



Everything New Orleans

Expungement costs make turning over a new leaf hard to do: Jarvis DeBerry

23rd Re-Entry Class

The Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office graduated 44 inmates June 13 from its 23rd annual Southeast Regional Re-Entry and Rehabilitation Program (*John Harper, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune*)

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on October 03, 2013 at 1:45 PM

"It's just so expensive, especially for people who aren't working." -- JAC director Ameca Reali on the cost of expungements in Louisiana

If employers reflexively disqualify job applicants who have criminal records and property owners categorically refuse to rent them a place to live, then people who are trying to set their lives back in order may find they have no other choice but to get their criminal records expunged.

Louisiana law allows some arrests and convictions to be shielded from public view - generally, not violent felonies nor those crimes that require people to register as sex offenders. But expungements aren't cheap. In fact, an ex-offender who desperately wants to get his record expunged to get a job will probably find that he first needs to get a job to afford the cost of expungement.

Ameca Reali, executive director of the **Justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana**, broke down the costs Tuesday. According to state law, "The clerk of court shall collect the processing fee at the time the motion for expungement is filed and may collect **a fee of up to ten dollars to cover the clerk's administration cost,**" but in Orleans Parish, the clerk demands \$100, Reali said. And that's cheap. Clerks in other parishes are charging up to \$375.

"They say it's the cost to perform the service," Reali said.

But the clerk's fee isn't all that's required. The Louisiana State Police demand \$250. Then the local sheriff and district attorney get \$50 each.

On top of the costs noted above, people seeking to get a record expunged in Jefferson Parish are also required to spend another \$50 for a background check, Reali said. The \$50 background cost is fixed no matter how many arrests or convictions you're trying to get erased at one time. But all the other costs multiply as the number of expunged records increase. So if you want two records expunged, you have to pay the clerk twice, pay the sheriff twice, pay the district attorney twice.

"It's just so expensive," Reali said, "especially for people who aren't working."

Contrast that with the state of Georgia, Reali said, where getting a record expunged costs a flat \$50. Mississippi also makes it easier and cheaper for its residents to clear their records. But here in Louisiana, where we have the highest incarceration rate in the world, the state seems determined to get folks coming and going. "I think it's a way to make money, unfortunately, on the backs of people who are poor," Reali said.

The Justice and Accountability Center held an expungement-day event Saturday at Christian Unity Baptist Church, my place of worship. More than 200 volunteers, including about 70 attorneys, showed up to help 500 people who want their records clear.

Fittingly, a job fair being held Saturday by **Voice of the Ex-Offender** seeks to connect ex-offenders with employers, although as VOTE's Gahiji Barrow said Thursday, the job fair is open to anybody looking for work. Expungements can be beneficial, but Barrow said they are not a prerequisite to people attending this job fair.

"We know what a difficult process that can be," he said of expungements, and the employers VOTE will bring to the job fair have agreed not to automatically turn people down because they've been arrested or convicted. Those employers might have a discussion with an applicant about their record, Barrow said, but not in a way that should make the applicant think he or she is going to be automatically disqualified. The job fair itself, he said, is part of VOTE's campaign to put an end to such automatic disqualifications.

Those who attend Saturday's job fair, he said, will find hiring managers from local restaurants and grocery stores and computer stations to help them apply to some of the warehouse stores that require online applications. Representatives from Delgado Community College will be there to talk about the skill-training programs available there. The cement workers union is definitely on board, Barrow said, and there are still other trade unions VOTE is hoping to have in place before Saturday's 11 a.m. start.

VOTE is also providing a forum for people who've struggled to get employers to look past their pasts to tell their stories Saturday.

We all ought to be on board with helping people transition from criminality to productivity. The more difficult it is for them to get jobs to support themselves, the more likely that we'll be supporting them as their inability to make an honest living lands them back in prison.

The V.O.T.E. job fair will be held at Christian Unity Baptist Church, 1700 Conti Street. For more information, call 504.252.0142.

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