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## **Bills boost job hopes of former offenders**

By ALAN JOHNSON

Ohioans with criminal records will find it easier to get jobs, become licensed in construction trades and get a driver's license under legislation passed yesterday by both houses of the General Assembly.

Gov. John Kasich will sign the "collateral sanctions" bill when it reaches his desk, spokesman Rob Nichols said.

"Relief and redemption are on the way," one ex-offender support group proclaimed after the votes.

The new law will affect 1.9 million Ohioans with criminal records.

It was a rare thing — liberal black female Democrats from Columbus and Cleveland working with conservative white male Republicans from Springfield and Cincinnati on a bill that one sponsor said "changes lives."

"The work that we are doing today opens opportunities," Sen. Bill Seitz, R-Cincinnati, said before the 27-4 vote on Senate Bill 337. The Ohio House later voted 96-1 for House Bill 524, legislation mirroring the Senate bill. One of the bills will go to Kasich when lawmakers return the week of June 11.

Lawmakers from both parties worked closely with the Kasich administration to eliminate some of the 600 barriers that prevent people with criminal records from getting an education and a good job, or even a driver's license.

The legislation will:

- Create Certificates of Qualification for Employment, which can be awarded by judges, to remove job barriers and protect employers from potential liability.
- Permit courts to order community service instead of fines or driver's-license revocation for nondriving offenses.
- Allow child-support orders to be modified when inmates are in jail or have a felony record.
- Reduce restrictions on licensing for cosmetologists, optical dispensers, salvage-yard dealers, construction trades, hearing-aid dealers and security guards.

- Permit the courts, upon request, to seal one felony and one misdemeanor record.

Sen. Shirley Smith, a Cleveland Democrat who has been working for years to eliminate sanctions that weigh down ex-offenders, gave an emotional floor speech in which she praised her colleagues and the governor, “my new best friend, John Kasich.”

“This is not a white issue or a black issue,” Smith said. “This is a people issue, and it’s the right thing to do.”

In the House, Rep. Tracy Maxwell Heard, a Columbus Democrat, said the legislation will help keep ex-offenders out of prison and prevent a return to “the overflowing, overburdened, unsafe and unsustainable” condition of state prisons. Rep. Ross McGregor, R-Springfield, was the other House sponsor.

The Ohio Justice & Policy Center, a nonprofit law firm that focuses on criminal-justice issues, described the bill as “one of the most intelligent and thorough reform packages” in the country. “There’s no handout or preferential treatment created by this bill. It’s about redemption, freedom and shared prosperity.”

**Article continued here:** <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/05/25/bills-boost-job-hopes-of-former-offenders.html>

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