



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:

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Youth Advocates Push Clean Records Vote

Senate passes Juvenile Justice Omnibus Bill – Advocates Rally for Vote in House

BOSTON, MA – Youth organizers from UTEC and the statewide policymaking coalition Teens Leading The Way (TLTW) are calling for House action on a bill that will allow youth to put juvenile arrest records behind them.

The state Senate voted on July 12 to pass a bill (S.2417) that would give people with misdemeanor records acquired before their 18th birthday the opportunity to apply for erasure, or expungement, of those records, with judicial approval. With formal sessions in the House ending on July 31, advocates are asking the House to also make critical changes to how Massachusetts treats young people who come in contact with the courts.

“If you do the crime, you do the time,” said Jamel Bonilla, 23, from TLTW lead agency UTEC, Inc. “But a record stays with you forever, and if you have a dream, you can’t chase it.” Jamel has a criminal record from when he was 17 years old.

Stephanie Bellapianta, 18, a Teens Leading the Way advocate from Haverhill, argues that “juvenile records pose critical barriers to employment, higher education and housing.” Juvenile records often facilitate recidivism, an issue that policymakers are working to address in our justice system. According to a 2015 study by the Juvenile Law Center, Massachusetts scored only two of five possible stars on the security and confidentiality of juvenile records.

“These long overdue reforms reflect best practices in juvenile justice to reduce crime, save money and help children learn from their mistakes,” said Senate Committee on Ways and Means Chair Senator Karen E. Spilka (D-Ashland). “All young people deserve a second chance and the support services and resources they need to get back on track, lead successful adult lives and positively contribute to their communities.”

The youth organizers’ advocacy is supported by data. Research shows that brain development continues into the mid-20s. Impulse control and decision-making may affect criminal involvement. Youth up to about age 24 are “the most likely demographic to find their way into Massachusetts prisons and the quickest to return to them upon release,” according to a 2015 MassINC report on juvenile justice. A 2014 Department of Justice analysis found that the 3-year re-arrest rate for prisoners released in 2005 was 78% for 18-24 year olds, compared to 72% for all released prisoners.

Advocates also point to cost savings through expunging records; according to a study by MassINC, if Massachusetts can reduce recidivism by only 5%, the Commonwealth would save \$150 million.

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The lead agency in Teens Leading the Way is UTEC, Inc., a Lowell-based nonprofit that helps young people trade violence and poverty for social and economic success. UTEC works specifically with young people who have proven risk factors, and 86% of UTEC youth have criminal records.

UTEC focuses on keeping proven-risk youth productively engaged during that critical highest risk period of 16-24 year olds. Through employment in UTEC social enterprises, onsite education, and intensive support services, these young people gain both work skills and life skills for successful adulthood. UTEC has demonstrated its ability to reduce recidivism and help young people succeed in employment after criminal involvement. Last year, only 13% of youth had any new arrests two years after leaving UTEC's program. More than 80% were employed two years after leaving UTEC.

"When our proven-risk young people succeed, our whole community sees the highest possible return on investment," said UTEC executive director Gregg Croteau, MSW. "This goes beyond the cost-benefit of investing in program supports rather than incarceration. We also see returns on public safety, public health and economic development."

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Interview options:

Teens Leading the Way youth – contact via Geoff Foster at UTEC: 978.930.

Vincent Schiraldi is a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Program in Criminal Justice and former commissioner of probation in New York City.

Jay Blitzman is the First Justice of Middlesex County Juvenile Court and an advocate for the issue of expungement (but as a judge does not comment on specific legislation).

Selected References:

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