



April 10, 2017

## Sealing the Records of People Found Innocent

Last week I passed a measure through the House of Representatives that will immediately seal the records of people who were charged with a crime but later found to be innocent. House Bill 514, which has now moved on to the Senate, states that records of charges that result in an acquittal or dismissal with prejudice, except for minor traffic offenses, may be immediately sealed after the final disposition of the case. It is so appropriate that we are taking up this legislation in this Easter season, when Christians commemorate the suffering of the falsely accused and falsely charged Jesus Christ, mourning His earthly death, but then rejoicing in His Resurrection to New Life.

At a press conference concerning the legislation hosted by my pastor, Fr. Tom Walsh, Pastor of St. Martin de Porres Church in Austin, Fr. Walsh said, "Every day, people who have been arrested and either spend time at Cook County Jail or are out on bond are found innocent of all the charges brought against them. Many people are arrested who did not commit the crime they are accused of, and eventually a judge or jury finds them innocent. Unfortunately, these charges will remain on their record. As a result, when they apply for a job or if their current employer looks at their record, they will find that these charges still on their record even if they have been found innocent. In order to get these charges removed from their records, there is a long process which involves fees which penalizes a person who is indeed innocent of the crime they were charged with. This practice is wrong, and it creates a barrier for many people who are law-abiding citizens who are trying to support themselves and their families and lead honest lives – this situation affects many people who live within our community."

If House Bill 514 becomes law, it will streamline a complicated process that costs money and may take months. Instead of having to file for sealing, paying fees and having to re-appear in courts, an acquitted individual could petition the court and be granted sealing in the same hearing that resolved the criminal case. In addition, by sealing these records, this legislation will help provide more employment and education opportunities.

The tide is turning in America, and the arc of the moral universe is bending a little closer towards justice. When we have leaders like Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown and Congressman Danny K. Davis working together to help pass legislation in Springfield, criminal justice reform is a little bit easier as we start by correcting flaws in our justice system. This bill is a simple bill, and it corrects an unjust practice. It is great to work with Clerk Brown who saw the need for this legislation.

Sincerely,

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District