

Let's Get Talking!

written by NARSOL | March 3, 2015

By Brenda....

Many of us know of someone accused and convicted of a sexual offense who had little or no idea of the collateral consequences of the plea or conviction they were getting. Often this was simply because even the attorneys involved in the process did not fully understand them. Not long ago, I heard about a new, wonderful online resource called the National Inventory of the Collateral Consequences of Conviction (NICCC) that allows defense attorneys, prosecutors, judges, and the general public to quickly look up how laws and policies in a particular state will impact someone with a particular conviction. This new resource has been developed by the Criminal Justice Section of the American Bar Association and funded through the National Institute of Justice.

On Friday, February 27, I attended the first ever National Summit on Collateral Consequences, which was an invitation-only event held by the ABA and NIJ in Washington DC. My main goal in attending was to network with others interested in criminal justice reform, in the hope that collateral consequences of sexual offense laws would not be ignored.

The good news is, those consequences are NOT being ignored by this group. The challenges faced by former sexual offenders were included in dialogues throughout the one-day event. Former sex offenders are certainly not alone in having huge hurdles to re-entry, though. Nearly all "returning citizens" struggle to find housing, jobs, and support networks because of the ease with which their convictions (even just accusations!) can be looked up and because of the roughly 45,000 distinct collateral consequences they can face.

I was just a participant, but I found an opportunity to ask a

question when one panel was discussing the national trend toward expungements for lower-level crimes. The answer from the panelists was less than useful, but it got people focused on me and on our issue for a moment. Afterward several people approached me with questions and comments.

Many ideas were tossed out for consideration on ways to increase success in re-entry and reduce the revolving door. One of my favorite quotes was that professionals in the justice system must never forget that these are HUMAN BEINGS we are talking about.

The bad news I took away, however, was that sex offense issues are simply too "toxic" to be directly dealt with in terms of reform efforts. It has taken reformers many years just to start having reform conversations AT ALL. Until we can start changing the general public perception and mindset regarding the stereotypical "sex offender," and the public can see that very few are the bogeyman they picture, we will not be gaining much traction.

So my BIG take-away is this: it is going to take EACH and EVERY ONE of us in this movement speaking out to start dispelling that myth of the bogeyman. EVERY ONE of us needs to tell our piece of the story.

I don't mean about how the justice system "did us wrong." (Nobody cares. Sorry!) Or how you or your loved one are somehow the EXCEPTION to the bogeyman myth. (Sounds like denial and excuses.) No, I mean simply tell how you or that loved one may have a conviction but are still a GOOD PERSON. You do good things. You are a neighbor, a friend, a family person, a sports fan A HUMAN BEING.

Until the rest of our fine country starts seeing us as HUMAN again, we will continue to fight an uphill battle. So let's get talking!