

A twist of hair

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Braiding hair is a skill that's passed down from mother to daughter, aunt to niece and friend to friend in the African-American community. It is also, for many women, a way to earn a living. But plying their trade legally is extremely difficult. Illinois law says braiders must have a professional cosmetology license, and that requires 1,500 hours of cosmetology school. That training can cost up to \$10,000.

That's a high hurdle. Day-care assistants, who change, feed, and watch our kids, need only a high-school diploma, and 15 hours of training a year. The licensing requirements drive braiders underground. They work from their living rooms and kitchens. They can run a business that way, but they can't establish one that's legal.

State Rep. William Burns (D-Chicago) wants the license for hair braiders to require "a reasonable amount of training that would make sure that basic hygiene, sanitation and techniques were covered."

That just makes sense. "We really think it's important to eliminate barriers for people who want to be entrepreneurs," said Alie Kabba, executive director of the United African Organization.

Ten states exempt braiders from cosmetology licensing, requiring only that they comply with basic business regulations and sanitation guidelines. "We've opened up the hair braiding markets now to no ill effects," said John Kramer, spokesman for the Virginia-based Institute for Justice. "In each of those examples we've seen hundreds of jobs created in the industry. These women no longer have to operate in the underground economy."

The market grows, more women are employed and the tax base expands. In Mississippi, more than 300 women have registered hair braiding businesses since the state lifted licensing requirements in 2005, according to the Institute for Justice.

Illinois is one of just seven states that require braiders to obtain a full cosmetology or similar personal-care license. The onerous rules for braiders survive because lobbyists for cosmetologists have resisted easing the rules. It's not hard to see why: onerous licensing restricts the competition.

Burns has tried in the past to eliminate licensing requirements for braiders. Now he wants to move a compromise, a bill that would reduce the required training to 300 hours.

That would be enough time to cover sanitation, hygiene, disease identification and best

business practices. That type of course might cost less than \$200.

This is a nice little test case of whether lawmakers will listen to the lobbyists or listen to the people. If they listen to regular people, they'll support Burns on this.

"I grew up in a black neighborhood, I was used to seeing women braid each other's hair in the community," Burns said. Braiding is a skill often learned on front stoops and back decks, a skill that's marketable.

Legislators, here's a measure that won't cost a dime in taxes, and it will let scores of people run legitimate businesses. Don't get twisted in knots over it. Just ease the rules.

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