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Fresh Start Initiative offers possible expungement for those convicted of certain crimes



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Not everyone qualifies. For example, those convicted of violent crimes do not. But by all accounts, this collaboration between a wide range of agencies is a truly unprecedented effort.

Expungement is expensive, but some agencies that are part of the process have eliminated or lowered fees.

The program was spearheaded by Calcasieu District Attorney John DeRosier, who said he wants to help people who deserve a second chance.

"This event is the culmination of a six-month project so far, to try to help young individuals who have committed criminal activities in the past to cleanse their criminal history so they can get gainful employment," said DeRosier. "That's what it's all about."

The Initiative was held Wednesday at the Civic Center. The Southwest Louisiana Law Center was also a major player behind the event.

"It's unprecedented," said Mark Judson, executive director. "It's a huge collaborative effort of so many agencies, people, volunteers, law enforcement and we know it's the first time it's been done in Louisiana, possibly the nation."

More than a dozen agencies and numerous volunteers came together for the initiative.

The expungement process can be lengthy and expensive. But the event made it a sort of a "one-stop shop."

"We don't want to shut the door on anybody today. It may be a 'no' today, but that doesn't mean it's always going to be a 'no' because we want to help these people so they can, in turn, help their families and the community," said Holly Holland with the D.A.'s office.

At the event, there were some cost savings as well.

"The sheriff has agreed to waive all of the fees for the sheriff's office, which is a pretty big deal," said Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Stitch Guillory.

The clerk of court also cut his fee.

"Our fee is normally \$200. We've waived a hundred of that to help it along to make it a little more affordable," said Lynn Jones, Calcasieu Clerk of Court.

You might not think of an expungement as something that would help reduce crime, but legal experts say it does.

Adrienne Wheeler is with the justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana in New Orleans.

"When people have access to housing and to employment, recidivism goes down. Oftentimes, there's crimes of necessity. And once we remove that necessity by providing employment, that goes down,"she said.

Even though expungement cleans up one's official criminal record, it doesn't mean it's erased from social media and the internet. But Wheeler says most employers and housing providers rely on official records to make decisions.

It took about 150 people to put on Wednesday's event, 42 of whom were attorneys volunteering their time. Judson said 118 people were counseled and 42 total expungements were granted. He said an additional 10 will be granted in the next two weeks with minimal follow up.

Judson said the organizers will evaluate the success of the event to see if it's feasible to do yearly.

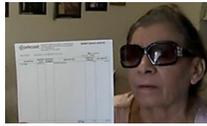
Those who attended were asked to preregister. Those who are interested but could not be helped this time were to be placed on a waiting list.

To find out more about the program [click here](#).

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