

April 15, 2019

The Honorable Phil Bryant  
Governor  
Post Office Box 139  
Jackson, Mississippi 39205

Re: The Fresh Start Act (SB 2781)

Dear Governor Bryant:

We are thankful for the inspired leadership you have demonstrated during your time as governor, standing strong on so many issues significant to the faith community. In accord with that legacy, we are asking you to stand with our brothers and sisters who have been in prison, but are seeking to turn their lives around. We are asking you to sign SB 2781, the Fresh Start Act of 2019, which would cut red tape so that individuals with a criminal record may pursue work in their chosen profession.

Psalm 51 says: “God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life. Don’t throw me out with the trash, or fail to breathe holiness in me. Bring me back from gray exile, put a fresh wind in my sails!” As the Psalmist attests, we have all been in a place where we have needed a fresh start. Just as God’s grace can provide this new beginning, we believe the state of Mississippi can do more to help ex-offenders reintegrate into their communities.

The Fresh Start Act, sponsored by Senator John Polk and Rep. Mark Baker, requires that occupational licensing boards examine their rules and regulations in order to remove “vague or generic terms including, but not limited to, ‘moral turpitude,’ ‘any felony,’ and ‘good character.’” Courts have found that such broad bans violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (cf. *Smith v. Fussenich*; *Furst v. NYC Transit*; *Thompson v. Gallagher*, etc.). Some of these bans are also distantly rooted in racist policies aimed at keeping “certain kinds of people” from obtaining an occupational license, as legal scholars like David Bernstein and others have observed.

Instead of blanket bans, Fresh Start requires licensing boards to specify which criminal convictions would prevent an ex-offender from obtaining an occupational license. In addition, the bill creates a preapproval process so that ex-offenders may determine ahead of time whether they might be eligible for a license. Fresh Start leaves every board completely free to disqualify any person who poses a threat to public safety. The legislation also does not supersede or otherwise affect any state law regarding the employability of an individual with a criminal record.

Fresh Start protects public safety and promotes economic opportunity. It balances justice with mercy. We believe Fresh Start will be a sign of hope for Mississippi families yearning for a better way of life. Fresh Start will help ex-offenders affirm their basic human dignity by pursuing meaningful work. It will also enable them to support their families and set a good example for their children.

Thank you, governor, for your many years of faithful service to our state. We continue to pray that God's blessing and favor remains upon you and your family.

In Christ,



Ron Matis  
*Chairman*  
*Mississippi Faith Advisory Council*



Rev. CJ Rhodes  
*President*  
*Clergy for Prison Reform*



The Most Reverend Joseph R. Kopacz, DD  
*Bishop*  
*Catholic Diocese of Jackson*



Bishop David D. Tipton Jr.  
*Superintendent, Mississippi District*  
*United Pentecostal Church International*

