

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR RELEASE AT WILL

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LEGAL SERVICES OF NEW JERSEY INTRODUCES NEW ONLINE GATEWAY TO GETTING CRIMINAL RECORDS EXPUNGED

EDISON— Javier sees the new website launched by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) to help poor people navigate the tedious and often expensive process of getting their criminal records expunged as a potential life-changer for many New Jerseyans emotionally and physically hindered by public records of their past offenses.

Elizabeth, too, sees the LSNJ expungement project as a much-needed helping hand for people wanting to get their records essentially cleaned so they can move on with their lives and not be effectively denied employment or professional licenses or face continually the Scarlet Letter-like scar of having a rap sheet.

Javier and Elizabeth (they prefer anonymity) speak from experience. After some twists and turns and much frustration, they were able, with the help of Legal Services advocates, to obtain expungements of their brushes with the law. And now, with the advent of the new website — an interactive program which guides applicants through the process and completes all necessary forms — the crucial expungement process is geared to be far faster, easier and potentially less anxiety filled.

The expungement program – “Clearing Your Record Online” is available at www.lsnjlaw.org/Publications/Pages/Manuals/CYR.pdf or through LSNJ’s legal education page, www.LSNJLAW.org, by clicking on the Clearing Your Record Online image on the top right.

In fact, those using the online application toolkit are able to know by answering a series of simple questions whether anything in their background makes an expungement application clearly viable or even a meaningless waste of time. Either way, the judgment on whether to complete a formal application — also made possible through the website — is superfast. Again, assisted by a secure online interview, the website creates all forms needed for the application, including the expungement petition, verification, order forms, proof of service and even cover letters. Written guidance on the filing and service process also is provided.

“Every year Legal Services gets well over a thousand requests for help with expunging records,” says Akil Roper, LSNJ Chief Counsel, for Reentry, who notes there are countless others — also likely in the thousands — who have given up, or simply don’t know there is a way of getting their records cleared.

“For a fresh start, a true second chance, a person must be able to put their criminal record in the rear-view mirror. The process can be murky to some, and assistance is often essential — particularly those unable to afford a lawyer,” Roper stressed. “Unfortunately Legal Services does not have the resources available to represent on an individual basis every low-income client that walks through the doors. Now, with the interactive website, we can better help people get over the hurdles.”

As Javier learned firsthand, proper completion of forms without assistance can be difficult. It is not unusual for initial applications to be kicked back for minor reasons.

The LSNJ website, operating much like a computerized income tax program for expungement, takes people, step by step through the rigorous application process. It cannot guarantee whether a judge ultimately will approve a requested expungement, but smooths the rocky path to getting the application in shape to be heard. It's up to the applicants themselves to gather all the documents and official records the website suggests they will need before filing.

The website includes avenues for applicants to get answers to questions they have about the process, and the interviews also are fully audible. The site features a variety of instructional videos focusing on various aspects of the application process. The videos also contain links to the New Jersey courts website, links to laws and a variety of other resources, and to online intake forms for LSNJ's statewide Legal Hotline, LSNJLAW, if a person has additional questions.

Those who register with the site can save their responses and return to the application at a later time. Throughout the process easy-to-understand definitions of legal and related terms are provided.

Javier had tried to apply for expungement on his own and believed he had studiously met every requirement, until a judge said otherwise and Javier turned to LSNJ for help with the revised application.

When the papers arrived officially expunging his past record for illegally having a gun after he had completed a stint in the military, Javier recalls how emotional he became.

"I cried. I'm not ashamed to say I cried. It's something I no longer have to worry about. Now I can go about my life. I feel normal again, a regular person."

Today, with the help of a clear record, he works as an outreach counselor for homeless veterans.

Elizabeth, too, had struggled to find work after she lost her nursing license following being charged with child endangerment. She still laments the circumstances that occurred after she returned home after a 12-hour shift as a nurse and says she was led to believe by her estranged husband that he had taken all their children out with him. As it turned out, her autistic boy was still there and while she slept, left the house and was found walking on a busy road.

Still, she said, she was determined to put the situation behind her. First she sought to attack the expungement process with a private attorney who, she says, wanted far more than she could afford. So, she turned to Legal Services and was successful in getting the expungement.

She currently is in the process of getting her nursing license reinstated.

Says Javier about the new website, “I think this simplified version for getting expungements will greatly increase the numbers of people who want to clean their records and move forward with their lives. It empowers people to take the initiative on their own.”

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Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) heads the state’s Legal Services system, a network of six independent non-profit corporations beginning its 50th year of providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties.

Having provided representation in 2.36 million cases since its inception in 1966, Legal Services has accumulated extensive information and broad perspective on the causes, extent, and responses to poverty. LSNJ constantly searches for insights concerning actions that reduce and ameliorate poverty, and thereby reduce the legal and other problems of those who live within poverty’s grasp.