Aspiring barbers, nurses, electricians and many others must first be licensed by the state in order to enter their chosen profession in Pennsylvania and all other states. Current Pennsylvania law designates the authority of licensing boards to deny licensure if the applicant has been convicted of a felony and certain specific misdemeanors.

In December of 2019, however, the Pennsylvania House joined the Senate in alleviating barriers which restrict former convicts from obtaining professional licenses. The House voted 193-4 on HB 1477 to reverse the policy that gives all 29 licensing boards authority to deny licenses to individuals with criminal records. This policy reversal will affect approximately 250 types of licenses.

Both the House and Senate versions of the bill mandate boards to individually review cases and evaluate potentially disqualifying personal factors. Reviews must determine if the individual poses a safety risk or if the crime formerly committed was relevant to the profession in which they are currently applying.

The Senate bill, SB 637, requires boards to publicly list criminal offenses directly related to the profession. Additionally, if the applicant is unsure if their past crime disqualifies them from a license, the bill grants them the right to seek a preemptive decision from the board before enrolling in a job-training program or acquiring additional education and professional experience needed for licensure.

The House version of the bill also allows boards to grant licenses to individuals who completed training while serving time, but on a restricted basis. Eventually, full certification may be reached after one or two years without violations. The restricted license alleviates the harshness of an automatic denial, while also maintaining the integrity of licensing boards. HB 1477 also provides a “best practices” guide for boards reviewing applicants with criminal records.

Both chambers must now negotiate and combine their bills before conducting votes on the new bill that will emerge for gubernatorial approval.

Pennsylvania is a leader providing access to employment for individuals transitioning out of the justice system. For example, the passage of the 2018 Clean Slate Law automatically sealed approximately 30 million criminal records in order to help Pennsylvanians with a criminal record achieve employment. Efforts to adopt these policies has spread to other states such as New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington.

Measures such as the Clean Slate Law, SB 637 and HB 1477 reduce cost and provide redemptive chances for individuals convicted of crimes. Ultimately, these reforms will work to support employment opportunities and increase economic security for more Pennsylvanians transitioning back into civilian life.
Pa. House Joins Senate in Overwhelmingly Passing Bill to Help Ex-Convicts Get Professional Licenses

Pennsylvania Licensing System Information for Licensees

PA Senate Unanimously Passes Proposal to Help Ex-Offenders Get Professional Licenses

More Criminal Justice Reforms on the Horizon in Pennsylvania

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