



New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearings

Testimony by Center for Community Alternatives, Presented by Sirena Sharpe in Support of the Clean Slate Act (S.1553C/A.6339B)

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Sirena Sharpe, a community leader with Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) and a resident of Syracuse.

I am here to testify in support of including the Clean Slate Act (S.1553C/A.6339B) in the Senate and Assembly one-house budgets. I testify as one of more than 2 million New Yorkers who experience perpetual punishment because of a conviction record, even though I finished serving my time over a decade ago.

When I was 16, I became homeless and struggled with drug use. A year later, I was convicted of a drug charge and spent a year and a half incarcerated. By the time I was released at the age of 19, I was eager to rebuild my life. I applied for dozens of jobs but was turned down repeatedly. More than 70 employers rejected me because of my record as a teenager. Finally, I got a job as a cashier at a gas station. I thought I could finally move forward with my life. I put all my energy into applying for college. I had good grades and was ready to learn as part of a community. But again, my conviction history came up, and the college didn't want to admit me because of it. Luckily, a staff person who saw my potential intervened to advocate for my admission. She fought hard for me because she knew how hard I was fighting for myself. While I am deeply grateful for her, New York should not be systematically blocking college access for the people who need it most.

A Brennan Center report estimates that people with conviction histories collectively lose hundreds of billions of dollars in earnings every year. How different would our neighborhoods and state look if that money went into the pockets of New Yorkers where it belongs? We would have stronger shared economic growth and safer streets because increased financial security can break cycles of poverty and crime. This is particularly urgent in low-income communities and communities of color, which have borne the brunt of mass incarceration and which are disproportionately affected by old conviction records.

And what about women across our state who are trying to overcome these barriers to build stable lives for our families and ourselves? As a survivor of domestic violence with a conviction history, I struggled to leave an abusive relationship because landlords hesitated to rent to me due to my record. Under the Clean Slate Act, women like me would have access to greater options and safety.

By allowing us to access jobs, housing and education, the Clean Slate Act will strengthen families and communities, decreasing recidivism and increasing community safety, as research shows. The mechanics of the bill are simple. Once someone like me has completed their sentence, is off of probation and parole, and after a three- or seven-year waiting period, our records would be automatically sealed. Those who have new convictions or pending charges would not be eligible.

For me, and so many others, a clean slate is a real chance at redemption. Those of us who have served our time want the same thing everyone else does: a stable job, a roof over our heads, and the ability to provide for our loved ones. Lawmakers can make that a reality and provide us the opportunity to fully contribute to our communities.

While we appreciate Governor Hochul's support for the key principles that underpin Clean Slate, the proposed language in her Executive Budget includes changes that significantly weaken the existing bill, including dramatically delaying when an individual becomes eligible for sealing and thereby limiting the legislation's effectiveness.

We ask you to include in your one house budget bills the full Clean Slate bill (S.1553C/A.6339B) - as is.

The Governor's inclusion of Clean Slate in the 2023 Executive Budget is a testament to the advocacy of directly impacted individuals and the broad coalition of supporters who have fought tirelessly for this vital relief. Supported by business leaders, unions, faith leaders, directly impacted individuals and organizations they lead, and individual New Yorkers in every corner of the state, Clean Slate is a jobs bill, a housing bill, and an anti-poverty bill. Automatically sealing past conviction records is also a matter of simple fairness. Championed by Senator Zellnor Myrie and Assembly Member Catalina Cruz, the Clean Slate Act will allow New Yorkers to move ahead with their lives and participate in our state's economic and social recovery.

We urge you to include the Clean Slate Act (S.1553C/A.6339B) in the budget, without weakening amendments, and bring real relief to New Yorkers and their families.