Washingtonians Deserve a Clean Slate

Barriers to opportunity make it difficult for previously-incarcerated people to move forward

After a person serves their conviction, they should have the support and opportunity to rebuild their life. However, societal barriers and stigma against people with convictions make it hard for people to successfully re-enter society and become contributing members of their community after serving their time. Long after a person has completed their sentence, their criminal convictions can continue to punish them, denying them opportunities for housing, employment, education, and even volunteering at their child's school.

In recent years, Washington state lawmakers have passed a number of progressive bills that are meant to eliminate such barriers. Legislation such as 2018's Legal Financial Obligations reform bill and "Ban-the-Box," which prohibits employers from asking about an applicant's conviction history until they are determined otherwise qualified for the position, have made critical strides toward reducing barriers to employment and economic security. But there is still work to be done to support previously-incarcerated people, their families, and their futures.

Building off of proven legislation

Washington state has long allowed people with criminal convictions who have gone years without offending to "vacate" their charges, effectively erasing them from their record. In 2019, lawmakers strengthened this policy by unanimously passing the New Hope Act, which streamlines the process for obtaining a Certificate of Discharge, allows a person to vacate multiple misdemeanors in their lifetime, and allows additional felony convictions to be vacated within the discretion of the court.

The passage of the New Hope Act further reduces barriers and improves supports for people with criminal convictions, but additional legislation must be enacted to strengthen the process of vacating charges.

A Clean Slate Act would ensure transparency and fairness

Poverty Action and our statewide justice reform coalition partners recommend the passage of a Clean Slate Act--automatic record clearing once a person fulfills their requirements to the state and remains crime-free for a set period of time. While the New Hope Act is a critical step in supporting people with convictions, it still requires that an individual petition the court, hire an attorney, appear before a judge, and be subject to the judge's discretion in order to have their charges vacated. This process often requires resources and knowledge about the legal system that many do not have.

By making this process automatic, the Clean Slate Act ensures equity, transparency, efficiency, and justice for those who have served their time and are rebuilding their lives.

To learn more about the Clean Slate Act and what other states have done, please visit cleanslateinitiative.org or contact Jay Doran (206-694-6796; jay@povertyaction.org).