



### **Criminal Justice Reform Organizing in Ohio**

In late 2011, Ohio Governor John Kasich commissioned the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections to conduct a series of public forum across the state to develop a piece of package legislation to remove barriers for people with criminal record. On June 26, 2012, he signed the end-product of that work: SB 337, a landmark set of reforms that open employment opportunities for the nearly 2 million Ohioans with criminal records. One key piece of the storyline that led to this huge success started in Cincinnati in late 2009, when local faith-rooted organizers began pushing their city council to change their hiring policy. At the beginning of that local effort, city council members resisted, asking the AMOS Project organizers, “How can we be talking about jobs for felons in this economy?” Yet the faith, persistence, and community-organizing skill of those leaders not only won a local Fair Hiring Policy (aka “Ban the Box”) for Cincinnati — they became kindling for broader statewide organizing on this issue, fanned into flame by the Ohio Organizing Collaborative.

The Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC) is a statewide network of faith, labor, community and policy organizations. There are 12 member groups, representing every major city in Ohio. The AMOS Project is a founding member of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, and is leading the OOC’s work on criminal justice reform. The AMOS Project is an alliance of 30 dues-paying member congregations in greater Cincinnati.

The work of the OOC to build momentum to address mass incarceration started four years ago. In 2008, the AMOS Project knocked on over 5,000 doors in low-income communities. The goal was to get people to vote, but canvassers and volunteers were asking people about jobs and the economy. We wanted to better understand how the economy was impacting people. What we learned instead was that impacts of mass incarceration in Ohio and in America. Following the election, the AMOS Project made jobs and criminal justice reform a top priority.

**Infrastructure:** Over the past three years, the OOC has built a multi-layered infrastructure that is engaging returning citizens, clergy and people of faith, voters, and allies in the mass incarceration reform movement. Our organizing has:

- Trained over 300 Ohioans in 3 years through the OOC’s extensive weeklong training, including over 40 returning citizens;
- Trained over 60 returning citizens through a movement building model based on the New Organizing Institute’s organizing model;

- Employed over 30 returning citizens during the electoral process that registered voters and mobilized thousands of people to vote in 2010 and 2011;
- Organized two Racial Justice Events that drew a total of 600 people to understand structural racism, where people heard from John Powell, Michael O. Emerson (author of *Divided by Faith & United by Faith*), and Michelle Alexander (author of the bestselling *The New Jim Crow*).
- Engaged over 400 “allies” through presentations & trainings at churches, house meetings, and door-to-door canvassing.

**Key Campaign Highlights:** The campaign for statewide reform started in February of 2010, with a Fair Hiring Policy effort. This campaign started at a direct action on the Civil Service Commission, who refused to hear from 80 clergy and faith leaders, where a pastor stood up and asked, “Would Cincinnati not hire Moses or Nehemiah or Jesus? They were all convicted felons.” As the AMOS Project led an organizing campaign to win a Fair Hiring Policy, alliances and relationships were being built with OOC partners and allies across Ohio. The organizing focused on using biblical justice frames, such as redemption, second chances and fairness. Since early 2010, the OOC:

- Led a strategy meeting with key allies from policy, advocacy and judiciary leaders in late 2010;
- Organized four lobby days in 2011 and 2012 that drew 25 to 150 people and reached almost every single legislator in Ohio;
- Held large public meetings in Cleveland, Youngstown, and Cincinnati, that was attended by 100 – 700 people, where collateral sanction reform was a priority;
- Won support for SB 337 from the Catholic Conference of Ohio, Southern Episcopal Diocese, and multiple nondenominational congregations;

The AMOS Project also focused on building support with the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati. In May of 2012, the Catholic Conference of Ohio (the statewide conference of all five Catholic Bishops in Ohio) wrote a letter to every single legislator in Ohio in support of collateral sanction reform (SB 337). The letter acknowledged mass incarceration in Ohio, and the need to ensure fair opportunities for returning citizens to reenter in to communities. This letter made an impact on legislators, but it also demonstrates the work of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative’s hard work to build support for criminal justice reform in Ohio.



# Catholics support major justice reform

Each year, about 3,500 ex-offenders are released from Ohio prisons and come home to four-county Greater Cincinnati.

And each year, even as rates have dropped to an 11-year low, about 1 in 3 of the former offenders will commit another crime that will land them back in prison. A major problem are state laws that prevent ex-offenders from gaining employment.

Two pieces of legislation, introduced April 24 in the Ohio General Assembly and up for more committee review Wednesday and Thursday, are gaining broad political and social support as a way to further reduce the rate of repeat offenders

The latest collective voice calling for passage of HB 524 and companion legislation SB 337 is the Catholic Conference of Ohio. It is encouraging Ohio's 2.1 million Catholics – including the almost 500,000 in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati – to write their state representatives.

The Collateral Sanctions Reform Bill would remove or revise some of the 675 state statutes that block former offenders from getting jobs in some of the state's largest employment sectors, such as health care and education. Sanctions also bar ex-offenders from many educational and

housing opportunities.

In Ohio, an estimated 2 million people have a criminal record, 17 percent of the state's 11.5 million residents, according to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

In the past year in Greater Cincinnati, meetings involving clergy and lay leaders of eight Catholic parishes have met with social action representatives from the archdiocese office and the Amos Project. These meetings, known as the Dismas Journey, have centered on Catholic social justice teaching – primarily "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," a document written by U.S. bishops. (The name Dismas comes from the name of the good thief crucified with Jesus, according to Catholic teaching.)

"We believe that because we are all created by God, none of us is the sum total of the worst act we have ever committed," the document reads. "As people of faith,



we believe that grace can transform even the most hardened and cruel human beings.”

Churches that have heard or participated in the presentation include St. Joseph in the West End, St. Vivian in Finneytown, St. Mary in Hyde Park and Church of the Resurrection in Bond Hill. “Stories of low level, non-violent offenders are rarely told, and small felony convictions such as drug possession carry heavy consequences far beyond those given by judges,” said Paul Graham, Project Amos executive director. “The Dismas Journey has engaged Catholics around real stories of people struggling to find redemption and a second chance.”

**RELEASES FROM OHIO PRISONS**

Calendar year releases from Ohio prisons, per county of commitment (offense).

County	*2010	*2011
Butler	773	749
Clermont	352	382
Hamilton	2,227	2,025
Warren	288	250
Regional total	3,640	3,406
State total	24,170	22,472

\*Based on first release during calendar year  
Source: Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections

# CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

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Date

Address [addressed to members of General Assembly]

Dear

The Catholic Conference of Ohio encourages your support for HB 524 and its companion legislation, SB 337. Both bills address helpful changes for reintegrating ex-offenders into our communities.

It is our understanding that there are numerous collateral sanctions – state statutes that block people with criminal records from employment, housing, and education -- often long after they have paid their debt to society. HB 524/SB 337 pursues judicious revisions in such sanctions. We especially support provisions ensuring that *Orders of Limited Relief* are accessible to as many persons as possible and with few bureaucratic barriers.

We commend the bipartisan efforts of the many stakeholders who have diligently worked on this legislation, including Senator Seitz, Senator Smith, Representative Heard, Representative McGregor and Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's Director Mohr.

In *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, the U.S. Bishops encouraged Catholics to find unique ways to support the victims of crime, to assist in the rehabilitation of those who have committed offenses, and to promote restoration within the impacted communities. We are pleased in the growing number of Catholic-sponsored programs throughout Ohio that offer prison and reentry services. The removal of various employment barriers in HB 524/SB 337 will be of great assistance to such ministries.

As the Bishops note in *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration*, “Human dignity is not something we earn by our good behavior; it is something we have as children of God. We believe that because we are all created by God, none of us is the sum total of the worst act we have ever committed . . . . As a people of faith, we believe that grace can transform even the most hardened and cruel human beings.”

Thank you for this consideration.

Respectfully,

Carolyn Jurkowitz

Executive Director, Catholic Conference of Ohio.



## **Dismas Journey**

The Dismas Journey dialogues are connecting Catholics from across the Greater Cincinnati area together to pray, reflect and understand some of the area's greatest challenges. We draw inspiration from Catholic Social Teaching, the power of the Catholic Church and her people in Ohio, and from USCCB documents, such as "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice."

Ohio is among the worst states for African-American unemployment (ranking 5<sup>th</sup> worst in the Country). The recent recession increased wealth disparities between white and black families, from 7-1 (1995) to 20-1 (2011). As many organizations and leaders tried to understand and address poverty, especially African-American poverty, issues of the criminal justice system quickly emerged as leading challenges.

Ohio's prison population is 49% black, while the state's overall black population is a mere 12%. Of the 4,892 Hamilton County residents currently in prison, 3,552 (or 72%) are Black. Each year, about 1,500 people return to Hamilton County from prison, yet face enormous reentry issues. Ohio currently has over 900 "collateral sanctions" that prevent individuals with felony or misdemeanor conviction from accessing employment, or make reentry a significant challenge. These include banning ex-offenders from some of the largest employment sectors, such as health care and education.

Stories of low level, non-violent offenders are rarely told, and small felony convictions (such as drug possession) carry heavy consequences, far beyond those given by judges and the criminal justice system. The Dismas Journey engages Catholics around stories, real examples of people struggling to find redemption and second chances, and promotes a focus on the common good.

The leadership team includes 15 volunteer Catholics from 8 different parishes in Greater Cincinnati. These parishes include:

St. Joseph Catholic Church  
St. Vivian Catholic Church  
Our Lady of Visitation  
St. Francis DeSalles

St. Mary Catholic Parish, Hyde Park  
Robert Bellarmine Chapel, Xavier University  
Church of the Nativity  
Church of the Resurrection

To date, the Dismas Journey dialogues have reached over 200 Catholics across 6 different parishes. The program is simple, and focuses on story, relationship and reflection. Each Dismas Dialogue is unique, but has a similar pattern: there is a brief overview of the USCCB teaching on criminal justice, volunteer returning citizens give personal testimonies about the challenges of reentering in the community, and there is ample time for discussion and reflection. Each dialogue is organized by parish leaders.

The stories shared illustrate the challenges and crisis in families across the state – white and black. Our experience with telling these stories often reveal hidden pain in families and congregations. Our network of support has grown, which is raising money and other resources to support those attempting to change directions in their lives, offering support on legislation and policy through lobbying and letter writing, and is engaging people in their faith.