



**Opinion Editorial - From The Orlando Sentinel: February 9, 2021**

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## **Minimum-wage exception bill another blow for ex-felons | Commentary**

**ORLANDO, FL - February 9, 2021** A bill was recently introduced in the state Legislature by Sen. Jeff Brandes (R-St. Petersburg) that proposes to pay people with past felony convictions less than the minimum wage. We believe this proposal is fundamentally flawed and should be defeated. We also believe there is a better way to support local businesses and ensure that people with past convictions, or returning citizens (as we prefer to call ourselves), can find and keep a job.

The idea behind the Brandes legislation is the belief that if returning citizens can legally be paid less than minimum wage, employers will be more willing to employ them when wages rise.

As individuals with past felony convictions and leaders in the movement to empower returning citizens in our state, we feel it is vital to not only let people know this proposal is a step in the wrong direction, but that there is a better way forward, for all of us. That better way forward is built on the premise that returning citizens can and should be able to operate in the marketplace, like any other Florida citizen.

That should be our goal. Not new regulations that perpetuate old, broken, divisive systems. Returning citizens are not looking for special favors or new employment classifications. We are looking for jobs — and to be treated like anyone else.

In November, Floridians passed Amendment 2, which increases the state's minimum wage to \$10 per hour this year, then increases by \$1 per hour each year until it reaches \$15 in 2026. Sen. Brandes' bill would add a huge caveat to this reform. In particular, the bill would give the Legislature the ability to set a lower minimum wage for people in the state correctional system, people convicted of a felony, people younger than 21 years of age, and "other hard-to-hire employees."

While we can't speak to the motivation of Sen. Brandes, this concept of classifying people with convictions in a new employment category represents a step backward in our ongoing efforts to empower returning citizens in our state. It is like setting policy about the activity on a train going in the wrong direction. We can do better.

Rather than locking returning citizens into a new second-class wage, we believe it is better to focus our efforts on removing existing barriers that block people with past convictions from job opportunities in the first place.

Instead of more regulations that divide people and distort the market, our goal should be that when a person completes their sentence, they have the same access to things like employment training, job



licenses, and credit that any other employee in the state has. Adding a new government bureaucracy to administer a “returning citizen wage policy” runs counter to such an approach.

A more forward-looking approach would be to continue creating a marketplace in which returning citizens who have completed their sentence can be treated like any other employee, rather than continuing to single people out for additional punishment beyond the sentence given to them by a judge. No one benefits from that. We can’t on one hand demand that returning citizens pay their outstanding fines and fees to be able to vote, and on the other hand limit their earning potential.

The success of returning citizens re-integrating back into their communities is a success for all of Florida. When our earning potential is not limited, we can shoulder more of the tax burden and help create more vibrant economic growth in communities throughout Florida. Limiting us means limiting Florida. Instead of limiting returning citizens in Florida, we should come up with new ways to expand opportunities for returning citizens to become even greater contributors to society.

Think about it. Clearing a person’s record at the end of their sentence increases employment among returning citizens by double digits. Yet our state makes record-clearing nearly inaccessible.

Giving returning citizens access to job licenses would have a similar impact on the lives of people with past convictions. Florida imposes 379 restrictions on returning citizens seeking occupational licenses or certifications. Licenses can also be denied at any time simply because of a past conviction. That is a huge barrier in a state where more than one in four jobs require a license.

We see similar access issues to job training and education, credit, housing, and transportation for people who have completed their sentences. When we worked to get Amendment 4 passed in 2018 and restore voting rights for 1.5 million returning citizens in Florida, we were not trying to create a special status for people with past convictions — we were fighting so people could be treated like any other citizen.

Instead of creating additional barriers and bureaucracies in the marketplace, and continuing to segregate and label people beyond their sentence, why not spend our time tearing down those barriers in the workplace and help both employers and employees alike? We think that is a much better approach.

### **About The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition**

FRRC is a grassroots, membership organization run by Returning Citizens (Formerly Convicted Persons) who are dedicated to ending the disenfranchisement and discrimination against people with convictions and creating a more comprehensive and humane reentry system that will enhance successful reentry, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety. For more information, [visit https://floridarrc.com/](https://floridarrc.com/).

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