

Hundreds seek help with record expungements at Clean Jacket Day

Clean Jacket Day held

By Danny Monteverde

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Fabian Pace arrived in a hopeful mood Saturday.

The 37-year-old, on parole for possession of cocaine, thought he might be able to get the crime expunged, so he made his way to Clean Jacket Day.

However, his status as a parolee meant he is not yet eligible to have his record cleared, he learned.

Clean Jacket Day was organized by the Justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana as a way to try to help hundreds of people seeking to have past arrests or convictions cleared from the public record. Expungement normally can be a confusing — and expensive — legal process, said Ameca Reali, the group's executive director.

It was the second year the center has hosted the day. Last year, about 500 people received help from volunteer attorneys who reviewed their cases.

This year, another 500 people were expected to show up at Christian Unity Baptist Church to try to clear their names of crimes that in some cases were decades old and minor but are still causing them major problems, Reali said.

“It could be a job, housing, getting into school,” she said. “A criminal record can prevent all of those things.”

Not every crime, however, can be expunged.

There is no way to get violent felonies, such as shootings, removed from the public record. The same is true of sex offenses and crimes involving children, Reali said.

But for those who have minor offenses on their records or arrests that were never prosecuted, expungement is a good course of action, especially when it comes to trying to find work, said David Marcello, a Justice and Accountability Center board member and Tulane law professor.

“If that’s the first question you ask a job applicant,” he said, “that discourages further conversation.”

If someone is able to afford the \$550 processing fee — which is required even of those helped by the JAC — it’s worth it, said Adrienne Wheeler, a Loyola College of Law graduate and director of law and policy for the center. “The collateral consequences for a conviction or even an arrest are severe.”

Last year, she said, the group worked with one person who’d carried around a conviction since 1969.

Throughout the day, those in attendance heard a mix of responses from the attorneys who screened each case.

“Good news. You’re eligible for an expungement,” one man heard minutes after sitting down to have his case file reviewed.

“I wish I had better news for you,” another lawyer said a short time later to a woman with a small child in tow.

One man was told there was nothing that could be done to deal with his federal conviction. The day dealt only with state and municipal charges.

Last year, Reali said, the JAC was able to file paperwork for 180 expungements after Clean Jacket Day. All but two of the individuals had their records cleared.

Pace, the felon on parole, said that if even one person was helped, it was a positive, especially if it means that person can now get a job or try to contribute to society.

“Once they run your name and see you have a conviction, it kind of puts a freeze on things,” he said of prior job hunts. “That’s why New Orleans is like it is today.”

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