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MPAC

LD 1941

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Dear members of the Joint Judiciary Committee:

My name is Steven Schoff, and I'm 53 years old. Although I was born in Portland and raised in Lyman, when somebody asks, I simply tell them that I'm from Maine. Until a few years ago, my experiences as a Mainer could have been told by countless other Mainers. I graduated from the University of Maine. I went to Bowdoin. I started a successful business in Maine. I have a home in Maine. My children and my grandchildren live in Maine. My siblings and all their children live in Maine. My ancestors were brought to Maine in 1757 as indentured servants, when Maine was still part of Massachusetts.

So, you might be surprised to learn that I no longer live in Maine. I drove ten hours, from central Pennsylvania, to tell you why I moved away.

Between 1996 and 2022, I spent 26 years in the custody of the Maine Department of Corrections. I'm a felon.

I belong to the last class of Americans who it is perfectly legal to discriminate against in employment, housing and education. Maine law not only allows this discrimination to fester unchecked, but it requires something akin to self-defamation after a wink and nod second interview. It's the Twenty-First Century equivalent to the Scarlet Letter. I write this letter and give my testimony in support of the Clean Slate Law (LD 1911); the Parole and Commutation Law (LD 1941), and the Corrections Ombudsman Law (LD 1962), because these issues hurt Mainers. They have each hurt me.

When I was released from the Mountainview pre-release in Charleston four years ago, I had a bunch of good reasons to feel prepared for what would come next. After all, I had a college education; vocational training, vocational certifications, money saved from working a job in the community for two years, and I already had my driver's license. I did everything that the Department of Corrections required of me, and much more. So now I ask: Was I wrong to expect that my debt to society was paid in full? I had dozens of job interviews that first month. Interviews seemingly always went well. I got countless call backs and requests for additional information. I went to nine second interviews. Then silence. The employers always found out that I was a felon, and that was the end of that.

I had no choice but to take a minimum wage job cleaning lawnmowers at a rental company in Biddeford, despite having degrees in Business and Finance, and Computer-Aided Design and Engineering. My worth to Maine employers was effectively reduced to worthless because Maine law not only makes it perfectly acceptable to discriminate against me, but it has also codified the question of my worth. Maine law makes that an acceptable question for employers and landlords to ask, even though my felony occurred over thirty years before.

Since 2022, I have been fired from three jobs because I didn't check the box. I refuse to check that box. My wife and I were evicted from our first home two months after I got out of prison, simply because I recently got out of prison. Then it happened again. I left Maine three years ago to live in Pennsylvania. That was not an accident.

Pennsylvania was the very first state to pass a Clean Slate law. My life and livelihood still present challenges in Pennsylvania, but at least I'm on a level playing field here. Nevertheless, I wanna come home. My family wants me home. My life and business belong in Maine, not in Pennsylvania.

In closing I simply hope that I have given you a real-world example of how these issues negatively affect good people. Good people who have dreams and jobs and families just like you. Thank you.

Steven R. Schoff Jr.

In closing I will hang on hope that I have given you a memorable, real-world example