



TESTIMONY OF AMBER VLANGAS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, RESTORATIVE ACTION ALLIANCE, INC.
JOINT COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
MARCH 10, 2021

Support with Reservation of: SB 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

Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee:

Good Afternoon. My name is Amber Vlangas, and I am the Executive Director of Restorative Action Alliance, Inc. (RAA) a regional advocacy group made up of anti-carceral crime survivors, individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal system, and restorative justice advocates and practitioners.

I am here today to express my support, with some reservation for **SB 1019, also known as “Clean Slate”**. As a survivor of military sexual assault, and a member of a justice-impacted family, I have a comprehensive understanding of the devastating impacts of both harm and the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction. **While I strongly support the spirit of this bill, I urge the committee to remove the exclusions that are based on crime category.** In the absence of the political will to take this action, I would ask that the committee include language that would prohibit the Board of Pardons and Paroles from denying someone a hearing based on the nature of their crime or their appearance on a public registry.

At RAA, we believe that every person has value and can be restored to community when they take meaningful accountability for their actions, engage in rehabilitation and do all that is possible to repair the harm they have caused. If a person has done the work by serving their court-ordered sentence and remaining conviction-free for a specified period of time, they should be eligible for Clean Slate, no matter their offense. **We refuse to accept the injustice of immutable punishment and life-long discrimination towards any human being as justice for survivors.** This approach fully misunderstands why and how violence occurs. Denying restoration, creating barriers to pro-social support and blocking access to necessities creates the very conditions that

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perpetuate cycles of harm: **isolation, shame and an inability to meet one's basic needs.**¹ Everyone, regardless of their offense, deserves the ability to earn a second chance. Making people whole again is the only way we can focus on reducing harm and begin to disrupt cycles of violence.

Often, the conversation around relief for people who have been convicted of a crime centers on the faulty idea that providing opportunity to justice-impacted individuals is contrary to what survivors want and need²; or that it will decrease public safety. This narrative does not reflect the full range of survivor voices nor is it supported by evidence.³

I would like to encourage this committee and all decision-makers in our state to expand their notion of who deserves to be heard and who deserves to be safe. Safety should center on harm reduction and always be seen through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion. The disproportionate way that the criminal legal system and mass incarceration affect people of color and the poor does not create safety.⁴ Marginalizing and silencing survivors who do not seek the criminal legal system or believe in lifelong punishment as a solution to their pain does not create safety.⁵ Creating limited access to housing, education and employment due to fear-based discrimination does not create safety.⁶

As a collective, we must push for a concept of public safety that includes every person living in our state. We must focus on who people are today and the services that survivors need; not on the worst thing a person has ever done, or the worst thing that ever happened to them.

Restorative Action Alliance enthusiastically supports the portion of the bill that provides protections against discrimination on the basis of an erased criminal record. In the age of the internet and rapid information dissemination, it is possible for a prospective employer or landlord to learn of a person's prior conviction despite it having been erased. Without this anti-discrimination provision, barriers will continue to exist.

In sum, RAA believes that all people living with a record should be eligible for Clean Slate, irrespective of their offense type. We support this bill with reservation and **urge the committee to remove the exclusionary language that leaves too many people behind, not based on who they are, but based on the category of crime that they were convicted of.** We ask the Committee to revise Senate Bill 1019 to provide the most expansive and fair version of Clean Slate possible.

¹ See Danielle Sered. *Accounting for Violence: How to Increase Safety and Break Our Failed Reliance on Mass Incarceration*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2017. *available at:* <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/accounting-for-violence.pdf>

² See Alliance on Safety and Justice (2016), *Crime Survivors Speak: The First-Ever National Survey on Victims' Views on Safety and Justice*. (Graph: Wendy Sawyer, 2020) *available at:* <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/whatvictimswant.html>

³ R. Karl Hanson, et al, "Reductions in Risk Based on Time Offense-Free in the Community: Once a Sexual Offender, Not Always a Sexual Offender." *Psychology, Public Policy and Law* 24, no. 1 (2018): 48-63.

⁴ See Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System (April 19, 2018) <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/>

⁵ See The Appeal (July 18, 2019) *I was Sexually Assaulted and I Don't Believe Incarcerating Rapists Doesn't Help Victims Like Me.* *available at:* <https://theappeal.org/i-was-sexually-assaulted-and-i-believe-incarcerating-rapists-doesnt-help-victims-like-me/>

⁶ Deveaux, Mika'il. (2017). *Fitting-in: How Formerly Incarcerated New York City Black Men Define Success Post-Prison*. 10.13140/RG.2.2.18997.68323.