

CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS: COMPLYING WITH NEW YORK CITY'S FAIR CHANCE ACT

New York City's Fair Chance Act (the "Act") prohibits most private employers from inquiring about applicants' (and employees') criminal histories until after a conditional job offer has been made, and imposes significant obligations on employers who intend to take action based on such information. This Legal Alert will help nonprofit managers review their pre-employment and hiring practices to ensure that their organizations are in compliance with the Act. The New York City Human Rights Commission ("Commission"), which will enforce the law, will publish guidance on their website. The Commission's website is: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cchr/html/home/home.shtml>

Prohibited Conduct Under the Act

The Act makes it an unlawful discriminatory practice under New York City's Human Rights Law for an employer or its agent to "[m]ake any inquiry or statement related to the pending arrest or criminal conviction record of any person who is in the process of applying for employment . . . until after such employer or agent . . . has extended a conditional offer of employment to the applicant." The Act defines "any inquiry or statement" making it clear that an employer or an outside agent may not, at the initial application stage:

- ask any oral or written questions concerning an applicant's criminal background,
- run a background search, including a Google search, on an applicant, and
- make any statement designed to elicit a disclosure from the applicant for purposes of obtaining information concerning the applicant's arrest record, conviction record, or a criminal background check.

Exemptions

The restrictions above do not apply to certain employers, including:

- employers with less than four employees [NOTE: independent contractors who do not have their own employees are included in this count] and
- employers who are required under federal, state, or local law or regulation to conduct background checks for employment purposes or to bar employment in a particular position based on criminal history. **Accordingly, the new law does not prohibit nonprofits, such as childcare or home health care providers, who are legally**

prohibited from hiring applicants with certain types of criminal convictions from asking applicants for such positions about their criminal history at the start of the hiring process. However, providers subject to E.O. 151 under city human services contracts must still wait until after the first interview to inquire about criminal history.

Notification Process

An employer who make inquiries into an applicant's criminal history, including running a background check, after a conditional offer of employment is extended, and determines that the information warrants an adverse employment action (e.g., not hiring the applicant) must follow the following process:

- Provide the applicant with a written copy of the report on which the decision not to hire is based.
- Perform a multi-factor analysis required by Article 23-A of the New York State Corrections Law, which forbids employers from denying employment to an applicant based on a criminal conviction unless certain criteria are met regarding:
 - the relationship between the position and the criminal offense or
 - the safety risk to property or individuals.
- Provide a copy of this multi-factor Article 23-A analysis to the applicant. Employers may use the Commission's "Article 23-A Evaluation" form, which can be found here: http://www.nyc.gov/html/cchr/downloads/pdf/FairChance_Form23-A_distributed.pdf. Employers may use their own form as long as it captures the "material substance" of the Article 23-A analysis providing the reasons for the decision to withdraw the conditional offer.
- Allow the applicant 3 business days to respond with additional or mitigating information. During this period of time, the position must stay open. The intent of this provision is to provide an opportunity for the applicant and the employer to discuss whether the employer's risk assessment is unfounded or whether any reasonable measures are available to mitigate the perceived risk.
- Employers should maintain an exception log of all adverse employment decisions based on criminal background, including the Article 23-A analysis. The Commission may request the log.

Enforcement

The Act will be enforceable against private employers through an administrative action or through a private right of action. Therefore, aggrieved individuals will be able to file a complaint with the Commission or file an action directly in court. Successful plaintiffs can receive damages (both compensatory and punitive), back pay, reinstatement or other equitable relief, and attorneys' fees and costs.

This alert is meant to provide general information only, not legal advice. If you have any questions about this alert please contact Judith Moldover at (212) 219-1800 ext. 250 or visit our website at www.lawyersalliance.org for further information.

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