

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This summer I had the privilege of working with the Greater Boston Legal Services CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information) and Re-entry project, assisting people with sealing and expunging their criminal records. This work enables people with criminal records to better be able to find housing and employment, and access resources and opportunities that they would otherwise be barred from. Through this process, the CORI Project not only helps combat poverty, but also helps reduce recidivism by allowing them to participate in normal life without the stigma of their record following them.

In addition to being able to witness the spectacular work that the attorneys at GBLS do every day, and seeing the depth of their knowledge in the CORI field, it was particularly moving to see the impact that record sealing and expungement could have on the lives of clients we worked with. Even months after sealing the record of one client “Danny”, we returned to court to expunge (not merely close the record to the public, but destroy the record altogether, for both the courts and police) marijuana possession charges he had accrued in his youth, for amounts of marijuana that would no longer even constitute a crime today. When the judge ruled that these charges were to be expunged, it was powerful to watch Danny shed tears of what I can only imagine was some mix of relief, vindication, and perhaps frustration that these minor charges had hounded him for over a decade, coloring his interactions with police, the legal system, and employers, but would at last be eliminated.

We were able to seal the record of another client “Alexis”, who had had no contact with the criminal justice system for over a decade before she and her landlord developed an ongoing dispute in the last two years. This dispute involved the weaponization of the justice system, and even though every charge her landlord filed against her was ultimately dismissed, these charges

still filled her criminal record and painted the picture for an observer of someone who had fallen into a pattern of instability and criminality. This incomplete picture led to Alexis losing her home and her job, and becoming trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of litigation. With her record sealed, she will hopefully no longer face the automatic and sometimes unconscious prejudices that are levied against people with records, even those without guilty charges.

The often frustrating flip-side to these morale-boosting successes was how often we might experience our own capabilities hitting their limit. For instance, some charges remain with people for the entirety of their lives, as a charge did for one of my clients who vehemently denied ever committing the crime he pled guilty to, saying he had been misled by his attorney three decades earlier, and still faces repercussions from charges he served no time for. This sort of predicament was unfortunately outside of our purview, and the best we could do was refer him to a different organization and hope they had the resources to help.

An additional dispiriting aspect was simply the fact that the clients we worked with had already faced such a degree of setbacks from the legal system, often for minor crimes, that our sealing process could not undo. This made the legislative work that our attorneys were also engaged in all the more encouraging, and it was inspiring to watch them fight day in and day out for a system that would not cause the same level of harm to start with.

I am deeply grateful to Equal Justice America for making my experience this summer possible in the first place, and have an immense amount of admiration for the commitment you show to furthering the ability of people across the country to work towards a more just society.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Hardin