CORI, an acronym for Criminal Offender Record Information, is a statewide database of individuals’ contacts with the criminal justice system. Originally created to facilitate the operations of the criminal justice system, CORIs are now accessible by over 10,000 organizations in Massachusetts and are used by employers, landlords, and creditors to evaluate candidates. As the system was not intended for this purpose and has far-reaching economic and social consequences, measures such as reducing this access and the amount of time each infraction appears on record are sought in CORI reform.

**The Bill**

Final Draft S2583: “An Act reforming the administrative procedures relative to criminal offender record information and pre- and post-trial supervised release”

**Elevator Speech**

Oh! Hello Representative [FILL IN NAME]. I’m so glad I ran into you because I know you agree that our community is stronger when everybody has employment and financial security. Our neighbors and family members, including your constituents, are in crisis because of the brick walls set up by overly restrictive CORI legislation.

The current CORI system denies equal opportunity to get a job, housing and education. I know that you and your constituents care because rehabilitated individuals deserve a second chance to contribute to our community. We know that CORI reform will begin to fix the problem.

Additionally, CORI reform will save this great state millions of dollars because ex-offenders will be able to get jobs and provide for themselves, rather than collecting unemployment services which is a strain on our tax dollars.

You can lend your assistance by helping to urge Speaker of the House DeLeo to bring the CORI reform bill #3523 to the house floor for a vote.
Who said you deserve a second chance?

Imagine that you have a daughter in elementary school. She brings home a permission slip so that she can attend a school trip to the Museum of Science. She asks you to volunteer to be her group’s chaperone. Unfortunately, you’re not allowed to attend because of a small mistake you made more than ten years ago. That small mistake has not only prevented you from chaperoning your child’s trip but has also prevented you from getting a job, stable housing, and continuing your education. The crime: a non-violent misdemeanor. The sentence: a lifetime without equal opportunities.

In Massachusetts, CORI, or Criminal Offender Record Information, is a report that details a person’s criminal past. Your CORI is available to a wide range of agencies. In 1994, 1 out of 5 employers used CORI reports to screen potential employees. Now, 4 out of 5 employers review CORIs. A CORI includes information about any criminal charge, even if the case was dismissed or the defendant found not guilty. Currently, a misdemeanor crime stays on your CORI for 10 years and a felony for 15 after the last court supervised condition of your sentence. This means that you can be prevented from obtaining housing, a job, loans or even supervising your child’s field trip for decades, depending on the offense.

If you’re Janna Drosco, that’s too long. A 30-year-old mother of two, one of whom is mentally disabled, Janna has been moving her family from apartment to apartment for the last year and a half. She can’t get stable housing or a job that pays enough to support her family. Nor can she afford the medicine that her child so desperately needs. Her crime? An underage alcohol possession conviction over 10 years ago.

With no place to live and no way to get a job and make a steady income, many individuals with CORIs turn to a life of crime in order to survive. Inevitably, they are arrested and incarcerated again and what’s left is a penal system with a revolving door that doesn’t rehabilitate people and costs taxpayers millions.

There are currently 11,000 people incarcerated in Massachusetts. Based on the cost of prisons to the state, i.e. taxpayers, we can estimate that CORI reform will save almost half a billion dollars in 2010 by letting rehabilitated individuals become independent, job-holding parts of our community, rather than forcing them back into a life of crime.

The State Senate passed a CORI reform bill in November 2009 that would decrease the time limits on sealing records for all non-violent crimes. What’s needed now is a vote in the State House. The House budget came out this week for the next fiscal year. The House budget proposes numerous reductions such as a $250 million cut to education programs, a $32.5 million cut to family and children services, and a $17 million cut to public safety. These cuts that the House proposes bring already limited resources and services to bare bones. Some cuts could be avoided with the money that the CORI reform bill would save. This CORI reform bill, which has widespread support from the State Senate and Governor Deval Patrick seems like a no-brainer.

We have friends and neighbors who are rehabilitated, reformed and want to contribute back to the society they may have wronged. By allowing these people a fairer opportunity for a new beginning, not only do we do them a justice, we also allow them to become contributing members of our economy, instead of a burden on it. Unfortunately, time is not on our side. The current legislative session is quickly coming to a close. We must act now. The fiscal and moral future of this state rests with us. We need you to contact Speaker of the House DeLeo and ask him to bring this bill to the floor for a vote in the House. Call his office at (617) 722-2500 or mail a letter to Room 356 State House Boston, MA 02133. If we delay now, we run the risk of losing the opportunity to better our community. Join us in our fight to fix our criminal justice system and help our neighbors. For more information about CORI Reform, please visit the Neighbor2Neighbor website at http://www.n2nma.org/campaigns/cori-reform.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Jake

“After attending the State House with the mission of lobbying state representatives categorized as being “on the fence” I have had the realization that we all can make a difference. As a student entering a world of political professionals I felt intimidated by the task at hand. I asked myself the question: who am I to try to educate and influence people on an issue that I have only been studying for two and a half months? What I realized was that I may be the only hope these representatives have of being educated on the issue at all.”

Liz

“Our first meeting of the day on March, 22 was with Gigi, Rep. Bradley’s Aide. Rep. Bradley is a democrat who represents Cohasset, Norfolk, Hingham, and Hull which...
are all somewhat small, rural areas. His biggest area of interest with regards to his policy is education and he is a strong supporter of increased funding for schools. The meeting took place in the Representative’s office. We sat on couches and chairs, around a coffee table, and the atmosphere was informal and relaxed. There were four of us altogether- Jenna, Jake, Gigi, and myself. Gigi seemed entirely uneducated about CORI except that she knew that a bill had passed in the Senate and she had seen a folder in the office labeled “CORI Reform”, but had not yet read it. The purpose of our meeting at the very outset was to educate Gigi about CORI reform, including the overly restrictive nature of the current law, the proposed changes, and what we saw as the benefits to the Commonwealth if this bill should pass. We made sure to emphasize the almost insurmountable barrier to education maintained by the current law because we knew how strong of an advocate Rep. Bradley was for education.”

Jenna

“Before the meeting, once I’d confirmed it, I researched the Representatives that we expected to meet with in order to find any connections that might help us convince them on the bill. I found that Representative Bradley voted “yes” on the sales tax increase bill, so I knew that they would find the financial benefits from CORI relevant. Additionally, Representative Bradley has a large interest in education initiatives so I also made sure to mention that if people want to get educated after being released from prison their CORI often prevents them. Liz, Jake and I had only briefly discussed beforehand what we wanted to say so I think we did a very thorough job of covering all the material we wanted to cover in the time that we had.”

Update (September 2010)

The bill was signed by Governor Patrick on August 6, 2010. It is now Chapter 256 of the Acts of 2010.

For more information

CORI Reform
- Massachusetts Law Reform Institute: http://www.mlri.org
- Neighbor2Neighbor: http://www.n2nma.org/campaigns/cori-reform