

Testimony to the Connecticut General Assembly's Judiciary Committee

In support of Senate Bill No. 1019

3/10/2021

Co-Chairs Sen. Winfield & Rep. Stafstrom; Ranking Members Sen. Kissel & Rep. Fishbein; and esteemed Members of the Judiciary Committee, I am writing in support of S.B. No. 1019 AN ACT CONCERNING THE BOARD OF PARDONS AND PAROLES, ERASURE OF CRIMINAL RECORDS FOR CERTAIN MISDEMEANOR AND FELONY OFFENSES, PROHIBITING DISCRIMINATION BASED ON ERASED CRIMINAL HISTORY RECORD INFORMATION AND CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CONNECTICUT SENTENCING COMMISSION WITH RESPECT TO MISDEMEANOR SENTENCES

My name is Daniel Houser, I grew up in Ridgefield, CT and am currently a resident of Boulder, CO. As a white male, and someone with a felony criminal record and a past experience of incarceration in CT, I've experienced the CT criminal justice system at its least harmful, from the most resourced position in the web of issues that interweave with mass incarceration, and yet I am not unhurt by my experience and ongoing legal status as a felon. While I am experiencing the best possible outcome a formerly incarcerated person could experience, due to my privileged identities and positional advantages, my future remains encumbered by the dark cloud of a felony record. As a recent graduate of Naropa University, a liberal arts school in Boulder, CO, I am looking towards building my future towards graduate school, and imagining myself pursuing careers in law and/or social work, oriented around principles of social justice and spirituality. However, legal restrictions and extralegal barriers remain in place within each of these professional fields, and these principles have led me to why I am writing this testimony and advocating for S.B. 1019, "the Clean Slate Bill," today.

S.B. 1019 would put into law the automatic erasure of most criminal records for CT residents. This Bill would also strengthen reentry services, prohibit employment and housing discrimination on the basis of an erased criminal record, and establish standards by which accountability for non-discrimination could be upheld. This would all unburden hundreds of thousands of people living in CT, it would open up opportunities for people with erased criminal records and incarceration histories to actualize their potential, and I believe it would make CT's communities stronger as a result. Many of those who are currently burdened by criminal records see their burdens connected and compounding with the historical and ongoing harms of racism and deep economic inequality. Mass incarceration has had real, ongoing consequences in Connecticut, disproportionately hurting Black and brown communities in our state, and burdening hundreds of thousands of Connecticut residents with a criminal record. Records present barriers to employment, housing, occupational licensing, and higher education. 9 in 10 employers, 4 in 5 landlords, and 3 in 4 colleges use background checks. Clean Slate will automatically expunge the records of people who have served their time, returned to our communities, and remained crime-free. A criminal record should not be a lifetime sentence. People who are formerly

incarcerated and people with criminal records are more than these experiences and records. Their potential does not and cannot, in good conscience, be continually hindered by the bane of a criminal record that represents where they have been, rather than where they are today.

As CTDOC Commissioner Angel Quiros has said, “no one deserves to be defined by their biggest mistake or their worst decision.” I myself made big mistakes and terrible decisions that resulted in felony and misdemeanor drug and weapon convictions at the age of nineteen, and my subsequent incarceration at Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire, CT. This experience, while as I mentioned was probably the least harmful when compared to many people’s experiences of incarceration, has cost me more than I can write here. I am in support of S.B. 1019 so that this experience does not cost me even more in the future. Obvious self-interest aside, I understand that, because the cost I pay is small compared to many, the costs of incarceration and a criminal record are social, as well as personal. CT is progressive among the U.S. for its recent leaps in criminal justice reform. However, we are still leaps away from a truly just and equitable system, and from true accountability, rehabilitation, and social well-being.

Clean Slate would make communities safer. When people have access to jobs, housing, occupational licensing, and higher education, they are more likely to earn higher wages, and less likely to recidivate. With an expunged record, I would be freed up to become a more productive and engaged citizen, better enabled to pursue my passions in graduate school and work towards justice. Similarly, hundreds of thousands of CT citizens with prior criminal records would be exponentially more able to live their lives, fulfill their potential and feel that we belong in society, some of the most important deterrents of recidivism.

With S.B. 1019, Connecticut can strengthen our economy, improve public safety, and advance racial and economic justice. I encourage all members of the Judiciary Committee, on both sides of the aisle, to support this important measure. Thank you.

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