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## Independence Chamber of Commerce: Missouri's employers need a Clean Slate

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**By Tom Lesnak**

*president, Independence Chamber of Commerce*

As president and CEO of the Independence Chamber of Commerce, I am always striving to create the best conditions for our local businesses. Since our founding in 1920, the chamber has been dedicated to building a business community of excellence. We have more than 600 member companies working tirelessly to create economic growth across our region.

Despite our best efforts, Independence's employers are still facing an unprecedented labor shortage. If our businesses are going to keep their doors open, we need to attract and retain top-quality talent. We're not alone – recent data from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce found Missouri's worker shortage to be one of the worst in the country, with only 53 available workers for every 100 open jobs. It's clear that we need new talent – and a new labor pool.

That is why the Independence Chamber of Commerce is joining chambers and employers across Missouri, and around the country, in strong support of Clean Slate. By passing HB 2108/HB 2555, and SB 1161/SB 763, which would automatically seal old criminal records for individuals who remain crime-free, Missouri's leaders can grow the workforce and strengthen the economy.

Individuals with old criminal records face more than 40,000 barriers to meaningful re-entry. They are far more likely than the general population to be unemployed, even years after they have served their time. While tens of thousands Missourians are eligible to have their old records cleared right now, the costs and complications associated are incredibly burdensome. Only one percent will actually receive the relief to which they are entitled. As a result, we're needlessly excluding thousands of qualified and talented Missourians from the workforce.

Automating the record-sealing process could have an immediate, and significant, impact on our workforce. Studies have shown that individuals who have their records sealed are far more likely to be



employed, and earn significantly higher wages, than those who have not. Missouri loses \$2.6 billion in cumulative earnings each year due to the underemployment of people with criminal records that could be, but have not been, cleared.

Our state and our businesses cannot afford the status quo. Nor can our communities. Stable employment is one of the most important factors in determining whether or not someone will reoffend. By reducing economic obstacles for people with criminal records, Clean Slate will improve community safety. In fact, a study in Michigan found that people who had their records cleared were less likely to commit a new offense than the general population as a whole. Passing Clean Slate will make Independence – and cities and towns around the state – safer, stronger, and more prosperous.

We know the challenges businesses are facing. We know how much Missouri’s employers need qualified talent, and the impact this would have on our state and our economy. Missourians are no stranger to challenge, though – we tackle them head on. The proposed clean slate legislation has been endorsed by the chamber’s public policy committee, and our board of directors has included it in our 2024 legislative agenda.

That’s why we urge the Missouri legislature to pass Clean Slate, HB 2108/HB 2555, and SB 1161/SB 763. Together, we can build a safer and stronger Missouri for years to come.



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