

In touting First Step at SOTU, Trump forgot about hidden obstacles to success

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What former inmates need most is help once they re-enter society. Where's the mandate providing legal services, job security for those released early?

Last month, [Matthew Charles](#) (who was serving a 35-year sentence for charges related to crack cocaine distribution, among other things) became one of the first people released from federal prison under the First Step Act.

This month, his presence [at the State of the Union address](#) reminded the nation that some people serving lengthy sentences do indeed deserve a second chance at freedom.

But what President Donald Trump's brief retelling of Charles' story (and the First Step Act itself) misses is the fact that being free from incarceration does not help inmates achieve economic freedom. And it's the latter that determines whether someone who has spent years behind bars will avoid recidivism.

Successful re-entry into society requires extensive post-incarceration support services, especially free legal assistance that can help former inmates address obstacles that can, among other things, hinder employment — problems that could be better addressed [within the First Step Act](#).



Matthew Charles is recognized by President Donald Trump during the State of the Union address. (Photo11: Jasper Colt, USA TODAY)

Insurmountable debt

One of the hardest things for newly released inmates (the First Step Act will discharge [more than 50,000](#) over the next 10 years) to escape is debt. Court fines and fees (especially from unresolved state cases) and old traffic tickets can come back to life once the person has been released from federal custody.

It is quite possible for a speeding ticket from decades ago to balloon to five times the original amount.

And in cases when it's impossible for ex-felons to get out from under large amounts of debt (putting some at risk for jail time), having the help of an attorney can be crucial. A lawyer can help with bankruptcy filings, a motion to modify the debt, or petition the court to convert the fine to a community service.

Not only could an unpaid ticket become an insurmountable debt for folks fresh out of prison looking for a job, it could also create a secondary problem — revoked driving privileges.

In the past, something as simple as getting a license was a difficult game-changer for felons leaving federal custody.

The First Step Act includes a provision requiring the government to help prisoners obtain a license (or some other form of ID) as part of prerelease procedures. It's a step in the right direction, but it's too soon to know whether the provision will produce meaningful results.

There is a mountain of issues that could make the task difficult for inmates — outstanding child support (at least [20 percent](#) of U.S. inmates owe child support) and possible prior DUI convictions are among them.

Solving those problems requires knowledge of a bureaucratic system that many former inmates may not have interacted with in years. It also requires the stamina to navigate across bureaucracies, which in most states involves tracking down multiple agencies that oversee cars, insurance, child support and collections.

Even harder than getting a license is navigating the family court system. Many people re-entering communities have complex legal problems related to child custody. Some might need to modify court orders after years of incarceration. Others might have started a new job, and need to adjust visitation schedules.

Help is there, but it's not enough

Even though many states offer some type of free civil legal help, services are stretched thin. A government mandate could help provide the money needed to fill in the gaps.

Some former inmates who are able to secure well-paying jobs may become ineligible for free services as they exist today. Many of those inmates won't make anywhere near enough to afford a private attorney. It's easy for these types of legal problems to contribute to a cycle of poverty, instability and re-incarceration.

These are complex, daunting and time-consuming problems that act as barriers to long-term employment, family cohesion and stability.

As the First Step Act's early release becomes reality for thousands of incarcerated individuals, addressing hidden obstacles to successful re-entry will become increasingly urgent.

We ought to ask what can be done to help people get and keep good jobs, and what can be done to set people up for success.

Addressing one person's suspended driver's license does more than allow that person to drive. It magnifies all previous efforts spent on job training and placement.

Addressing child support and custody problems does more than establish a new payment and visitation schedule. It creates a pathway to stability and family. For genuine success there need to be resources, including legal resources, that can meaningfully address hidden obstacles.

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