is one of the strongest predictors of reduced recidivism</p>
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CONCLUSION

Fair chance hiring and access to identification are not peripheral issues — they are foundational to workforce participation, economic mobility, and public safety.

**Through More Than a Background and Opportunity 2030**, CEO is advancing practical, evidence-based solutions that remove barriers, strengthen labor markets, and create pathways to opportunity.

Policymakers should act now to modernize hiring and identification systems so that work — not a background — determines a person’s future.

