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ON THE WEB

## Cities That Lead the Way

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Crippled by soaring corrections costs, states and municipalities are re-examining policies that drive ex-offenders right back to prison by barring them from employment. Locked out of the mainstream, ex-felons become burdens to their families, their communities and the nation as a whole. Three cities - Boston, Chicago and San Francisco - have taken groundbreaking steps aimed at de-emphasizing criminal histories for qualified applicants for city jobs, except in law enforcement, education and other sensitive areas where people with convictions are specifically barred by statute.

The Boston plan, which becomes effective this summer, deserves to be widely emulated. It covers not just city employees but also the companies that do business with the city. Those companies, which employ hundreds of thousands of workers, will be required to make their employment policies consistent with those put forth by the city.

Under the new policy, the city will not conduct a criminal record review at all, except in special circumstances or when it is required by law. Even then, the search will come near the end of the process, after the applicant has proved to be qualified and is about to be hired. If the city then changes its mind about the job offer, the applicant is entitled to a full explanation and a chance to rebut the criminal records reports, which sometimes contain errors.

Taken together, the recent developments in Boston, Chicago and San Francisco symbolize a step forward in terms of fairness for law-abiding ex-offenders, who are often barred from entire occupations because of youthful mistakes and minor crimes committed in the distant past. It should be clear to all of us by now that confining those people to the ranks of the unemployed makes it more likely that they will commit new crimes, return to prison and become a permanent burden to society.