

A 'Clean slate': Lawmakers, advocates push for automatic sealing of criminal records

By **Dan Glaun** Globe Staff, Updated January 10, 2025, 4:56 p.m.



View of the Massachusetts State House. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

A coalition of lawmakers, advocacy groups, and business leaders are backing legislation to automatically seal certain criminal records in an effort to help people with years-old convictions more easily access jobs, housing, and education.

Clean Slate Massachusetts launched its campaign Thursday, saying the changes could help more than 600,000 people in Massachusetts clear their records. Under the state's [2018 criminal justice law](#), people can petition to seal misdemeanors three years after completing their sentences and nonviolent felonies after seven years, as long as they haven't been convicted of other crimes in the interim. But relatively few people have actually benefited from that measure — a [Globe review of the program](#) found that just 2,186 people submitted petitions in the first two and a half years of the law being in effect, of which 352 were approved by judges.

The proposed legislation, sponsored by state Senator Cindy Friedman and Representative Mary Keefe, would automate that process. It's an attempt to lift the "heavy burden of carrying a record" that could prevent eligibility for a range of programs and services, Keefe said.

"It is so difficult to find employment, find housing, to just move your life forward," Keefe said. "I don't think the average citizen, unless they've had this experience, understands what this is."

Rahsaan D. Hall, president of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, described the proposed law as a way of promoting economic opportunity and addressing social barriers that disproportionately affect communities of color.

"When we empower people to work, support their families, and participate fully in society, everyone wins," Hall said. "A more inclusive workforce means a stronger Massachusetts for all of us."

Twelve states have enacted automated sealing legislation since 2018, according to Clean Slate Massachusetts. Previous efforts to automate record sealing have failed in Massachusetts. Similar bills introduced in [2019](#), [2021](#), and [2023](#) died in committee, and an attempt to add it as an amendment to a [2022 judicial modernization bill](#) did not succeed.

For Jacqueline Velez, a community project coordinator with the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts, the issue is personal. Twenty years ago, she said, she pleaded guilty to possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell. She spent six months in jail, but the charge continued to haunt her — on applications for jobs, Section 8 housing, and college financial aid.

“I lived in constant fear,” Velez said. “We cannot punish people by sending them to jail or prison and then put barriers in their path to succeed.”

Clean Slate Massachusetts is a coalition of 11 advocacy groups and nonprofits, including The Fountain Fund, Greater Boston Legal Services, Justice 4 Housing, and the national Clean Slate Initiative. The campaign has also drawn support from members of the state’s business community.

Sealing old records can help expand the talent pool for local businesses, said Jay Ash, president of the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership, a public policy group consisting of CEOs from 20 of the state’s largest companies.

Nan Gibson of the JPMorganChase PolicyCenter said 10 percent of her firm’s hires last year had criminal histories that did not affect their ability to do their jobs.

“They’ve paid their debt, they’ve done their time, so to speak, and now it’s time to allow them to move on,” Gibson said. “This notion that you’ve done something when you’re young and now it follows you for the rest of your life is not something I believe our system is based on.”

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