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Stop Unemployment Discrimination, Start Putting Ohioans Back to Work

Across Ohio, I've heard the same story again and again. People lose their jobs—then they lose their health insurance. After that, they lose their home or apartment because they can't afford the mortgage or rent.

The best way to get our economy back on track and reduce our deficit is to get people working again. Most people would rather be collecting a paycheck than collecting unemployment insurance.

I've received letters from Ohioans who have sent dozens of résumés a week looking for a job across the state and across the country. These are Ohioans who are hungry to get back to work.

But according to a recent report from the National Employment Law Project (NELP), some employers, staffing agencies, and online job sites are saying that if you don't have a job, you can't even apply for an open position.

According to the report, some American employers and staffing agencies are using recruitment and hiring policies that expressly deny unemployed Americans from being considered for positions. Staffing agencies say employers instruct them to look through résumés from people currently working—and not the unemployed. Some jobs explicitly require current employment as a requirement for just applying for an available job.

Reducing unemployment is tough enough without some employers refusing to even consider jobless applicants.

The recent economic downturn has not discriminated against its victims. Millions of Americans in all types of jobs—in fields from manufacturing to management—have been left holding a pink slip *through no fault of their own*. According to NELP, more than six million Americans have been jobless for longer than six months.

Earlier this month in Cleveland, I met a woman laid off in 2008 from her job driving a school bus. She landed an interview for another job driving a bus for a private company, but was told that the company had a policy of not hiring anyone who had been unemployed for six months or longer.

And I just received a letter from a man in the Dayton area who was also laid off in 2008. Despite nearly 30 years of experience in his field, he was passed over for jobs time and time again. The longer he was unemployed, the harder he found it to get interviews or even a call back.

He spent more than two years looking for a new job before landing a position last month—in a completely different industry— thanks to help from his neighbor.

These Ohioans—and others who work hard and play by the rules—deserve a fair chance at a new job. A chance to compete on a level playing field—to have their résumés read and their qualifications considered the same as any other applicant.

That's what the *Fair Employment Opportunity Act of 2011* would do. This bill would make it illegal for employers and employment agencies to unfairly discriminate against unemployed job seekers.

Employers should have the right to hire staff according to their needs—and to factor in work experience. But they shouldn't have the right to discriminate from the start and preemptively deny qualified workers a fair chance at a job they need.

There's no additional burden—no red tape, no extra paperwork—for businesses under this legislation. But it would outlaw employers from refusing to consider for employment someone merely because they are unemployed, and would ban the type of discriminatory language from job listings that NELP uncovered in its report.

Since NELP's report, at least one job-search website, *Indeed.com*, has banned job listings with this discriminatory language. This is a step in the right direction, and more employers and employment agencies should follow suit to help give more Americans the opportunity to compete for an open position.

This bill isn't about telling employers who they can and cannot hire. It's about giving all Americans—regardless of their employment status—an equal chance when it comes to finding a new job.



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