

Commentary

Survivors like me can't rebuild without a clean slate

By Mariann W.

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When my five-year old son and I were escaping my abusive husband, we didn't know that what we did to survive would leave me with a criminal record that would trap us in a cycle of poverty. For thousands of criminalized survivors like myself, the Clean Slate Act is our only hope of putting our past behind us so we can truly heal, rebuild, and support our families.

The Clean Slate Act would automatically seal misdemeanor convictions after a three-year waiting period and felonies after an eight-year waiting period. This would be transformational in my life. I was convicted of petit larceny for using a credit card in my husband's name while I was fleeing his violence to protect myself and our son. I accepted a plea to a misdemeanor and successfully completed probation.

My son and I need the Clean Slate Act because after my conviction, I have been constantly denied employment due to my record, despite the master's degree I have earned. I was recently offered a position as a director at a program, but I was devastated when they reviewed my record and rescinded the offer.

Women only earn 82 cents for every dollar a man makes - a gender pay gap that only gets worse for women of color. Adding to this inequality is the fact that for every four women you know, one of them is a survivor of intimate partner violence. Many of us are forced out of work and funneled into cycles of poverty and homelessness when we try to escape the violence and protect our children. Imagine trying to pull yourself and your family up into financial security under these circumstances, while navigating the trauma and instability that follows in the wake of violence. Now imagine doing it with a criminal conviction that bars you from accessing housing or employment. The Clean Slate Act will finally alleviate the injustice of these barriers to the most basic pillars of stability.

But this legislation isn't just good for survivors and our families. Businesses and unions support Clean Slate because they know that this bill will expand the workforce and generate an estimated annual earnings boost to the state of \$7.1 billion.

New York is closer than ever to passing the Clean Slate Act. For me, this means I could finally apply for positions that I am more than qualified for without the fear that my record will bar me from consideration. It will protect my privacy, and mean that I have the ability to disclose, on my own terms, when and with whom to share the story of what my son and I have survived.

I am more than the worst things that have happened to me, and I am more than what I had to do to protect myself and my son while we were trying to survive and escape abuse. Survivors and families cannot wait another day for Clean Slate - we need it now, so we can reclaim control of our lives and futures.

Mariann W. is a mom and advocate living in the Hudson Valley.