

# 'I deserve another chance'

**Chicagoans with arrests struggle to land jobs—but there may be hope**

**By Kyra Kyles**  
REDEYE

Taisha Brownlee realized she would have to struggle to put her life back together after being released from federal prison last summer.

Brownlee wanted to re-enter the workforce, but after checking “yes” to a felony conviction on applications, the 37-year-old wondered if she would ever get a job.

“Employers were so high up and enthused about me until they saw my answer to that one question,” Brownlee, who lives in the South Suburbs, said of reaction to her nearly two-year sentence for drug conspiracy charges. “After a while, I got really discouraged.”

Brownlee got a job as a case manager at Westside Health Authority, a nonprofit that offers career assistance and re-entry support to ex-offenders. Now, Brownlee said, she helps others like her, who have a black mark on their records.

“I made a mistake,” Brownlee said. “I paid for it. I want to move on.”

But many more locals might also be paying a price professionally for less drastic past mistakes—even arrests in which the charges were dropped—career experts and local criminal attorneys told RedEye.

Criminal lawyer Tamara Holder said people assume she spends the brunt of her time working with convicted felons. But she has seen a spike in the number of twenty- and thirtysomething professionals coming to her for help with clearing their arrest records through the process of expungement, which effectively erases the record from law enforcement files.

Essentially, applicants file an appeal through the courthouse in the district where they were arrested. A judge makes the final decision, and successful applicants get their arrest records—including mug shots—returned, Holder said.

It's worth it, especially now, to clear away any hint of a run-in with the law, said John Challenger, CEO of locally based workplace consultant Challenger, Gray and Christmas.

“Companies have a lot of people to choose from and fewer jobs to give them,” said Challenger, blaming the shrinking job market for the shift in employer attitude. “Even as far back as January 2007, employers might have given you a chance if your abilities outweighed whatever legal issue you had, especially if it was something done when you were young and reckless. But now, it's just another way to weed job-seekers out.”

A number of Holder's clients are contending with arrests from their college days, she said, citing busts for retail theft and marijuana possession among their common conundrums. Loop-based criminal attorney Robert Kerr, too, has noted that pattern.



“The clients I see are dealing with a college arrest for something like disorderly conduct that they never thought twice about until some employer calls it to their attention,” Kerr said of what he described as “young, white-collar professional” clients. “Then, they realize they need to do something about it if they can.”

Locals seeking expungement must go to one of the six district courthouses in the county in which charges were brought against them and file papers—and pay fees—to get the process started, Holder and Kerr said.

Odds appear in favor of expungement for applicants with qualifying misdemeanor arrests, according to data provided by the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, which tracks expungements in the six county districts courthouses, including Markham, Skokie and Daley Plaza. Judges expunged approximately 81 percent of 11,800 considered requests for misdemeanor arrests last year, according to court data. In 2007, judges expunged approximately 82 percent of 8,987 considered misdemeanor arrest requests.

But you can't take appropriate action unless you know you have a record, Holder said. She said you can access that information at computers within the six courthouses. If you were arrested in the city, Holder recommends also getting fingerprinted and run through the system at Chicago Police

## Pardon me?

For locals who have been convicted of a misdemeanor, expungement is not an option unless it comes from the governor, who also can pardon you. How likely is that? Not very high, according to statistics provided by Ken Tupy, a spokesman from the state's Prisoner Review Board. Tupy cautioned that the number of requests granted also might reflect a backlog in processing and review.

2009	2008	2007
Requests: 124	Requests: 567	Requests: 623
Expungements: 2	Expungements: 67	Expungements: 3

headquarters at 3510 S. Michigan Ave. The fee is \$16, and turnaround for your fingerprint records is approximately four days, a representative from the police's department of identification told RedEye.

That's the scenario if you have been arrested and the charges were later dismissed or dropped. The rules change, however, if you actually have been convicted of a misdemeanor.

That limits your options to a sealing or partial suppression of your record, making it accessible only to law enforcement.



Tiffany Dziadkowiec, 28, has been trying to have a shoplifting misdemeanor removed from her record in order to get a job.

KATE DOUGHERTY FOR REDEYE

## Afraid of your record?

Are you afraid an old arrest will come back to haunt you on a background check? There are certain guidelines for record-clearing under Illinois law that can clue you in to your options if you were arrested in the state. These are provided by the Illinois Attorney General's Office.

**You may be eligible for expungement in scenarios including:**

**You were arrested with violating a city ordinance, misdemeanor or felony, and:**

- » Found not guilty
- » Charges against you were dismissed

**You were sentenced to supervision for certain misdemeanors, and:**

- » A time period of two to five years has passed since that supervision ended

### MORE ONLINE

If you're not eligible for expungement, you could qualify for a sealing, or partial suppression of your record. Visit [state.il.us/defender](http://state.il.us/defender) for more options.



Pedro Menendez received assistance from Westside Health Authority in finding a job and putting his criminal past behind him. KATE DOUGHERTY FOR REDEYE

# 'You don't get a fair shake'

Logan Square's Vanessa Munoz understands why employers are reluctant to give ex-offenders a chance.

But what they may not realize is that when they reject someone with a criminal record, they are affecting that person's family at the same time, she said.

Munoz, 28, said she and her 8-year-old son are struggling financially because his father—her former boyfriend—Jesse Serrano, is unable to find a job because of a record including felony convictions in 1996 and 2002 for gun possession and aggravated battery.

"It takes a toll on me," Munoz said of Serrano's inability to get a job. "He owes a lot of child support, and without that help, I've had to cut my own health insurance and live check-to-check."

Munoz said Serrano, who injured his back in a labor-intensive position, hasn't had luck looking, a situation worsened by a DUI he was convicted of, and served time for, last April.

Serrano's is a situation in which many ex-offenders find themselves, particularly in a down economy, according to the director of the Westside Health Authority, which houses a prisoner re-entry program funded in part by the Illinois Department of Corrections and the Chicago Department of Human Services. The program added a job placement component in 2007 with just 23 participants. Last year, nearly 5,000 visited the center, program director Roger Ehmen told RedEye.

Among those visitors was Pedro

Menendez, a West Side resident who has served separate sentences for aggravated robbery and drug possession. Menendez, 39, spent nearly two years looking for a job after his latest release, he said.

Recently, Westside Health Authority helped land him one in customer service. Others aren't so lucky, said Menendez, who still volunteers at the center during his time off.

"You don't get a fair shake, especially in this economy," Menendez said.

Ehmen said the program is achieving successes like Menendez's in a down economy, but faces an uphill battle to find jobs for program participants.

"There is a set of employers who will not hire an ex-offender for any reason," Ehmen said. "Another set will do it if the person is seven years or more removed from the crime. The third set will hire anyone as long as they can do the work."

Ehmen is encouraged by what he called growth in that second set.

"Our society seems to be a little more open to correcting mistakes, especially with corporate bigwigs serving prison sentences and then being able to re-enter society," Ehmen said. "It gives me hope for the future."

Munoz said she hopes Serrano will find a job soon. Until then, Munoz considers herself stuck.

"I hear my friends complain about the economy, and I ask, 'Oh, you think this is bad?'" Munoz said. "I've been living this way for years." KYRA KYLES