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Rep. Doyle Column

Rep Doyle: Meeting at the White House is Productive

If you had the chance to go to the White House to meet with top administration officials, what would you want to talk about? That was the happy dilemma I faced when I was invited to be one of eighteen state legislators from around the country to join in a meeting with top Obama officials last week.

I had a chance to convey some concerns of local business people generated from a business roundtable I sponsored three days earlier. I also had an opportunity to talk about issues of importance to my local school officials. And, of course, I expressed the near unanimous sentiment of my fellow state and local officials that the federal government should reduce its meddling in our affairs. We had good and positive discussions on all of these topics. Time will tell whether those conversations made any difference.

Mostly though, I listened, because a lot of good ideas came out during the sessions – ideas we can use right here in Wisconsin.

One idea in particular that stood out to me was a truly bipartisan initiative. Did you know that one-third of adult Americans have a criminal record? Seventy million Americans have some type of criminal conviction that hinders their ability to find employment. Not surprisingly, that helps create a vicious cycle of crime and incarceration, where a person who can't find a job after getting out of jail decides to sell drugs to support themselves. We all lose if this outcome occurs. And we also lose if that person simply collects government benefits instead of working. In response, there is a federal initiative called the Fair Chance Business Pledge. Businesses are encouraged but not mandated to refrain from automatically rejecting an applicant just because that person has a criminal record. Instead, employers are asked to consider whether that criminal record would have an impact on the person's ability to do that particular job. You wouldn't want a person with a conviction for theft to handle money in your business, but maybe a twenty year old conviction for smoking marijuana wouldn't present a problem. This effort is not just some liberal idea from a Democratic Administration. Koch Industries (aka, the Koch Brothers) and Catholic Charities have each adopted policies to hire convicted



STATE REPRESENTATIVE
STEVE DOYLE

WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

94th DISTRICT

persons in their organizations. They have found that reasonable screening, rather than blanket rejections, can bring some excellent employees on board.

The State of Maryland has instituted its own initiative to ease the transition from jail to the workforce. Maryland has established one-stop job centers in all of its local jails. Before their release, prisoners learn how to write a resume and interview for a job. They are even connected with local employers. In some cases, job centers like this do things as simple as lending a person a clean shirt and tie to wear to the interview. When that person leaves the jail we don't want them to come back. Having a job is one of the most important factors in keeping a person from reoffending. Good for them, good for us.

Just as I frequently proclaim that neither Democrats nor Republicans have a monopoly on good ideas, neither does Wisconsin nor any other individual state. I've been invited back to the White House later this year to continue the discussion further, and I am looking forward to presenting these proposals to my colleagues in the Wisconsin Legislature. This sharing of ideas was a valuable exercise. It was a model for all of us elected officials to follow. When all the shouting from the upcoming election dies down, maybe we can start talking to each other again.