

State hears criminal justice reform advocates

Proposed bills affect sentencing, records

[Jule Pattison-Gordon](#) | 6/7/2017, 11:43 a.m.



Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz gave testimony on criminal justice reforms, accompanied by Rep. Mary Keefe. Ben Forman of MassINC stands in back. BANNER PHOTO

Criminal records

Among those giving testimony was a woman who has a felony on her record for receiving stolen property worth a little more than \$250. Such an offense remains on her record for ten years, and is a major barrier to her life and employment abilities, she said.

“I am a nursing assistant by trade, CPR-certified, medically certified, but I cannot get a job in any hospital right now because of my felony [which is not sealable until 2019],” she said, adding that while she is working on her RN qualification at a community college now, her record prevents her from applying to continue the program at another in-

stitution. "It is too long of a waiting period. I did my time: I served, I was on probation. However, I am still being punished."

Advocates call for allowing felonies to be sealed after seven years, down from ten years, and misdemeanors to be sealed after three years instead of five years. Many also call for increasing the property value level at which a theft is considered a felony from \$250, where it was set 30 years ago, to \$1,500.

Jefferson Alvarez, a 21-year-old member of UTEC, advocated for the ability to expunge juvenile records. He said his life took a wrong turn seven years ago, when he was arrested on the verge of a fight as a high school freshman. Police arrived before the altercation turned physical, he said. He was removed from school and placed into an alternative school, where fights and arrests continued, he said. Now he has learned better and is trying to turn his life around, but his record holds him back, he said.

"What if I wanted to be a foster parent or run a day care?" Alvarez said. "Because of one mistake in my life [I can't]."

Criminal records also can be a barrier to living in public housing, attaining employment and higher education.

Other measures

Members of Jobs Not Jails and other supporters also argued for reducing collateral fees on those released from incarceration, such as the \$65 per month probation fee, so that released individuals are not financially burdened as they try to get on their feet again.

Activists also called for raising the age at which people are tried as juveniles to age 21 (save for in cases of severe violent crimes), as the brain continues to develop into one's mid-20s. Lael Chester, a research fellow from Harvard Law School's criminal justice program, said as youth mature, many age out of crime by their mid-20s. She noted that allowing young adults into the juvenile system instead of the adult system means they do not lose eligibility to receive Pell Grants for higher education, making it easier to turn their lives around. Sen. Karen Spilka said that when the age at which a person was considered a juvenile was raised from 17 to 18, juvenile crime declined.

Others called for changing the bail system so bail is only set for those considered unlikely to show up in court. That would prevent people being locked up while waiting for trial solely because of inability to afford the bail fee. Under the current system, "25 percent of the incarcerated population has not been found guilty," said Sen. Pat Jehlen.