



Expanding Post-Conviction Relief through Accessible Expungement Services in California



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Executive Summary



The **Social Impact Center (TSIC)** is a Los Angeles-based non-profit organization who build power in criminalized BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities through stigma-free organizing and mutual aid. Our model is rooted in storytelling, education, cultural expression, intergenerational healing, and intersectional coalition building.

This whitepaper examines how California is transforming post-conviction relief through technology-driven expungement services, with a focus on The Social Impact Center's remote ready service delivery model. While millions of Californians are eligible to clear their records, most never receive relief due to legal complexity, high costs and limited access to support. Recent reforms like **AB 1076** and **SB 731** have expanded automatic record clearance, but many individuals must still navigate petition-based processes.

TSIC addresses these gaps by offering trauma-informed, in-person and virtual expungement services designed for accessibility. Through online intake, volunteer support, and virtual events, they reduce barriers for justice-impacted individuals. The TSIC model also includes an e-learning platform to train volunteers and a focus on digital inclusion.

Despite progress, **challenges remain**—particularly **the digital divide, lack of awareness, incomplete data removal**, and **funding sustainability**. We conclude with recommendations to expand expungement access nationwide by advocating for legislative changes and investing in technology, community-based expungement services, and trauma-informed practices. These have become especially crucial as the passage of **Proposition 36 (2024)** and other laws re-criminalizing threaten to block progress to create a more care-centered justice system that addresses the root causes of issues like addiction or other societal challenges.

Background: The Need for Expungement and Key Challenges



Millions of Americans live with criminal records that create lasting barriers to employment, housing, education, and other opportunities. In fact, the United States *“houses roughly the same number of people with criminal records as it does four-year college graduates”* (Friedman). An estimated **one in three U.S. adults has a record visible on background checks (Friedman)**. In California, as elsewhere, even decades-old or minor convictions can disqualify individuals from jobs or licenses and hinder reentry success. Post-conviction relief through expungement offers a crucial “second chance” by mitigating these barriers, but historically the process has been difficult to navigate.

Eligible individuals face multiple challenges in seeking expungement. The petition-based process in most states, including California, can be complex and burdensome – it often requires understanding intricate laws, filing legal petitions, and sometimes appearing in court. High costs are another barrier: many cannot afford attorney fees, effectively pricing out low- to middle-income people from relief.

As a result, only a tiny fraction of those who qualify for record clearance ever obtain it. Research in one state found just **6.5% of eligible individuals achieved expungement within five years of eligibility** (Prescott). This stark “*second chance gap*” is common nationwide – in many jurisdictions, well under 10% of people who could clear their record actually succeed (Schlusser). The result is that tens of millions remain saddled with records that could be cleared under existing law (Schlusser).

These unmet needs disproportionately affect underserved populations: communities of color and low-income individuals are both more likely to have criminal records and less likely to access relief, compounding inequities.

1 in 3 people in the U.S.



Have a criminal record



California's Legal Framework for Expungement

California's expungement framework provides several avenues for post-conviction relief, though with important limitations. **True expungement (total erasure) of adult convictions does not technically exist in California**; instead, relief is through record clearance mechanisms like dismissal of convictions and the sealing of records. The most common remedy, often colloquially called "*expungement*," is a petition for dismissal under Penal Code §1203.4 and its related provisions.

If granted, the conviction is set aside and the case dismissed and removed from public access, allowing the person to legally state they have no conviction (with some exceptions). However, the record is not destroyed - law enforcement and some agencies can still see it. There are also procedures to reduce certain felonies to misdemeanors and to seal arrest records that did not result in conviction.

Recent reforms have significantly expanded and automated relief in California. **Proposition 64 (2016)** legalized adult cannabis use and mandated that past marijuana convictions be reviewed and cleared or reduced. This led to a **2018 law (AB 1793)** requiring prosecutors to identify and expunge eligible cannabis convictions by July 2020. In 2019, California enacted **AB 1076**, the "Clean Slate" law, to automate clearance of certain records. Implementation is handled by the California Department of Justice (DOJ), which built a computer system to scan the state's criminal record database monthly and flag records that have become eligible.

As a result, California began automatically sealing old misdemeanor records in 2022. In the first six months alone, state **DOJ data show 11 million cases were sealed from public view, benefitting 6 million individuals** – reportedly the largest record relief carried out over such a short time period in U.S. history. Building on this, **SB 731 (2022)** further expanded relief to include many felony convictions. As of July 2024, California now will automatically seal certain rehabilitated felony records (those deemed "non-serious, nonviolent" and after a 4-year period) without requiring any application. This gives California one of the broadest record clearance regimes in the nation.

Despite these advances, petition-based expungement remains crucial. Automatic laws apply only to specified categories and timeframes; many people must still affirmatively seek relief. The state's patchwork of processes – varying by county and type of record – can be daunting. For example, someone with convictions in multiple counties must apply in each county separately, and each county court may have different procedural requirements. This is where technology-driven petition based expungement solutions have become invaluable in California: to streamline and simplify the expungement process for the public, and to help the justice system implement these new laws at scale.

The Social Impact Center: A Virtual-Ready Model for Expungement

At TSIC, we approach the expungement process as a gateway to opportunity and liberation, rather than a bureaucratic necessity.

From the very beginning, our mission has been rooted in equity, accessibility, and healing. Founded in 2019, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our organization was thrust into a rapidly changing world that demanded immediate innovation. As the public health crisis unfolded, we quickly realized that being virtual-ready was not a convenience—it was essential for survival and continuity. The urgency of the moment revealed long-standing disparities in how legal services were delivered, particularly to low-income and system-impacted communities. It became clear that we needed to reimagine not only the structure of expungement services, but also the principles guiding their delivery.

Traditional expungement clinics have often been day-long events requiring participants to already possess their criminal records, wait hours to receive assistance and ultimately file their own paperwork. These models assume a level of stability, access, and familiarity with the legal system that many of our community members simply do not have. Individuals are often left feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, facing logistical challenges that include taking time off work, finding childcare, arranging transportation, and navigating court without professional help. We asked ourselves a fundamental question: which aspects of this process truly required in-person interaction?

By challenging these assumptions, we created a streamlined and inclusive model that centers the needs of the most impacted.



Our approach begins well before the event itself. Community members are invited to complete an intake form online at their own pace, with support available for those who need technical assistance. These preparatory steps are designed to reduce anxiety and ensure that when individuals attend an expungement event, they arrive informed, supported, and ready to take action.

On the day of the event, the experience is intentionally brief, accessible, and trauma-informed. We guide participants through the process of obtaining their fingerprints and securing their Department of Justice criminal history records, or Records of Arrest & Prosecution (often referred to as “RAP sheets.”)

Rather than waiting in line for hours or navigating legal jargon alone, participants are paired with trained, trauma-informed volunteers who assist in the preparation of their personal declarations. These declarations serve as powerful testimonies to each individual's rehabilitation, growth, and future goals.

By the end of their session, most participants are ready to move forward in the expungement process, having completed their portion in under two hours. **This time-saving model allows us to reach more people and ensures that no one is turned away due to logistical or emotional barriers.** In addition, we provide additional wraparound services and referrals to resources, easing access for our community members.

The Social Impact Center: A Virtual-Ready Model for Expungement

In order to make this model sustainable and scalable, **we developed a comprehensive e-learning platform for our volunteers.** This training program ensures that every volunteer—whether a law student, advocate, or community member—is thoroughly prepared to assist at events. The curriculum emphasizes trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and procedural knowledge, giving volunteers the confidence to offer meaningful support. We emphasize the necessity of using trauma informed language - for example, referring to those we serve as “community members” rather than “community members.” By providing this training online, we remove geographic limitations and maintain a high standard of consistency across all of our events.

Our commitment to accessibility also led us to pilot virtual expungement events using platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. These remote gatherings have proven to be a critical tool for continuing our services during flu season or other public health challenges. Through video conferencing, we are able to assist community members with intake, help them write declarations, and provide ongoing support, all without requiring physical presence. We walk individuals through the process of acquiring their criminal history records, and complete their final filings. This virtual model has not only ensured the continuity of our work during crises, but has also enabled us to expand our reach to rural communities and individuals with mobility challenges.



The results of these innovations have been profound. By centering flexibility, digital access, and emotional safety, TSIC has been able to serve more people more effectively than ever before. **In 2025, we are able to assist over 300 people due to the efficiencies from our process.** We have proven that expungement does not need to be intimidating or exclusive. Instead, it can be a pathway to empowerment and financial stability when built on a foundation of care, strategy, and innovation.

As we look to the future, we recognize that uncertainty is inevitable. Public health emergencies, natural disasters, and systemic inequities will continue to challenge our communities. However, with our virtual-ready expungement model, we are not only prepared to meet these challenges—we are ready to lead through them. At TSIC, we believe that justice must evolve with the times, and we are committed to ensuring that no one is left behind in that evolution.

Remaining Barriers and Gaps



While California's virtual expungement services have made significant progress, challenges and gaps remain. Understanding these issues is important for refining the model and for other states seeking to replicate it.

Digital Divide:

Not everyone who needs expungement services has access to the required technology. Many justice-involved individuals have limited internet access, lack devices, or have low digital literacy (Tron). The digital divide falls along socio-economic and racial lines, meaning those most in need of relief may also be the most digitally disconnected. For example, a low-income individual in a rural area may only have a smartphone with a limited data plan, or an older formerly incarcerated person may not be comfortable navigating websites.

This gap can prevent people from using online tools or attending virtual events. Our experience highlights this concern – we have observed that some community members struggled with Zoom or online forms, sometimes requiring help to get them online. Mitigation efforts are underway, but ensuring equitable access remains a challenge. Bridging the digital divide is essential so that virtual services do not inadvertently exclude those without access to technology.

Awareness and Mistrust:

Another barrier is simply lack of awareness. Many people with records do not know they might be eligible for clearance, or they mistakenly believe expungement is automatic when it's not (or vice versa). Public education hasn't fully caught up to the new laws – for instance, some individuals eligible for automatic relief under the new laws may not realize their record was cleared and continue to self-disclose convictions unnecessarily. On the flip side, others who are *not* covered by automatic relief might falsely assume the state took care of it. California has found that proactive outreach is needed to inform communities about the availability of expungement help, especially virtual options. Nonprofits use social media, text message campaigns, and partnerships with reentry organizations to spread the word, but there is still a gap. Additionally, mistrust of technology or government can deter participation. Because of the high cost associated with traditional expungement providers, some individuals are wary that an online expungement "sounds too good to be true" or fear a scam. Building trust through community messengers is important.

Remaining Barriers and Gaps



Incomplete Relief and Data Aftermath

Even when an expungement is granted, a gap often remains in fully erasing the record's impact, particularly online. Commercial background check companies and mugshot websites may have already scooped up the record information. These third-party databases are often unregulated and may not update their data to reflect a cleared record. This means an individual could win relief in court, yet still have the old arrest or conviction show up on a private background report or a Google search, undermining the benefit.

California's laws don't yet fully address this "data echo." Some advocates are pushing for stricter regulation of background check firms – for example, requiring them to regularly purge records that the state has cleared. But until that happens, a person with an expunged record might have to send notices to these companies or rely on existing consumer protection laws to try to get the information removed. Additionally, some jurisdictions place a high discretionary bar on expungement relief, and not all consequences are erased by expungement. For instance, certain professional licensing boards in California can still see expunged convictions in some cases. These nuances must be explained to community members, so they have realistic expectations. The bottom line: expungement is a powerful tool but not a panacea, and the digital age complicates fully "cleaning" one's record from all corners of the internet. Policymakers will need to consider supplementary measures to ensure that legal relief translates into practical relief in people's lives.

Sustainability and Funding

Many expungement initiatives began as pilot programs or emergency responses (such as during the pandemic). Funding is a concern – building and maintaining the infrastructure to provide services requires investment, as does keeping staff or volunteers engaged in virtual events. There is a risk that without continued financial commitment, the progress made could stagnate. California's legislature and philanthropic community will need to keep supporting these innovations. The interest is certainly there - however, ensuring robust funding and policy support for record clearance (just as is done for other justice reforms) will be critical to address remaining gaps and maintain momentum.

Recommendations for Broader Implementation



Enact Supportive Legislation (“Clean Slate” Laws)

The foundation for success is having laws that permit broad record clearance. Other states should pass laws that expand eligibility for expungement and, where feasible, mandate automatic clearance for eligible records. California’s model includes automatic relief for minor convictions and non-convictions – a policy approach that ensures people get a second chance without needing to navigate burdensome processes.

States like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Utah have already passed similar Clean Slate automatic expungement laws. These laws not only directly help citizens, they also create impetus for developing the necessary technology infrastructure. Policymakers should also eliminate unnecessary fees and streamline waiting periods. Making expungement free or low-cost and timely will complement virtual services - even a great online system won’t help if the law itself is too restrictive or costly.

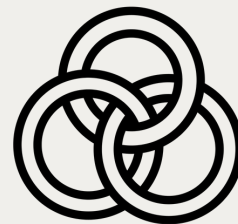
Invest in Technology Infrastructure

Governments must treat record clearance as a function that can be improved with modern IT systems. This means funding the development of automated clearance software and data integration between agencies. California’s DOJ built a statewide clearance program – other states could do the same, or even adapt California’s approach with help from civic tech groups. States should consider allocating budget specifically for implementing expungement automation, including upgrading court case management systems to accept bulk updates. Importantly, any technology adopted should be open-source or shareable so that jurisdictions aren’t all reinventing the wheel. Technology can also aid eligibility screening. States might create online eligibility calculators accessible to the public, as a few have done, to demystify who qualifies for what relief.

Support Community-Based Virtual Legal Services and Events

Even with automatic laws, many people will still need to petition for certain relief, so ensuring access to legal help is key. Policymakers and funders should expand support for virtual expungement events and remote legal assistance programs. This could include grants to legal aid organizations to obtain video conferencing licenses, develop user-friendly online intake systems, and train volunteers for virtual service delivery. Bar associations and pro bono coordinators can help by mobilizing attorneys to participate remotely. It’s also beneficial to establish statewide coordination for such events – for instance, a state could have a centralized online expungement portal that triages applicants to regional legal aid providers. During the COVID-19 period, many courts and legal aids learned to operate virtually; those lessons should be captured in formal protocols and kept alive beyond the pandemic. Additionally, states should look at library partnerships or community based “kiosk” initiatives to provide physical locations where those without technology can access virtual legal services. By blending online and on-the-ground strategies, states can ensure no community is left out.

Recommendations for Broader Implementation



Adopt Trauma Informed Procedures

To ensure equitable and effective expungement services, we recommend that all organizations adopt trauma-informed training and procedures as a foundational element of their model. Many individuals seeking record clearance carry the weight of past trauma—stemming not only from their involvement with the criminal legal system, but also from systemic inequities such as racism, poverty, housing instability, and community violence. Without a trauma-informed approach, legal services risk retraumatizing those they aim to support. Training staff and volunteers to recognize signs of trauma, practice empathy, and prioritize emotional safety can significantly improve outcomes. These practices foster trust, increase engagement, and help restore a sense of dignity and control to those navigating an often intimidating legal process. Trauma-informed care should not be viewed as an optional enhancement, but rather as a necessary standard in any reentry-related or wraparound effort.

Address the Digital Divide

To replicate California's success, it's crucial to bridge the digital divide using community-based and public infrastructures. Policymakers should incorporate digital inclusion efforts into expungement programs. This might involve providing funding for internet access programs, public wifi hotspots, or device lending targeted at communities with many justice-impacted individuals (Tron). Public libraries are again a key resource. Another approach is deploying mobile legal events to physically go to underserved areas and offer online expungement services on-site. Training and resources should be provided to help people use the available tech. For example, simple video tutorials on how to join a Zoom event or fill out an online form can empower those unfamiliar with these tools. States could also partner with community organizations to serve as “digital navigators” who assist community members in accessing virtual expungement services. In short, make the virtual model as inclusive as possible by bolstering the digital capabilities of the user base.

Engage in Public Education and Outreach

An often overlooked component is making sure the public knows about and trusts these services. Following California's model, states should launch awareness campaigns when new expungement resources go live. This could include partnering with community groups, reentry organizations, and probation/parole offices to disseminate information about virtual events or online applications. Government agencies (like state DOJ or public defender offices) can use their platforms to advertise automatic relief – for instance, sending mailed notices or emails to people whose records were cleared automatically, confirming that relief. Language access must be built into this especially to multiple threshold languages in respective counties.

Outreach should also use trusted community organizations and grassroots groups, and should also emphasize the benefits of clearing one's record, to motivate those who may be discouraged. Given mistrust issues, messaging should be community-centric – e.g., featuring testimonials from people who successfully cleared their record through the service, to build confidence. Multilingual outreach is important in diverse communities. By normalizing expungement as a routine, accessible process (instead of a rare legal ordeal), states can increase participation and thus the social impact of these laws.

Conclusion



California's pioneering use of technology for expungement is transforming the landscape of post-conviction relief. By combining forward-looking laws with innovative service delivery, the state has extended the promise of a clean slate to hundreds of thousands of people – many of whom would never have been reached through traditional methods. Virtual expungement events, online tools, and automated clearance systems are not just efficiency upgrades; they are mechanisms of inclusion and equity, helping to dismantle the systemic barriers that have long kept underserved populations from clearing their records. The California model shows that with the right policies and conscious use of technology, government can deliver relief at the scale needed, directly improving lives and communities.

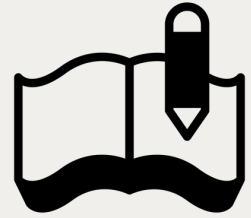
For nonprofit organizations and policymakers around the country, the implications are clear. Expungement and record sealing need not remain cumbersome, underutilized remedies. They can be reimaged as accessible, routine processes – much like filing taxes online or renewing a driver's license – thanks to digital innovation. Replicating California's approach will require collaboration across sectors, investment in infrastructure, and attention to fairness and accessibility. But the payoff is enormous. Millions will be given a true second chance, and society will reap the benefits of increased economic participation and reduced recidivism. As more states follow this path, we move closer to a future in which no one is unjustly defined by an old criminal record, and post-conviction relief is delivered efficiently, universally, and justly.

It will be important to shore up such work even as certain groups push to backtrack on progress on helping people address the root causes of issues now in the criminal justice system, such as addiction and theft. Expungement is an important part of telling the story of how we actually help take on the issues that spur recidivism, with transformative ripple effects in communities targeted by mass incarceration.

California's experience provides a compelling blueprint – now it is up to other jurisdictions to take up the charge and ensure that the doors of opportunity are opened wide for all who have earned a fresh start.



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