

Honorable Members of the Committee,

My name is Chris Davis. I am a resident of Grand Forks's district 18, a proud veteran of the United States Marine Corps, a Vice Commander of American Legion Post 6 in Grand Forks, and a mentor with the Veteran's Wellness Court in our community. I am also someone who has lived with the lasting consequences of a criminal conviction. My experiences have shaped my understanding of the barriers that justice-involved individuals face and strengthened my commitment to advocating for systemic reforms that promote fairness and second chances.

I'm here today to voice my strong support for House Bill No. 1263. This legislation provides an essential opportunity for individuals who have demonstrated accountability and growth to petition for the sealing of their criminal records and to appeal unfavorable decisions. It represents a crucial step forward for justice-involved individuals seeking to rebuild their lives after serving their time.

My Personal Journey

I know firsthand how difficult it is to reintegrate into society with a criminal record. Despite having served my sentence, paid my debts, and committed myself to rehabilitation, my conviction continues to overshadow my life. Every job application, background check, or disclosure feels like a reminder of mistakes I've worked hard to overcome. These challenges not only affect individuals like me but also limit their ability to contribute fully to their families and communities.

Through my involvement with the Veteran's Wellness Court, I have seen the transformative power of second chances. Veterans, in particular, often face unique challenges upon returning to civilian life, and a criminal record only compounds these difficulties. This bill would give justice-involved individuals, including many veterans, a fair chance to move forward and live productive, meaningful lives.

Removing an Unnecessary Burden

One of the most commendable aspects of House Bill No. 1263 is its removal of the requirement for petitioners to prove that "the benefit to the petitioner outweighs the presumption of openness of the criminal record." This standard places an unfair burden on individuals, forcing them to justify why their rehabilitation matters more than the public's access to their past.

This requirement is a relic of a system that prioritizes punishment over redemption. When someone has proven their commitment to change through years of good conduct, gainful employment, and community involvement, the benefit of sealing their record should be self-evident. Removing this burden is an essential step in treating justice-involved individuals with the dignity and fairness they deserve.

The Right to Appeal

Another vital component of this bill is its recognition of the right to appeal decisions made by district courts. This is a critical safeguard for ensuring that every individual has a fair chance to present their case. In my time volunteering with the Veteran's Wellness Court, I've seen the impact of judicial decisions on people's lives—both when the system works as it should and when it does not. The right to appeal is fundamental to ensuring fairness and correcting potential errors. It is a protection that reinforces the integrity of our legal system and gives individuals a fair chance to present their case fully.

A Call to Action

This bill is about more than sealing records—it's about affirming our belief in the power of redemption and the value of second chances. Justice should not end with the completion of a sentence; it should include the opportunity to rebuild and reintegrate.

By supporting House Bill No. 1263, you are not only improving the lives of justice-involved individuals but also strengthening families, communities, and our economy. You are giving people the tools they need to succeed and the dignity they deserve.

Thank you for your time and for considering this important legislation. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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