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Patrick proposes reforms to CORI

Providers applaud Patrick's reform package, call it "promising" and "strong step"

After months of studying the controversial Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) system, Governor Deval Patrick released a comprehensive reform initiative to strengthen public safety, help ex-offenders reintegrate into society and reduce recidivism. The Governor's initiative included an Executive Order, which took effect immediately, to ensure that the information in criminal records is not only accurate and understandable but also provides the best information available to assist in the reentry decision-making process.

The Governor's initiative also included regulatory changes in state hiring practices, legislation to improve job opportunities for rehabilitated ex-offenders, workforce development incentives, an anti-housing discrimination directive to ensure stable housing for ex-offenders and a directive to the Criminal History Systems Board to train people reading CORI reports, as well as draft regulations to require training and examination as a condition for CORI-certification and to enhance auditing of CORI users.

"CORI was never intended to turn every offense into a life sentence," said the Governor in a press statement. "All but a handful of people incarcerated are eventually released, and they need to get back to work. These reforms require decision-makers to make an individual determination about whether an applicant is rehabilitated, rather than excluding ex-offenders cat-

egorically."

Community-based providers with state contracts have long sought relief from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services' strict regulations on hiring candidates with a CORI. While providers want to protect their vulnerable population, they also feel that the strict regulations excluded some ex-offenders whose past offense did not pose a threat to consumers.

"EOHHS is undertaking a thorough review of our current regulations," EOHHS Secretary JudyAnn Bigby, M.D., told *The Provider*. "We are committed to making sure that we balance the need to give work opportunities."

Currently, the EOHHS and most of its agencies have separate regulations for reviewing a candidate's criminal records. These regulations support the state's unwavering commitment to protect the vulnerable populations it serves. Under the Executive Order, the EOHHS, in consultation with its agencies and the Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance, will develop a consolidated set of regulations to provide clear guidelines for employers to document all factors taken into consideration, including evidence of rehabilitation, in making employment decisions. These hiring guidelines will apply to the Secretariat, its agencies and their vendor programs and will specify strong penalties for vendors who fail to comply with any requirement.

"I think the executive order is a strong step in the right direction," said Sandra McCroom, executive director of Roxbury Youthworks, Inc. whose agency contracts with the Department of Youth Services. "I have spent my career working with disenfranchised youth and their families, and CORI has always been a huge obstacle for many of our teens.

"Every child deserves an opportunity to succeed, but CORIs have been a dark cloud hanging over many young people who have made strides to go in the right direction," she added. "It is promising finally to be moving in a direction that can help to restore that hope in children who truly deserve it."

Governor Patrick noted that general items in his reform package, including the Executive Order and the legislation, mirror the recommendations from two Boston Foundation reports calling for CORI reform. Len Engel of the Crime and Justice Institute, a division of Community Resources for Justice, served as project coordinator for both reports and authored the second one dealing with workforce development. In addition, Michael Weekes, president of the Providers' Council, was a member of CORI Employer Guidelines Task Force. The task forces' recommendations are part of the second report entitled *CORI: Opening Doors of Opportunity: A Workforce and Public Safety Imperative*.

"The Governor has shown

real leadership and provided clarity to a complex and emotional issue," said Engel. "He understands that, in addition to public safety, these issues are about employment and workforce development.

"Most important, and somewhat lost in the discussion about the contentious CORI issues, is the Governor's support for employment training and skill development for hard-to-employ ex-offenders. Those who work with ex-offenders understand that making them employable by addressing the problems that led to their criminal behavior as well as skill and training deficits will reduce recidivism and improve public safety."

Rehabilitating disenfranchised people is a valued concept, noted Jim Cassetta, executive director of Work, Inc. "I support the Governor's approach to reform the CORI regulations. Work, Inc. has retrained thousands of workers who are disenfranchised, unemployed or otherwise in need of training to reenter the workplace. We do not have a contract with the Department of Corrections, but we have contracts with other state agencies including the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, the Departments of Education, Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Transitional Assistance."

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