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Members of the Committee – good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak about criminal justice reform in Pennsylvania.

My name is Joe Harford. I am the Founder and President of Reclamere, a cybersecurity firm located in Central Pennsylvania with a 22-year track record of protecting our clients' data. More relevant to today's topic, my wife Karen and I are actively involved in community reentry and are in the process of starting a program to help support those men and women on probation or parole to ease their transition into productive citizens and taxpayers.

The program is called – Farming2Freedom.

I became acutely aware of the challenges presented by mass incarceration in 2017 while developing my research topic for my doctoral dissertation. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Pennsylvania has approximately 50,000 people in our state prison system today. More shocking than that number are those that, upon release, will return to prison in three years – approximately 55%. This year we will release approximately 16,000 people from prison, and in 2025, greater than 8,000 will re-offend and be back in prison.

So, you may wonder why I care about the issue. I have a thriving business, a great family, and incredible opportunities. Because like most criminal justice advocates this problem struck my home. Two close family members have been a part of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections as inmates. Additionally, I view this topic of recidivism as one of the top 3 social dilemmas of the 21st century.

The Clean Slate legislation is only part of this larger problem known as prison recidivism. Research shows that the two main challenges people face when they are released from prison are securing safe housing and full-time employment.

Although the intention of "cleaning" the slate appears to have good intentions, we know from experience that is not always the case. This is not the first-time advocates have tried to reduce discrimination against people with criminal records by hiding those

records. Research on “Ban the Box” shows that employment for young men of color with limited education decreased in areas that passed Ban the Box. To the extent that Clean Slate seals records employers care about, it could leave them guessing, just as Ban the Box did. Employers who want to avoid hiring people with a criminal past may then discriminate against applicants from groups where criminal records are more common. Once again, this would most likely harm young men of color who never had a criminal record.

So, what else can we do?

First, invest in rehabilitation and training: For most people coming out of jail and prison, the criminal record itself may not be the primary barrier to employment. We currently do little to give individuals the skills and support they need to compete in the labor market. Investing in education, job training, cognitive behavioral therapy, and health care for those with recent convictions could all go a long way toward helping people reintegrate into society – and address employers’ concerns in the process. Policymakers should also experiment with designing systems to increase the information available to employers about individuals’ rehabilitation and job readiness (for instance, court-issued rehabilitation certificates).

Broaden the use of deferred adjudications for non-violent, first-time felony offenses: Helping people avoid a record in the first place is likely the best way to help them move forward. Some states allow “deferred adjudications” for certain charges, usually non-violent offenses. Defendants who receive such deferrals are essentially placed on probation, and if they complete those requirements, the original charges are dismissed. Research from Texas provides compelling evidence that these policies have considerable benefits when applied to non-violent, first-time felony defendants: they dramatically reduce the likelihood of future convictions and increase employment. In other words, giving people a real second chance before putting a (first) felony conviction on their record is an effective way to ensure that one bad decision doesn’t derail their lives.

Centralize criminal record data and improve accuracy: Record sealing policy emphasizes sealing a single version of a record. It could be far more helpful if states centralized and restructured their criminal record data practices to ensure that available records are complete and accurate. We should increase the use of state record repositories to manage a single version of a person’s criminal record, integrating data between police, courts, and corrections. States could then provide qualified employers and the public access to a single, high-quality source; this would limit demand for private vendors’ inaccurate and incomplete data, making it less lucrative for such vendors to exist in the first place. People should also have free and direct access to their criminal records to check for and correct inaccuracies. In other words, we should treat criminal records the way we now treat credit reports and medical records. These administrative records affect people’s lives; they deserve privacy and integrity.