



JUSTICE FOR ALL

MARYLAND HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
TESTIMONY OF MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE
IN SUPPORT OF HB957: CRIMINAL PROCEDURE –
EXPUNGEMENT – FELONY CONVICTIONS
FEBRUARY 22, 2022

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Chairman Clippinger and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 957. My name is Chris Sweeney, and I am a staff attorney at Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS), where I manage our Workforce Development Project. MVLS is the oldest and largest provider of pro bono civil legal services to low-income Marylanders throughout the state. Since MVLS' founding in 1981, our statewide panel of over 1,700 volunteers has provided free legal services to over 100,000 Marylanders in a wide range of civil legal matters. Through our Workforce Development project, we represent many clients seeking sustainable, fulfilling employment. One of the major barriers to employment is a criminal record, and we have represented over 750 clients in expungement proceedings. For the reasons explained below, MVLS respectfully requests the committee return a favorable report on HB957.

MVLS' Workforce Development Project is a partnership with occupational training programs in Baltimore City and is a continuation of the Mayor's Office's 'One Baltimore for Jobs' pilot program. The Mayor's Office of Employment Development began One Baltimore for Jobs to respond to the civil unrest in 2015. The project supports job programs, social services programs, and legal services programs in Baltimore, connecting those programs with support from state agencies such as the Office of Child Support and the Motor Vehicle Administration. MVLS currently supports a variety of workforce programs in Baltimore: Civic Works, Job Opportunities Task Force, Jane Addams Resource Corporation, Caroline Center, Biotechnical Institute of Maryland, Bon Secours Community Works, and Helping Up Mission. We provide supplement the trainees' social services with legal services with a goal to make participants more job-ready by reducing barriers to employment.

Each of the clients we serve through the Workforce Development Project is enrolled in courses to receive job skills training and certification in welding, machine operation, nursing, pharmacy tech, construction, or weatherization. These non-profit programs are free to students and aim to provide re-entry opportunities for the previously incarcerated or those who lacked educational and employment opportunities due to poverty. The majority of clients we see through this project have criminal cases on their records. In Maryland, a criminal

conviction can follow a person for the rest of their life. Convictions make it harder to find employment, housing, and social services.

As Marylanders invested in our community, we at MVLS believe that a person's life should not be defined by the worst thing they have done. A number of circumstances beyond an individual's control can culminate into that person making bad decisions. But through our Workforce Development Project, we have seen how people can change for the better when given a chance. We know from serving over 750 clients with a criminal record that wrong choices from a person's past do not dictate their worth to our community or define who they are as a person.

HB957 would allow for the expungement of three felony convictions with a fifteen-year waiting period. This waiting period begins when a person's sentence ends. This bill in no way lets anyone off easy for their criminal actions. The bill deals with individuals who have been tried, found guilty, and served their time. Our legal system applies prison sentences in proportion to the crime committed. Once a person has served their time – and in the case of the felonies at issue, this will often be several years – they have paid their debt to society in accordance with our judicial system's values. Fifteen years *after* a person has paid their debt to society, that conviction should not haunt them when they apply for a job. Especially when, in accordance with HB957, that person has been free from convictions during that entire period.

Though the idea of expunging felonies may cause an emotional response at first glance, when we consider the waiting period this bill requires, along with the absence of subsequent convictions for fifteen years, allowing a person to expunge certain felonies from their record is in the interest of justice. When we allow people to move forward with their lives, find employment, and obtain stable housing, we allow our communities to thrive. When we perpetually punish people for their actions from fifteen years ago, they are more likely to seek their basic needs through more criminal activity.

HB957 will allow those who have made mistakes, paid their dues, and left their past behind them to be free from unjust consequences for who they used to be. We at MVLS believe that this bill advances justice. We hope you will consider the information we have provided and return a favorable report on this bill. We sincerely thank you for the opportunity to testify.