

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 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."

To the Honorable Senator Winfield, the Honorable Representative Stafstrom, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary:

I am the Rev. Josh Pawelek, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society: East in Manchester, a clergy leader with the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance (GHIAA), and a resident of Glastonbury. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony **in support of Senate Bill 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," otherwise known as the "Clean Slate" bill.

Many faith communities and religious denominations have begun to understand and confront the racist legacies of our current criminal justice system which today continue to ensnare people of color in numbers that far exceed their proportions in the general population, and which create enduring barriers to full economic participation in society. Our Unitarian Universalist Association has made denomination-wide commitments to working in local communities to reform the criminal justice system. Our principles motivate these commitments. Our first principle is respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our second principle is the pursuit of justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We view current criminal justice practices that continue to decimate communities of color as violations of both these principles.

Passing Clean Slate legislation is one important step in the effort to reverse the long-term economic and social impacts of racism in the criminal justice system. Currently, people with certain misdemeanor and felony convictions on their records are not able to access housing, jobs, higher education and other services. Though they have served their time, they are penalized a second time through this lack of access. Clean Slate seeks to remove many misdemeanor and felony convictions from a person's criminal record after a certain period of time. This will enable formerly incarcerated people to more easily become productive, contributing members of society.

I am aware that reform efforts like Clean Slate often fail because of the false and frankly racist assumptions that such efforts signal we as a state are 'soft on crime' and, in the case of Clean Slate, create a public safety hazard by making criminals impossible to identify. These assumptions are false. Study after study in other states reveal that people who remain crime free after leaving prison stay crime free, especially when barriers to economic activity are removed. These soft-on-crime fears tend to take hold in white suburban districts where there is little understanding of the negative impacts of the criminal justice system on communities of color. I urge you not to let these fears rule the day. I am a white suburbanite. I pastor a largely white, suburban congregation. I am not afraid of expunging the criminal records of people who have already paid their debt to society. I would much prefer that formerly incarcerated people become productive, contributing members of society. I urge you, especially those of you who serve in white, suburban districts, not to give into fear. It's time to stop penalizing people who've already served their time.

Please support SB 1019.

Sincerely,
Rev. Josh Pawelek