

My name is Natasha Cooper. I was trafficked for 12 years .. I have been out of that life for 6 years. I work for Franklin County Municipal Court for a specialized court docket called Catch Court as a Peer Support Specialist and as Victims Advocate. I also serve as an Ambassador for the Ohio Attorney General's office. I currently provide training at the Columbus Police Academy on Human Trafficking.

House Bill 385 is the definition of HOPE to me. This law would make expungement accessible to all human trafficking survivors, regardless of the kind of human trafficking they experienced or the criminal charges they have. That is important to me because I was a primary victim in the Mike Mearan case out of Portsmouth, OH. Mr. Mearan was indicted on human trafficking charges in 2020 because of what he did to me and so many others. I suffered and lived in darkness for years. Finally I have taken my power back, but not all of it. Even though I have over 4 years clean and have accomplished a great deal, I am still haunted by my past. If I got my record expunged this would help me move forward in life in so many ways, it would help me with more diverse Employment opportunities, greater access to safe and stable housing, and give me a sense of pride because I am productive member of my community and want to be viewed for who I am not what my past charges have been.. My daughter wouldn't have to hear about my past record. I have worked hard for this, and I know that forgiveness is a gift, a gift I am deserving of. Right now, I am a private sub-contractor for the court through a grant. Having my record expunged would allow me to be not contracted but an employee with county benefits. This is my passion to help others just like me, giving back and being able to share my lived experiences with everyone has helped me and our community and other survivors. One time my felony background stopped me from having a job in treatment where I was qualified to work but the background with my felonies stopped me from actually gaining employment, I was denied for only that reason. When I was searching for apartments a year ago, three places denied me because my felonies haven't been long enough. I was also denied a CQE from my county because of my felony record.

Because I don't carry a solicitation or a promoting prostitution charge, after graduating from a 2 year program that I now work for called Catch Court I am unable to pursue my fresh start.. I have been on the waiting list for almost three years and today I've been given a chance to share with you who I am and why I need this and why we need this. This is stopping others from using their voices and being able to live their life. I'm grateful for a second chance to be something different than just what my background says. *Right now, you cannot get an expungement if you have_not been convicted of soliciting, prostitution, or loitering in Ohio. This leaves out many survivors who were trafficked for labor, who were trafficked away from the streets, who were arrested for these crimes in other states but not Ohio, or who just never got arrested for these kinds of charges because they lived in a place where the police did not patrol for these crimes.*

Thank you very much for taking the time to listen to me and my story, and for taking the time to understand why this is so important. I want to end my statement with a question to you all. I have multiple felonies that I received during my time of exploitation. The State of Ohio identified me as a primary victim and witness in the Mike Merean case out of Portsmouth, OH. How can the state that asked for my testimony to convict a trafficker withhold expungement from me? Although I escaped human trafficking 6 years ago, my past haunts me every day.

Thank you,

Natasha Cooper