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Organization: Dismas of Vermont, Inc.

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Title: Ban the Box Testimony

My name is Richard Gagne, I am the Program Manager for Dismas of Vermont, which seeks to bring reconciliation between former prisoners and their community by providing transitional housing and supportive community. We opened our first house in Burlington in 1986 and also have locations in Rutland, Hartford, and Winooski. I am also a House Director in Burlington and have been with Dismas since we started. My expertise does not come from having conducted research, so I will not be presenting facts and figures, but rather my expertise is derived from knowing and having provided support to approximately 800 men and women who have at lived at Dismas House in Burlington and Winooski these past 30 years.

Dismas, as an organization, has not taken positions on political questions in the past and we are not doing so here. What I do hope to provide is a certain perspective and context.

In the largest context of society, we believe that while it is necessary to hold people accountable for their actions when they break the law, eventual restoration to the community, not punishment, is the final goal of the criminal justice system. To be restored to the community means becoming a productive and contributing member of the community through employment. For a person or business in the position to provide employment, when they provide that opportunity for employment to men and women who have been convicted of a crime, they are acting in service of the common good.

With respect to the perspective of employers I would say this: As employers you probably know from experience that in the general population you will find that there are excellent, adequate, and poor employees. I can say with 100 percent conviction that from among the former prisoner population you will likewise find excellent, adequate, and poor employees. If from your pool of applicants you pass on all who have been convicted, you very well may have passed on an excellent employee and settled for a merely adequate employee. I would also add this, with respect to the business community in the Burlington area, which is the community I know best, I believe, and I have said this many times in public settings, that they as a group are indeed open to providing our residents employment opportunities. For that they have my respect and gratitude.

Finally, from the perspective of our Dismas residents: The transition from incarceration to life in the community is often incredibly stressful. If they are going to stay out of prison, they have to support themselves, and oftentimes their families. If they are able bodied, that means they need to find a job. Many of our residents report to us that when they have to check “the box” on an employment application, that is a sign that they have no chance, and when they experience automatic rejection often enough, they begin to feel hopeless. Other residents report that while on the local level they might be receiving a fair chance, but if the business is a larger one, when the application is reviewed at the corporate level, a simple check of the box turns into a rejection.