February 26, 2014

Dear Senator Coghill and members of the Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on SB 108. I am going to make my comments brief.

This bill provides a simple and sensible answer to an important question. What should happen with the record of a state court criminal case when no convictions were obtained and the case is now closed? In other words, when all charges have either been dismissed or gone to trial, and none of the charges resulted in a criminal conviction.

Under SB 108, the approach is straightforward and simple. Three months after the case is closed, the court file is designated as confidential. This means, simply, that the court record is no longer offered for general public viewing.

In many states, expungement is an available remedy for a nonconviction record but Alaska does not have an expungement statute. SB 108 provides a less drastic remedy than expungement. SB 108 would not require the destruction of court records. Nor does it impede or unnecessarily burden law enforcement. Law enforcement and prosecutors still have access to the records.

Does the court system have an ongoing obligation to provide the general public with access to information which no longer has legal relevance? No. The Legislature has long recognized that not every piece of court-maintained information is accessible by the general public. Not probate records. Not adoption records. Not records of civil commitment proceedings concerning the decision whether to institutionalize mentally ill people.

The reason for making this small number of closed nonconviction records confidential is a good one. It avoids an unnecessary risk of harm to a person. Even though we all know it should not make any difference, just the information that there once was a criminal accusation can limit a person's economic opportunity and severely damage a community reputation. Making such records confidential, by contrast, provides a meaningful end to a criminal process.

Is being merely accused of a crime that much of a hardship? Perhaps there is no better illustration of the personal impact of criminal litigation for us Alaskans than the case of Senator Ted Stevens. After 41 years of faithful service,

he was charged with crimes and convicted. His conviction was later thrown out because of gross prosecutorial misconduct and the case was dismissed. If Sen. Stevens had been charged in state court with state crimes, his public court records would forever tar him as a criminal defendant. Why is that fair? Why should any citizen be treated that way for all time?

I understand that a letter has been submitted by Taylor Winston. I find it interesting that Ms. Winston, a former prosecutor opposing the bill, shows little regard for constitutional basics. She would stigmatize persons for all eternity with the mere fact that criminal charges were once filed. The Founding Fathers disagreed—they prescribed no penalty, no loss of privilege and no loss of privacy for those who had once been charged but not convicted with a crime.

Ms. Winston also thinks that the grand jury has a 'good enough' fact-finding process such that their indictments should forever stand as public monuments. She seems to forget that the grand jury meets in secret with the prosecutor and that the accused and his lawyer aren't allowed in. The Founding Fathers rejected the Star Chamber model as a reliable means of determining guilt.

Finally, she argues the Courtview is objective and provides information the public can use to can protect itself. Her example – she would check Courtview to help make a decision on a babysitter. This is a great example as to why SB 108 should be enacted. Courtview warns the reader as to its unreliability and yet people still rely on it, presumptively, for making important decisions on someone's trustworthiness. [1]

SB 108 should be approved. It is a neat, nifty way to be fair to defendants - like Sen. Stevens- who end up with non-conviction cases, without undermining law enforcement or prosecutorial functions.

Thank you.

Mary Geddes
1113 N Street
Anchorage, AK 99501

[1] By the way, parents can easily obtain reliable information about a potential babysitter's entire arrest record from the Alaska State Troopers by getting the babysitter's consent and paying $20. SB 108 does not effect this mechanism at all.