

New laws will allow for criminal record sealing

BY AVERY GOODSTINE
STAFF WRITER

Effective July 1, 2025, the Clean Slate laws will seal certain criminal records, meaning they will no longer be publicly accessible. George Townsend, attorney and founder of the Clean Slate Virginia law firm, said most misdemeanors can be sealed, with the exception of DUIs and domestic assault. Class five and class six felonies will also be eligible for sealing and those punished like grand larceny.

"It's exciting news for Virginia," Townsend said. "These laws have been a long time coming, and honestly, there's been legislators working on laws similar to this for decades in Virginia."

Prior to these Clean Slate laws, Townsend said Virginia was in the bottom five states for

criminal record forgiveness.

He explained people often get confused about the difference between expungement and record sealing. Expungements only apply to people found innocent, or who were not convicted. Criminal convictions can be sealed.

According to the Virginia State Crime Commission, there are around 4,000 expungement orders per year, and the Clean Slate laws have the potential to seal 10 times that, Townsend said.

There are some charges that will be automatically sealed come July 1, if the offender has no new criminal convictions for seven years. Qualifying charges include underage possession of alcohol, petit larceny, concealing merchandise, trespassing, distribution and possession of marijuana, and

disorderly conduct.

For felony charges, qualifying convictions can be sealed if there are no new criminal convictions within 10 years.

According to Clean Slate Virginia, qualifying convictions can also be sealed if there is proven rehabilitation, if the record shows drug dependence, no more than two previously sealed convictions, the continued existence of the conviction constitutes manifest injustice, if there's never been a class one or two felony charge that carries a life sentence, if there's no class three or four felony convictions within 20 years, or if there's no felony conviction within 10 years.

If a conviction is not automatically sealed, a petition can be filed with the circuit court to request the record to be sealed, which will probably be most cases, Townsend

said.

"You can see the way it's set up ... there's the possibility of a second chance, but people really have to earn it," Townsend said. "People have to go that time period without another criminal conviction, and then it would be sealed."

In response to those who may worry about the safety and effectiveness of the Clean Slate laws, Townsend highlighted the laws apply to nonviolent offenses and there are 25 exceptions where a sealed conviction can be seen, such as nursing jobs, law enforcement, banking, and government agencies.

Townsend said there is no evidence that these laws increase crime. Rather, there's research to suggest the opposite. These laws incentivize them not to commit another crime in hopes of getting their current conviction sealed.

"When you dive deeper into these laws across the country, they benefit everyone because they actually decrease crime by decreasing recidivism, and they actually increase employment," Townsend said. "So they benefit employers and employees, and they increase the tax base."

The biggest challenge with the Clean Slate laws, he said, is getting the word out to people about how to petition for their records to be sealed. That's the gap Townsend is trying to fill with his

law firm.

He said he's doing everything he can to explain the laws in a way people will understand, and he hopes to partner with community activists and legislators to continue to educate people about them.

"They really are very impactful," Townsend said. "I realize nothing is unanimous. Nothing was supported unanimously, but these really are good, impactful laws that decrease crime and help employment across the board."



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ANDREW KERLEY/CAPITAL NEWS SERVICE

Shelves stocked with donated baked goods and canned food at the Virginia Commonwealth University Ram Pantry on Jan. 29.

Legislators hope to fund college food pantries with new grant program

BY ANDREW KERLEY
VCU CAPITAL NEWS SERVICE

Before leaving Hampton Roads for college, Anje Mixon received SNAP benefits and free or reduced-priced lunch through school.

Mixon studies accounting at Virginia Commonwealth University, with support from a Pell Grant and work-study job as manager of the Ram Pantry. Students can shop at the pantry once a week for free food, toiletries and even baby formula. Mixon occasionally uses it herself.

Many people don't understand the spectrum of food insecurity and think it just means going without food, according to Mixon.

"Food insecurity can literally mean you're having the same food every single night," Mixon said. "Us college students eating Oodles of Noodles every single day, that's food insecurity."

Two state lawmakers have bills moving through the General Assembly that would create a grant program to formalize state support for existing and new food pantry programs.

Sen. Danica Roem, D-Manassas, introduced Senate Bill 1016, or the Hunger-Free Campus Food Pantry Grant Program. Del. Rae Cousins, D-Richmond, sponsored the near-identical House Bill 2240.

Each bill made it out of its respective chambers, with amendments. The Senate on Thursday

approved \$500,000 state funding for the grant program in its proposed budget.

Food insecurity is a broadly recognized problem, according to a 2024 study by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Half of respondents said food insecurity is "somewhat problematic" at their institution, while almost a third said it was "very problematic."

There are food pantries at 91% of the Virginia colleges and universities that responded to the SCHEV survey. However, they are primarily funded through donations or with light support from the universities.

The Ram Pantry is mostly funded through grants and donations from community partners, with some support from VCU Business Services, according to VCU Student Affairs. Student use of the pantry has increased every year since it first opened.

There is uncertainty about the pantry and its workers, most who have Federal Work-Study positions, because of President Donald Trump's efforts to pause federal funding, according to Mixon.

"Not only will we miss out on being able to provide for different Ram families, a lot of students will be out of the job as well," Mixon said.

A grant program managed by SCHEV is a more reliable source of funding and will help stock pantries with a wider variety of goods to meet students' nutritional and dietary needs, advocates of the

bill said at a press conference on Jan. 29.

Roem and Cousins have both previously introduced legislation to combat the issue. Last year, the General Assembly voted to create the SCHEV study.

Many students do not come from households with two parents who pay their way through college, Roem said at the press conference.

"A lot of people who go to college have kids themselves that they take care of," Roem said. "They have family members who they're taking care of."

The bill is also an opportunity for Virginia to lead the way in a time of uncertainty with the federal government, according to Roem.

John Jones is an assistant professor who works at the Center for Environmental Studies at VCU, and is also the Ram Pantry faculty adviser. Jones, who has researched food security and urban food systems, said students need food to focus on their studies.

People need a broader selection that includes nutritional food and accounts for allergies, dietary needs and religious needs, according to Jones. It is especially a challenge for immigrants, who must adapt to the American food system. Students also need food they have the equipment to prepare, he said.

The grant program will help universities stock up on food that best meets student needs, according to Jones.

The measures had

bipartisan support from lawmakers and the Virginia Commission to End Hunger, as well as advocacy groups like the Virginia Food Access Coalition and the Virginia Agribusiness Council.

Both bills would require SCHEV to submit a report in 2026, on grants received and distributed, and the impact on food insecurity.

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