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There are 400,000 people in Philly with convictions and criminal records. Expungement clinics can offer a fresh start.

This Saturday, the nonprofit group Ceiba will hold one of these clinics at 2600 N. Fifth St., from 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.



Albert Price has had a bogus felony conviction hanging over him for 30 years and is working to get his record cleared. Tuesday, October 18, 2022. Steven M. Falk / Staff Photographer

by [Nate File](#)

Albert Price always wanted to be a firefighter. As the Germantown native grew up and into young adulthood, he had a plan for his career path: He would first go into the military, and then join the Fire Department after he finished his service. But that path has been completely shut off to him for the last 30 years, ever since he pleaded guilty to a crime he never committed.

Price was just 21 when he was fixing up his car behind a friend's house and a pair of police officers pulled up. The officers had received complaints from neighbors about the noise Price and his friend were making on the car, and ran the vehicle information for each man's cars through their database. It turned out Price's friend was in possession of a stolen vehicle. Even

though Price had no idea about his friend's car, he was charged with felony-level receiving stolen property. He pleaded guilty to avoid jail time.

Now 51, Price is just one of thousands of Philadelphians who carry a criminal record with them every day of their lives.

According to research from [The Promise](#), a new public-private partnership-based initiative from the United Way aimed at tackling poverty in Philadelphia, there are more than 400,000 people in Philadelphia with some kind of conviction and/or arrest record. This often strictly limits the most essential parts of their lives, such as where they can work, where they can live, or the activities they can do in their free time. It is why Price described his criminal record as “a dark cloud that’s been hanging over my head for 30 years.”

Since the spring, the United Way, The Promise, and community organizations throughout Philly have come together with legal partners to offer criminal-record clearing clinics throughout Philadelphia in an effort to clear those clouds.

The next of these clinics is hosted by the nonprofit group Ceiba this Saturday in West Kensington, at 2600 N. Fifth Street, from 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. United Way and The Promise plan to hold more clinics in the future, and information about them is [posted on The Promise website](#).

Each clinic also offers a variety of other resources to community members, like job opportunities. But clearing criminal records is the primary focus. “It sounds like an overexaggeration,” said Sarah Hutton from the United Way and The Promise, “but [having a criminal record] impacts almost every aspect of [people’s] lives.”

Records become barriers even in unexpected places

To have a criminal record does not only mean that a person has been convicted of a crime. If a person is charged with an offense but is not found guilty, the crime can still show up on one's criminal record. Even if someone gets arrested in connection with a crime and is never charged with an offense, that too can show up on that person's record.

“They're mostly cases where people were never convicted of anything. Where they were arrested and ultimately there was not enough evidence to prove they committed the crime,” said Jordan Barnett, an attorney with the Philadelphia Defender Association who helps people clear their criminal records. “We're talking about people who were arrested possibly as a case of mistaken identity, possibly as a case of police impropriety ... and yet, that arrest, that record can still often be a barrier.”

Often, criminal records become a barrier for those seeking employment, like Price. Even when a criminal record doesn't automatically bar someone from a job, as a felony conviction can, employers frequently won't consider candidates with even misdemeanors or arrests in their past. Sometimes, even if someone with a criminal record has a job, it may disqualify them from a promotion at the same employer.

Getting housing can be similarly difficult; some felonies disallow people from living in Section 8 housing altogether, and landlords often conduct background checks as they consider applications from new tenants.

“You’ve got parents who want to be involved but can’t.”

~~*Taylor Pacheco*

But having a criminal record bleeds into people’s lives in ways most don’t realize. Banks conduct criminal background checks for small business loans, mortgages, or student-loan applications, and so do all of Pennsylvania’s state universities.

”Often many of our clients are parents and they want to do things like chaperone field trips, go to school with their kids, maybe work as a PTA mom, and they can’t because [of their record],” said Taylor Pacheco, an attorney with the Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity who is working on Price’s case. “Which is just really devastating. ... You’ve got parents who want to be involved but can’t.”

“We hear a lot about housing, but we also hear a lot about social stuff, like feeling socially ostracized from previous friend groups or sometimes family,” said Hutton.

Confusing remedies

There are a few potential remedies for people with criminal records. Unfortunately, the criminal legal system does not make those options known or easily understood to most people.

“There [isn’t] necessarily an infrastructure built up to advise people of their rights,” Barnett said. “We all think of when you get arrested ... ‘You have the right to remain silent, you have the right to an attorney.’ ... If your case later on gets dismissed or is withdrawn or you’re found not guilty, there [isn’t] necessarily an institutional process that says, ‘You have the right to seek an expungement.’”

Expungements are one of these potential solutions, where the offense or arrest can be completely erased from a person’s record. Sealing a record can also be an option, where the offense still remains on a person’s record, but the offense is not visible to most people or entities that would search for it.

“There (isn’t) necessarily an institutional process that says, ‘you have the right to an expungement.’”

~~*Jordan Barnett*

And for the most part, once a person is convicted of a crime or pleads guilty, the only remaining remedy is a pardon by the governor of Pennsylvania. This act will also erase the conviction from a person’s record, but the process is much more difficult and lengthy.

Whichever option applies to a person's case, the organizers of these record-clearing clinics want to make sure that Philadelphians have options, and do not have to carry their criminal records forever.

Price is seeking a pardon for his felony conviction. He's two years into the process and still has a long way to go, but he is happy to be moving closer to clearing the cloud over his head.

"It would open so many doors to me," he said. With a clean record, he would like to take a higher-paying job and be able to retire in the next 10 years or so. He wants to eventually move out from Germantown to the suburbs with his wife.

"It's a lot to do and it takes time for things to happen. ... Everything has a process. So you have to just be patient."

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