



CITY OF PROVIDENCE

Jorge O. Elorza, Mayor

April 2, 2019

Chairman Craven
House Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street, Providence, Rhode Island, 02903

Re: H5839 -- Expungement of Criminal Records Act (Support)

Dear Chairman Craven and Members of the Committee,

As Executive Director of the Providence Human Relations Commission, I write to you today in full support of House Bill 5839.

Impaneled in 1963, the Providence Human Relations Commission works to protect and expand residents' rights to fair housing, education, employment, credit and public accommodations, free from discrimination.

A conviction record is a scarlet letter -- one that, as a result of our nation's drive towards mass incarceration, affects nearly 5 million formerly incarcerated people living in the United States today.

Racialized mass incarceration is very much the result of marked changes in sentencing policies, including widespread adoption of mandatory minimums for nonviolent offenses, cutbacks in parole release, the War on Drugs, and the 1994 Crime Bill passed by Congress, which created additional incentives for states to build prisons and increase sentences. Black and Latino persons systematically face higher odds of incarceration and receive longer sentences than white individuals for the same offenses.

While [26,000](#) Rhode Islanders remain in prison or under criminal justice supervision to date, those granted release from prison face a whole new set of challenges. Every year, more than 600,000 people in the United States make the difficult transition from prison back to community, facing extensive [economic exclusion](#). The Department of Justice [reports](#) that individuals who have been incarcerated can expect their future earnings reduced by approximately 40 percent after they return to their communities. The unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is nearly six times that of the unemployment rate for the general United States population. In fact, working-age "prison penalties" increase [unemployment rates](#) anywhere from 14% for white men, to 37% for black women, when compared to their general population peers. Exclusionary policies and practices are responsible for the labor market inequalities that individuals with prior contact with the justice system face -- improved, but still an issue in states like Rhode Island that have passed legislation to "Ban the Box." Individuals with a record are routinely banned from applying to educational programs and employment opportunities, obtaining [occupational licenses](#), accessing [public housing](#), and applying to public benefits such as EBT, TANF and [SNAP](#), due to former convictions. Expungement can change these circumstances, shielding an individual from discrimination based on their history, and removing barriers in accessing supports critical to preventing recidivism during an already difficult transition.



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While giving courts the power to grant expungements does not address the racial disparities present in our justice system, or the exclusionary labor policies individuals with prior contact with the justice system face, the passage of H5839 is one small but necessary step in expanding opportunity for residents denied access to gainful employment, stable housing, and basic necessities when re-entering our communities. I urge you to consider passing H5839, and consider broader structural solutions to the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated Rhode Islanders.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sol Taubin".

Sol Taubin
Executive Director
Providence Human Relations Commission