



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

February 16, 2023

**CONTACT:**

Mayor's Press Office

312.744.3334

[press@cityofchicago.org](mailto:press@cityofchicago.org)

**MAYOR LIGHTFOOT ANNOUNCES ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN CHICAGO'S FAIR CHANCE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR RETURNING RESIDENTS**

*City reforms background check policy for 2,500+ annual City of Chicago jobs, announces new RFP for reentry housing and employment navigation program, and ordinance to expand workplace anti-discrimination protections for individuals with prior convictions*

**CHICAGO** — Today, Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot, with Department of Human Resources (DHR) Commissioner Christopher Owen and Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) Commissioner Brandie Knazze, announced a suite of actions aimed at better supporting Chicago's returning residents, including changes to the City's background check policy and the February 17<sup>th</sup> release of the DFSS Spring Forward Pilot Program RFP. The new background check policy will promote employment access for returning residents who seek City of Chicago government roles. These changes codify DHR's current practices to lead an equitable and transparent hiring process for all residents and strengthen the City's track-record as a nation-leading Fair Chance employer. The DFSS SPRING Forward Pilot Program will integrate workforce training with wrap-around services, including housing navigation and rental support for returning residents. Mayor Lightfoot also announced an effort to partner with City Council to introduce aligned policy changes at the March City Council meeting, including enhanced workplace anti-discrimination protections for returning residents.

"People who are returning to their communities after paying their debt to society face immense barriers to accessing basic opportunities, like housing and employment — a reality my family has experienced firsthand," said **Mayor Lightfoot**. "As Mayor, I have committed to ensuring that Chicago is a fair chance city and that we support Chicagoans who are looking to rebuild their lives post-incarceration. Today's changes to the City background check policy and announcement of future citywide policy changes and investments are a critical step in our whole-of-government strategy to promote positive life outcomes for Chicago's returning residents and their families."



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



The background check policy reforms will impact all future hires for City of Chicago government roles effective February 16, 2023, which is approximately 2,500 new hires annually. The policy changes include:

- Prohibit the consideration of the following items that may arise from a background check in hiring decisions:
  - Any conviction for decriminalized conduct, including those related to cannabis consumption or possession.
  - Arrests that did not lead to a conviction.
  - Convictions from the juvenile justice system.
  - A conviction that has been dismissed, expunged, or sealed.
  - A conviction that is more than 5 years old (commonly referred to as a 5-year lookback period), unless there are legal, funding, or grant requirements tied to the role, or it is within the Mayor's Office, which shall be subject to a 7-year lookback period.
    - For more recent offenses, all applicants are still eligible to be considered for employment through the individualized assessment process detailed below.
- Formalize timeframes for the following steps in the hiring process:
  - An individualized assessment conducted by DHR: If a qualifying prior conviction is returned during a background check process, an individualized assessment requires that DHR and/or the hiring department consider various factors when determining whether the applicant's background should disqualify them for the role, including job-relatedness of offense, rehabilitation efforts, including additional education or training, length of time since conviction, circumstances surrounding the conviction, etc.
  - Submission by the head of the hiring department of a response to the DHR memo indicating that an applicant's background check returned a qualifying prior conviction.
  - Response from the candidate on notice of adverse hiring action related to their background check.
- Add Fair Chance Hiring language to all City job postings so applicants are aware that having a prior arrest or conviction does not make them ineligible for City roles.

These changes do not impact the hiring practices of private employers or those of the Chicago Police Department, Chicago Fire Department, or Sister Agencies, which maintain their own background check policies.

"Chicago has been a Fair Chance employer for many years, and the changes announced today are a step forward to improve the hiring process for returning residents. These changes will codify our existing processes, making them more



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



equitable, transparent, and efficient for hundreds of annual applicants who may have conviction histories over 5 years old,” said **Commissioner Christopher Owen of the Department of Human Resources**. “I’m proud of these actions we are taking today to make our City government a leading Fair Chance Hiring employer in Chicago and beyond.”

In addition to the background check policy, the Department of Family and Support Services announced a February 17<sup>th</sup> RFP launch for a new \$6.6M employment and housing navigation support program for returning residents. Once the program launches in mid 2023, the SPRING (Selected Pre-Release for Immediate Navigation Support Going Forward) program will support 300 participants with reentry navigation support, employment services, and paid work-based learning opportunities. Half of eligible participants, selected through a weighted lottery, will also receive housing navigation services and a 12-month rental subsidy. The focus population for the future program will be Chicago residents 18 or older who have been released within the past 18 months from the Cook County Jail (CCJ) or the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) and who are homeless or at risk of experiencing homelessness. The goal is to connect with participants pre-release so a reentry navigator can link residents to the appropriate services (including housing) within 90 days of release.

“For years, DFSS has worked to provide Chicagoans with the support they need to reenter their communities with dignity through our Community Reentry Support Centers,” said **Department of Family and Support Services Commissioner Brandie Knazze**. “Now, with the launch of our SPRING Forward Pilot Program, we are building upon that work and piloting new models for comprehensive reentry services. This new pilot will go even further to support participants in accessing stable housing and workforce training opportunities — areas in which we know returning residents face immense challenges.”

Lastly, Mayor Lightfoot also announced that she will work with City Council to introduce an Ordinance for the March 2023 City Council meeting to advance these efforts and promote workplace anti-discrimination and economic opportunities for returning residents. Among other changes, the future Ordinance will expand citywide anti-discrimination protections for those with prior convictions to apply not only to the hiring process, but to other components of employment, including tenure, promotion, and employment terms. These provisions will align the Municipal Code with 2021 amendments to the Illinois Human Rights Act and give the Chicago Commission on Human Relations the jurisdiction to enforce anti-discrimination complaints received related to an expanded breadth of the employment lifecycle. The Ordinance will also change the name of the Department of Procurement Services’ bid



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



incentive program, currently titled “Ex-Offender Apprentice Utilization Program” to eliminate the use of the stigmatizing term “ex-offender,” among other amendments.

These actions build on Mayor Lightfoot’s dedication to ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals are afforded the opportunity to reenter society with dignity and respect. In 2021, Mayor Lightfoot signed an Executive Order creating an Interagency Reentry Council to advance wide-ranging recommendations made by the 2021 Returning Residents Working Group, which were detailed in the “[A Roadmap for a Second Chance City](#)” report. This working group was comprised of people with direct experience in the criminal legal system and other advocates for reform. The group suggested more than a dozen ways the City can give returning residents the fair chance they deserve. These include revising municipal ordinances to remove restrictions for individuals with prior convictions and coordinating with the jail and prison system to create a one-stop shop connecting individuals with housing, workforce resources, healthcare, and other tools upon release. In June of 2022, Mayor Lightfoot hired [Willette Benford](#) to serve as Director of Re-Entry for the City of Chicago, a newly created role to transform Chicago into a national leader in supporting returning residents and lead the Interagency Reentry Council.

“As a returning resident and a City of Chicago employee, I know personally what it’s like to go through a job application process with a prior conviction history,” said **Willette Benford, Director of Re-Entry in the Mayor’s Office**. “This policy change will impact the experience of thousands of returning residents who, like me, are seeking an opportunity to secure a stable job with the City of Chicago, who no longer will be forced to fear that incidents from 10 or 20 years ago will limit their opportunity to pursue economic stability.”

“As Alderman of the 27<sup>th</sup> Ward on the west side of Chicago, which has one of the largest returning resident populations in the state, I applaud Mayor Lightfoot, Commissioner Owen, and Director Benford for taking this step to ensure that all residents of Chicago have a fair chance to secure a City job. This change will help shed light on the many employment opportunities that exist with our City government and the fact that returning residents can expect to be treated like any other resident, should they choose to apply,” said **Alderman Walter Burnett, Jr.**

“I commend the Mayor for taking this bold step to create an equitable pathway to career opportunities in city government for returning residents,” said **Ahmadou Dramé, Program Director at the Illinois Justice Project**. “As one of the largest employers in Chicago, City Hall now has even more skin in the game in our city’s work to create opportunities and eliminate barriers for people with records.”



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



"Chicago's fair chance hiring policies and practices as it relates to those looking for a career as a city employee is a step in the right direction. As a person with a background, we should not be socially excluded but have the same benefits to contribute to the communities in which we live," said **Colette Payne, Director of the Women's Justice Institute**

"This policy initiative is a step in the right direction to give returning residents an opportunity to improve their quality of life and a pathway to be fully free from the barriers that hinder successful reentry," said **Marlon Chamberlain of the Fully Free Campaign.**

"Nearly one out of three working Americans has a criminal record that poses a barrier to employment. The City of Chicago, in defining a limited lookback period, is opening up opportunities for Chicagoans and leading by example as an employer," said **Brian Fabes of the Corporate Coalition**

"Changing the DHR Background Check Policy is an important step in removing the barriers that keep people who have been directly impacted by detention and incarceration from becoming productive members of the public. Employment is a critical component to successful reentry," said **Jennifer Vollen-Katz, Executive Director of John Howard Association of Illinois.** "Creating a more individualized assessment of each candidate and removing certain arrests and convictions from consideration of a person's qualifications for a job will allow people to be judged on their capabilities and not written off because of something in their past that no longer represents who they are."

###