

Viewpoint: Clean Slate Act gives some second chance to work

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New bipartisan legislation now makes second-chance hiring a reality in Pennsylvania. Signed into law by Gov. Tom Wolf on June 28, the Clean Slate Act is good news for workers and employers across the Commonwealth.

The Clean Slate Act seals from public view all police and court records older than a decade when the offense was a non-violent summary offense or low-level misdemeanor and the individual has been crime-free for a decade.

Government shouldn't stand in the way of those who want jobs and the businesses who want to employ them. We, as a civil society, should be willing to give a second chance to individuals who have worked hard to earn it. Yet, those with past criminal records — including women and men who have worked hard for a second chance — often have a tougher time obtaining a job than the average person.

Roughly 3 million Pennsylvanians have a criminal record of some kind, according to the Center for American Progress. In Pennsylvania, individuals who have been convicted of low-level offenses, misdemeanors or other petty crimes often carry those records for years even if they've paid their debt and not re-offended. This creates significant costs for society. Upwards of \$65 billion in GDP is lost by excluding those with criminal records from the labor force. And individuals who can find a job tend to earn about 40 percent less annually than others, limiting their ability to buy local goods and services that help fuel the economy.



Matt Smith is president of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, an affiliate of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development.

The Allegheny Conference on Community Development and the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce work with public- and private-sector partners to improve the economic outlook and quality of life in the 10-county Pittsburgh region. To this end, we are focused on advocating for policies that expand economic inclusion to all of our communities and address the workforce challenges that threaten our economic progress.

The Conference's "Inflection Point" report projects an 80,000-person regional workforce shortage by 2025 as the Baby Boomers retire and new skill sets rise in demand. To address this shortage while continuing to grow the jobs needed to fuel our economy, we must tap into all the available talent in our region. This includes providing a pathway for individuals convicted of low-level offenses to have their records expunged if they have remained crime-free.

Excluding access to employment to those with criminal records has even farther-reaching consequences. Unable to find work, many of these individuals are more likely to return to the justice system, threatening public safety and burdening taxpayers. Steady employment is proven to dramatically reverse this trend. Multiple studies have found that employment is the No. 1 factor in preventing individuals from committing new crimes or returning to prison. Pennsylvania already boasts one of the most expensive prison systems in the nation, and we do not need to add to that burden on taxpayers.

In response, a bipartisan group of Pennsylvania legislators introduced and passed the Clean Slate Act.

While our economy continues growing, we can't afford to turn away hardworking Pennsylvanians and deny them a fair shot at a good job and a promising future. And our businesses can't afford anything less than access to a full, competitive labor pool. Sensible, data-driven justice reforms like "Clean Slate" are a proven pathway to a more robust and skilled workforce.

These reforms provide a fresh start to those who have effectively demonstrated that their past mistakes do not define them. We thank those legislators, from both parties, who have voted to give Pennsylvanians a meaningful second chance and to improve the Commonwealth's economy. Further, we thank Gov. Tom Wolf for swiftly signing this legislation into law.

By becoming the first state to automate the record-clearing process for minor offenses, Pennsylvania sends a clear signal that we're open for business for those willing to work hard.

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