

Fresh Start Coalition Press Conference

9:15 AM ET - November 17, 2021

Abby Deshman, Director of the Criminal Justice Program, CCLA:

Good morning. We are here today to announce the launch of the Fresh Start Coalition – a group of nearly 70 civil society organizations that are uniting to urge the federal government to revamp the way Canada deals with old criminal records.

Canadian law currently allows people who have been convicted of a crime to apply for a record suspension once they have completed their sentence, to lift the burden of an old criminal record – but the system, as it stands is broken. It is slow, exceedingly difficult to navigate, and expensive. For many, the promise of a record suspension is completely out of reach. This means that jobs, education, housing – and with it the stability needed to rebuild lives – is frequently out of reach as well. It is a situation that disproportionately impacts our most marginalized communities, deepens systemic inequality, jeopardizes community safety, and places needless barriers in front of job-seekers.

The evidence shows that criminal record checks for the purposes of basic employment, housing and volunteering aren't good screening tools. Simply put - we do not make communities safer by keeping people in poverty, preventing them from accessing jobs, stable housing, or volunteering with their communities.

This is an issue that impacts hundreds of thousands of people across the country. As many as 1 in 9 Canadians have a criminal record of conviction, and many more have non-conviction records that may be revealed on police record checks. And those communities that are disproportionately policed and criminalized - Black people and members of other racialized communities, Indigenous persons, those experiencing homelessness, mental health challenges, and addictions, along with others who are marginalized – bear the brunt of these harms. The breadth of our coalition, which includes organizations working on access to housing, violence against women, mental and physical health issues, racial justice and Indigenous reconciliation, is a reflection of this reality.

Today, we are calling on the Canadian government to finally deliver real reform to the record suspension system by doing away with the unnecessary and complicated application process. Record suspensions should be automatic for those who have successfully completed their sentence and lived in the community for years. Doing so would dramatically increase individuals' chances of accessing employment and stable housing, transforming people's lives, increasing community safety, and curbing systemic discrimination.