



It's Hard to Get a Second Chance in Georgia

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Sonya is looking for a job. She has five arrests on her record, all of which led to dismissals. To have her record expunged would cost \$250.00 (\$50.00 per arrest). Without a job, she can't afford these fees. Without clearing her record, she's not likely to get a job.

Sonya is just one of over 150 clients who have come to Georgia Justice Project's (GJP) Coming Home program seeking relief from the systemic barriers that result from arrests and/or convictions.

Both in Georgia and in the nation, an increasing percentage of our population has been arrested and/or incarcerated – the vast majority for nonviolent offenses. America leads the world in incarceration – locking up 510 per 100,000 residents. Georgia tops that percentage by incarcerating 986 per 100,000. In addition, one in 13 Georgia residents are either in jail or prison, or on probation or parole. This is the highest percentage of any state in the country. Currently, 80% of those

incarcerated are classified as indigent at the time of their arrest. When released from jail or prison, most return to the metropolitan Atlanta area, and they face an array of legal barriers.

A criminal record includes virtually any contact with the judicial system. If ever arrested, even if charges are never officially brought in court, that person will have a criminal record. And any criminal record creates barriers to employment, housing, and public assistance. These often harsh consequences stand as substantial impediments to people who want to return to lives as contributing members of society. In fact, these barriers may be so substantial that they are counterproductive, causing some of those released from incarceration to return to criminal activity in order to support their livelihood. The overall impact of these roadblocks for ex-offenders constitutes a social and economic drain on our communities, our state, and the nation as a whole. The Legal Action Center in Washington ranked Georgia the third worst state, behind only Mississippi and Louisiana for barriers to successful reentry for individuals with a criminal record.

The Coming Home program directly responds to the call in Georgia for comprehensive reentry planning and the removal of legal and social barriers. We work on these issues in three distinct ways: direct representation, education, and policy.

Direct Representation: Coming Home enhances and expands services previously provided by GJP staff attorneys and is supported by volunteer lawyers from Atlanta-area law firms who play a pivotal role in the representation of clients through expungements, correcting criminal histories, and advocating for sentence modifications.

Education: GJP also has a partnership with Mercer University Law School where GJP

teaches courses on Civil Consequences of Criminal Convictions and Poverty Law. We also present reentry issues to attorneys, judges, and community partners to build awareness.

Policy: GJP is currently working with other non-profits as well as individual legislators to develop strategies that will foster feasible administrative and legislative change in Georgia. As part of this collaborative effort, in 2009 Mercer Law School published a book, "Collateral Consequences of Arrests and Convictions," by **Lane Dennard** and **Pat DiCarlo**, which outlines the legal and policy challenges for those with criminal records (see p. 13 for an article about this book.)

Individuals served by Coming Home have had contact with the criminal justice system. Having received justice as defendants, they (now) deserve the full promise of justice. Justice means removing impediments that block an individual's attempts to provide for themselves and their family. Justice means being able to find a place to live and a job when trying to start your life over. Justice means not having to suffer consequences for a wrongful arrest. Justice means not continuing to pay after serving a full sentence.

Coming Home is a strategic extension of Georgia Justice Project's core work of criminal legal defense that serves as a departure point for a longer-term investment meant to get clients' lives back on track. Coming Home offers hope for a criminal justice system that moves beyond harsh and punitive sentencing and instead focuses on a more purposeful objective--building capacity in our nation's underserved criminal and criminally-accused population, so that clients like Sonya can get on with their lives. ■

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