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‘Ban the box’ law would help rebuild lives in Alabama

How long should a mistake follow people through their lives? Should it prevent them from earning a living? The “criminal history checkbox” on many standardized job application forms often keeps otherwise qualified employees from making it to the next stage of the hiring process, where they could explain their past face-to-face. This creates discouraging barriers to employment for people who are looking to rebuild their lives after serving their time and paying their debt to society.

A nationwide “ban the box” movement is urging some simple but important changes to job application processes. Removing questions about conviction histories can level the playing field and give all applicants a fair chance to compete for jobs on the basis of qualifications and skills. The movement already has influenced many Alabama employers to make individualized assessments of applicants, delaying questions about criminal offenses until later in the hiring process, and considering how long ago the offense was committed and whether it is relevant to the job.

Nineteen states, including Georgia, have removed the conviction history question from their applications for state jobs. Seven states have even removed the question from applications for jobs with private employers. President Obama’s executive order in November 2015 will ease the re-entry of former inmates into society by “banning the box” on federal job applications.

Many major corporations already recognize that it makes good business sense to pick from the widest possible pool of employees. Target, Walmart, Home Depot, Koch Industries, Starbucks, and Bed, Bath & Beyond no longer ask questions about criminal history on initial job applications.

How ex-offenders can re-enter the workforce and the broader society is an issue with both moral and economic dimensions. People who have completed their punishment deserve both dignity and forgiveness. Ex-offenders need to be brought back into the mainstream, rewarded for their labor and encouraged to play by the rules. Creating a group of people deemed permanently unemployable because of a past criminal conviction is bad public policy and bad economics.

BOTTOM LINE: Employers have every right to inquire about the histories of their prospective employees, but a common-sense rule could help ensure that job applicants are judged on their full merits. Removal of the criminal history checkbox would allow employers to judge each applicant on substantive criteria. That would help former inmates become productive members of society and provide for their families.