

New Illinois law allows more residents to seal, expunge records during Second Chance Event

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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VENICE – Second Chance Saturday may be able to help even more Madison County residents with the passage of a new Illinois law.

The event will be held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 9, at the Venice Recreational Center in Venice.

Second Chance Saturday gives eligible residents the opportunity to expunge or seal criminal records; resolve outstanding traffic warrants, misdemeanor warrants and ordinance violations without concern for arrest; register to vote; and more.

On Aug. 24, Gov. Bruce Rauner signed House Bill 2373, which will allow more Madison County residents to take advantage of Second Chance Saturday. The law amends the Criminal Identification Act by expanding the number of convictions that are eligible to be sealed under Illinois law. Before, Illinois law allowed for only nine convictions to be sealed. The new legislation allows more records to be sealed.

Dr. Ed Hightower, executive director of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities, said the hope is that more than 100 will be able to clear their records on this day, which will help them in landing jobs and placing their futures back on track.

Simmons Hanly Conroy law firm in Alton is giving a great deal of time to help some area residents clear their criminal records, along with Madison County Judiciary and State's Attorney's office, the Circuit Clerk and the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, Hightower said. He said his center will be deeply involved along with county organizations including the Madison County Sheriff's Office, the Venice Mayor's Office, and the Leadership Council of Madison County.

"If they have a rape or murder situation, the lawyers can't help with that, but on more minor offenses on their record they may be able to assist," he said. "We will have more than 60 lawyers, paralegals, four judges and the Secretary of State Office on hand. A lot of these people cannot get jobs because of some issue they have with the law. It is a big day and a feel-good story."

The expungement process includes filling out petitions related to each charge or arrest, which then must be notarized by the clerk's office and sent to the Department of Illinois State Police, as well as the arresting agency, for review. If no objections are raised, a final decision is then made by a county judge. It is not uncommon for the entire process to take four to six months to complete, but county agency representatives hope "Second Chance Saturday" will expedite this process to 90 days.

Organizers recently added Ronda Pryor from the Illinois Department of Employment Security to the list of specialists on-hand to help at the event. Pryor's expertise is in finding employment for offenders after their release from prison.

Although the pre-registration deadline has passed, eligible residents can still attend "Second Chance Saturday." They cannot be guaranteed a spot, but they will be helped on a first-come, first-served basis. Pre-registration is not required for voter registration or for those resolving warrants and fines.

The county agencies in attendance will assist in expediting the processes of expungement/sealing by allowing attendees to file all necessary paperwork at once. After meeting with an attorney, attendees will go to the Circuit Clerk booth to submit their paperwork and pay filing fees. However, the court may grant a fee waiver based on income and other factors.

A 30-day window will be provided to those who need additional time to secure the necessary paperwork or complete a drug test. Then, after 90 days, a Madison County judge will review submitted expungement or sealing requests and issue a final ruling.

Drug tests are not required for all applicants – only those who are applying for expungement/sealing of certain drug offenses.

County residents will be able to resolve outstanding traffic warrants, misdemeanor warrants or ordinance violations and will not be arrested unless the warrant is for a violent crime. The event is not for charges that occurred after Aug. 15, 2017, or include any of the following warrant types: domestic violence, child support, violations of orders of protection, civil contempt, or federal, felony or juvenile warrants. Photo identification is required the day of the event.

Residents wanting an expungement should come prepared with the following information:

- The case number
- The date of arrest
- The arresting law enforcement agency
- The charges brought
- Any paperwork they have relating to each case

Attendees can expect to meet with an attorney on a pro bono basis when they arrive. The attorney will review their paperwork, ensure they are eligible to participate and answer any questions.

The Illinois Secretary of State's Office will have a mobile unit on-site to assist with the expungement process, as well as provide additional services to participants: assistance with renewing, replacing or correcting a driver's license; purchasing vehicle stickers; and providing information regarding organ and tissue donation.

A similar event was hosted in 2016 at the office of Simmons Hanly Conroy in Alton, which helped more than 100 people remove past minor offenses, misdemeanors, and other nonviolent crimes from their records. This year's event has been relocated to the southern part of the county to serve historically underrepresented residents.

In addition to assistance with the expungement/sealing of criminal records, the event will also include activities for children, a free concert by the Dirty Muggs band from 5-7 p.m., and free refreshments provided by McDonald's of Granite City.