Keeping ex-criminals from committing crimes

One of the most effective answers to the critical question of how to keep offenders from committing new crimes is actually very simple – it’s jobs. A study by the Safer Foundation found that 47% of prior offenders without jobs committed crimes and only 8% of prior offenders with jobs committed crimes.

So what’s standing in the way? A never-ending cycle that makes it extremely difficult for people with a record to actually find a job. Even those with non-violent offenses. Even those getting help with re-integrating into families and communities. Even those with clean records for many years. A study recently showed that 74% of employers said they were negatively influenced by criminal records when making hiring decisions ... even if the offense was long in the past.

Ms. Jones worked for 11 years in recovery centers and has a Master’s in psychology but found it impossible to get a job after being laid off (the opportunity for a CTA bus operator position came close) simply due to a minor drug offense from 25 years before.

Many offenders (and there are almost 4 million Illinois residents with criminal records; 70,000 people are released each year from Cook County jail alone) actually have a chance for their records to be cleared but don’t have the legal support and access to make expungements, pardons, waivers and other methods possible.

The impact on families, children, communities, the economy and safety is astronomical and must be turned around – and there IS a way to do it.

Multiple efforts are underway that could turn the tide. The Association of Pro Bono Counsel, with many important law firms working together, is finding ways to improve access to legal assistance for those in poverty; an effort supported by Vice President Biden. The IMPACT Chicago Project also works with law firms, and the Chicago Bar Foundation, to offer justice and education. And Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, in partnership with Cabrini Green Legal Aid, held a “Smart Justice” roundtable just this week to explore new ways for those with criminal records to find work.

IMPACT Chicago lawyers worked with Ms. Jones, resulting in a Certificate of Good Conduct, another chance with the CTA ... and a job.
Common sense dictates that policy changes that minimize the consequences of a criminal record that keep responsible citizens from meaningful employment are essential for reducing crime, protecting families and building the economy.