



Former Prisoners Go to Albany To Defend Rights

May 21, 2008

[ALBANY](#) — Nearly 100 ex-convicts threaded their way among hordes of noisy schoolchildren clogging halls around the Capitol yesterday, advocating legislation to protect their employment and voting rights, close underused prisons, and make re-entry into society less difficult.

"This charge is led by people who have done time. You're talking about hundreds of years of time in prison," a former inmate, [Glenn Martin](#), said, unloading his pockets at the state police security checkpoint in the Empire State Plaza concourse. "Talk about unlikely lobbyists, right?"

Many dressed in conservative suits, blending with other late-session lobbyists. They carried notebooks with copies of a dozen bills they back. They divided into small groups, each heading to appointments through the day with several lawmakers.

But in ways that were not immediately visible, they were marked — with criminal records that follow them lifelong, voting rights lost while in prison and on parole, and struggles back to the mainstream.

"That is one of the hardest things coming out of prison, trying to get that job," Vilma Donovan told [Assemblyman Michael Benjamin](#). The 45-year-old Long Island woman recalled a job interview that visibly went south after she disclosed her drug conviction, though she said she's been drug-free for eight years.

State law prohibits "unfair discrimination" against those with convictions, it also directs employers to consider what bearing the particular offense has on the job, how long ago it happened, and state certificates and information about conduct since. But that provision is sometimes ignored and more often unknown, Martin said.

Bills pending in the state Senate and Assembly would require consumer reporting agencies that do criminal background checks to also include in reports to employers a copy of Article 23-A of state correction law, which tells them how to use the information.

Mr. Benjamin, a Bronx Democrat, was already a sponsor. He also sponsored the Assembly-passed legislation that would ensure convicted felons are notified of their right to vote again once their sentences are served.

"The voting right is a fundamental American right," Mr. Benjamin said. "It shouldn't be taken away by any state."

The lobbyists were also pushing legislation that would establish a \$10,000 employment tax credit as an incentive to businesses to hire those released from state prison. There is already a similar \$2,400 federal tax credit, Martin said.

Martin, 36, spent six years in prison on a drug conviction, earned a college degree behind bars, and was released seven years ago. He is now vice president of the [Fortune Society](#), which provides housing, counseling, and other prisoner re-entry services in [New York City](#), as well as an alternative program to prison.