

April 2018, DC BAR FOUNDATION

Hello, I'm Muriel Bowser, the Mayor of the District of Columbia, and I am delighted to be here at the new DC Bar headquarters for Law Students in Court's Celebration of Service 2018!

I'd like to recognize Moses Cook and his talented staff of attorneys in their mission to train the next generation of social justice leaders. Together with your class of student-attorneys (representing American University, Catholic, GW, Georgetown, Howard, and UDC Law Schools), you are "fighting the fight" for our city's underserved and truly making a difference in bringing justice to all. *(nod to Moses)*

I am honored to stand beside Brian Ferguson of the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizens to accept the Community Partnership Award. Under Brian's leadership, we are taking on prisoner re-entry as a basic municipal service--creating a hub of support and doing the work to reintegrate returning citizens into society through partnerships with organizations like LSIC. *(nod to Brian)*

Speaking of partnerships, I'd like to touch on one issue that we take very seriously here in this room and that is the importance of clearing criminal records.

Every day we encounter people who need work and want to work. People who need a safe place to live, who love their kids and want to see them thrive. People who are lonesome and dream of being a part of their communities.

Some of these folks have been arrested for crimes they did not commit. Others have made mistakes and paid the price. But they should not have to pay that price for the rest of their lives.

**A criminal record must not become a lifelong sentence.**

We all know about the dire collateral consequences of having a criminal record – consequences that prevent people from moving beyond second chances. Consequences that put them at risk to reoffend and become chronically homeless.

The implications are grave and affect one-third of the U.S. population, with a disproportionate number being people of color. For this reason, we are working hard with municipalities across the nation to advance measures that improve the laws and simplify the path for returning citizens to fulfill their potential – measures like ban-the-box legislation, reduced wait times to seal records, and automatic sealing for individuals who've been “no papered” or not convicted of crimes. We are working with legal experts to consider additional types of offenses that may be eligible for sealing and expungement, and we are focusing on the special needs of youth, women, and the LGBTQ community.

**Together we have come some distance, but there is still a lot of road ahead.**

Last year, out of about 12,000 arrestees in the District who were eligible to seal their records, only 2,100 filed motions.

**We can do better than that.**

We need to understand the criminal justice system and work together to identify and educate residents about their records and the potential to clear them. This is one of the many places every one of you can have an impact. Records sealing is complicated and often an expensive undertaking, and for this reason, the work of the LSIC Expungement Clinic, PDS, MORCA, and the pro bono community is vital.

Now we are all well aware that one or a few sealed motions will not address the myriad challenges our clients face. But it is one small piece among others we can do to give folks an equal shot and the dignity they deserve. That one small piece sends a message to our residents that no matter what the mistake, or no matter how long they've been away, the city--and all of you--are behind them.

My congratulations to the Office of Returning Citizens, to Avis, (if the Mayor knows her personally, perhaps "Our inspiration"), Mr. Salzman, and the pro bono volunteers at Steptoe and sponsoring firms who are here tonight to celebrate public service and the work of Law Students in Court.

These individuals stand out for reasons large and small, but at the heart of our mission is YOU. I hope you have a wonderful evening.