

# The Eagle-Tribune

## Lawrence legislators, UTEC back bill to improve education behind bars

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Hamza Berrios, Amari Pope, and Ana Victoria Morales sharing testimony on a bill filed by Sen. Pavel Payano and Rep. Frank Moran.

BOSTON — A Lawrence legislator who was previously a teacher says education can only improve success rates for at-risk youth and inmates.

“As a former Department of Youth Services educator, I’ve seen firsthand the profound impact that education can have on young people, especially those involved in the justice system,” said state Sen. Pavel Payano, D-Lawrence.

“With access to quality education, guidance and support, incarcerated youth are given a real opportunity to build brighter futures and embrace a true second chance as they are returning home,” Payano said.

A bill on educational programming for incarcerated emerging adults was filed by Payano and Rep. Frank Moran, D-Lawrence, and calls for the enhancement of educational programs for incarcerated individuals aged 18 to 25 in state prisons and county lockups.

Also speaking in favor of the bill were individuals affiliated with UTEC, a Merrimack Valley nonprofit

whose mission is to reduce recidivism and advance criminal justice reform. Amari Pope and Hamsa Berrior, provided testimony in support of the legislation before a joint committee recently.

“When I was 16, I was incarcerated and placed in DYS,” said Amari Pope. “When I was finally released eight years later, I came home with nothing but the clothes I had on and \$50. I had no resources, no documents I needed, and no direction. I’m here today because I believe everyone deserves access to consistent education and programming—especially young adults in the system. If I had been given that kind of access during those critical years, I might not have come home with nothing, forced to figure it all out on my own.”

Berrios echoed similar sentiments.

“As a person who has been formerly incarcerated and was able to earn a Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Studies from the Boston University Prison Education Program at MCI-Norfolk, I know firsthand the importance of education, especially in the carceral setting,” Berrios said.

“This bill would create more opportunities for people like me to not just survive incarceration, but to come out stronger and ready to thrive in society with the hope of reshaping and giving back to the communities we live in,” he said, according to a press release from UTEC.

The legislation requires each facility to offer at least one program for high school equivalency, with opportunities for testing and earning credits. Additionally, facilities must provide age-appropriate programs in college readiness, workforce readiness, and vocational training for all emerging adults.

Incarcerated emerging adults must participate in at least four hours of out-of-cell educational programming each weekday, with additional in-cell learning via tablets. The bill emphasizes community-based workforce development, partnerships with nonprofits like UTEC, and educational institutions, especially those with staff who have shared experiences with incarceration, to create innovative programs.

Through UTEC’s “Behind the Walls” programming, UTEC street workers work in collaboration with DYS, the Essex County Sheriff’s Department and the state’s Department of Corrections to build relationships, address mental health, and assist young people with reentry plans, according to the release.

Street workers provide immediate transition support, often picking the young person up from the facility and taking them for a meal, a haircut, shopping for street clothes if needed, and visiting the UTEC program center to encourage enrollment in workforce programming, according to UTEC.