FSN

Fresh Start Network

The Case for Expungement

An ESG Brief

2026

The Case for Expungement

More than 70 million Americans carry some form of criminal record, roughly one in three adults. Millions are legally eligible for expungement right now. The barrier is not the law. It is access. This brief makes the case for why expungement infrastructure is a workforce issue, an ESG issue, and an economic opportunity that organized partners are positioned to solve.

What Expungement Actually Does

Expungement is a legal process that seals or dismisses a criminal record for people who meet eligibility requirements set by state law. It is not clemency. It is not a pardon. It is a process the law already authorizes, for people who have already satisfied its conditions, that most of them never complete.

When people do complete the process, the outcomes are significant and swift. Research from the University of Michigan Law School finds wages rise an average of 22% in the year following expungement. The findings are consistent across jurisdictions and study designs. The barrier has never been legal authorization, it has always been operational access. Solving for access is the entire mandate of Fresh Start Network.

> The barrier is not legal. It is operational. Filing fees, document retrieval costs, court navigation, and the absence of legal support combine to make a nominally accessible process functionally out of reach for most people who qualify.

The Workforce Problem Hiding in Plain Sight

A criminal record does not disappear when a sentence ends. It follows a person into every job application, every housing search, every professional licensing process. For millions of people who are legally eligible to have their records cleared, the record persists not because the law requires it, but because the expungement process is too costly, too complex, and too inaccessible to complete without help.

$6,000
ANNUAL EARNINGS LOST TO A SINGLE RECORD
(Arizona Law Review)

22%
AVERAGE WAGE INCREASE FOLLOWING EXPUNGEMENT
(University of Michigan Law School)

70M+
AMERICANS WITH A CRIMINAL RECORD

<10%
ELIGIBLE PEOPLE WHO COMPLETE EXPUNGEMENT WITHIN FIVE YEARS

The majority of the 70 million Americans with records are not incarcerated. They are working, or trying to, in the same labor market your organization draws from, invests in, and reports on. They are in your applicant pool. They are in your portfolio companies' workforces. They are in the communities your ESG commitments are meant to reach.

When a qualified worker cannot fully participate in the economy because of a record they are legally eligible to have cleared, that is not a justice system outcome. That is a market inefficiency. It is also a measurable one, and measurable problems have measurable solutions.

$372B
ANNUAL EARNINGS LOSS ACROSS THE AFFECTED POPULATION
(Brennan Center for Justice)

These are not poverty statistics.
They are productivity statistics.

Every dollar of lost earnings represents labor market capacity that exists but cannot fully participate in the economy.

What the Data Tells Us

The 22% average wage increase following expungement, documented by the University of Michigan Law School, is not a marginal adjustment. It is a structural correction.

Employment rates increase. Housing stability improves. Recidivism falls. The findings hold across jurisdictions and study designs, making expungement one of the most evidence-backed workforce interventions available.

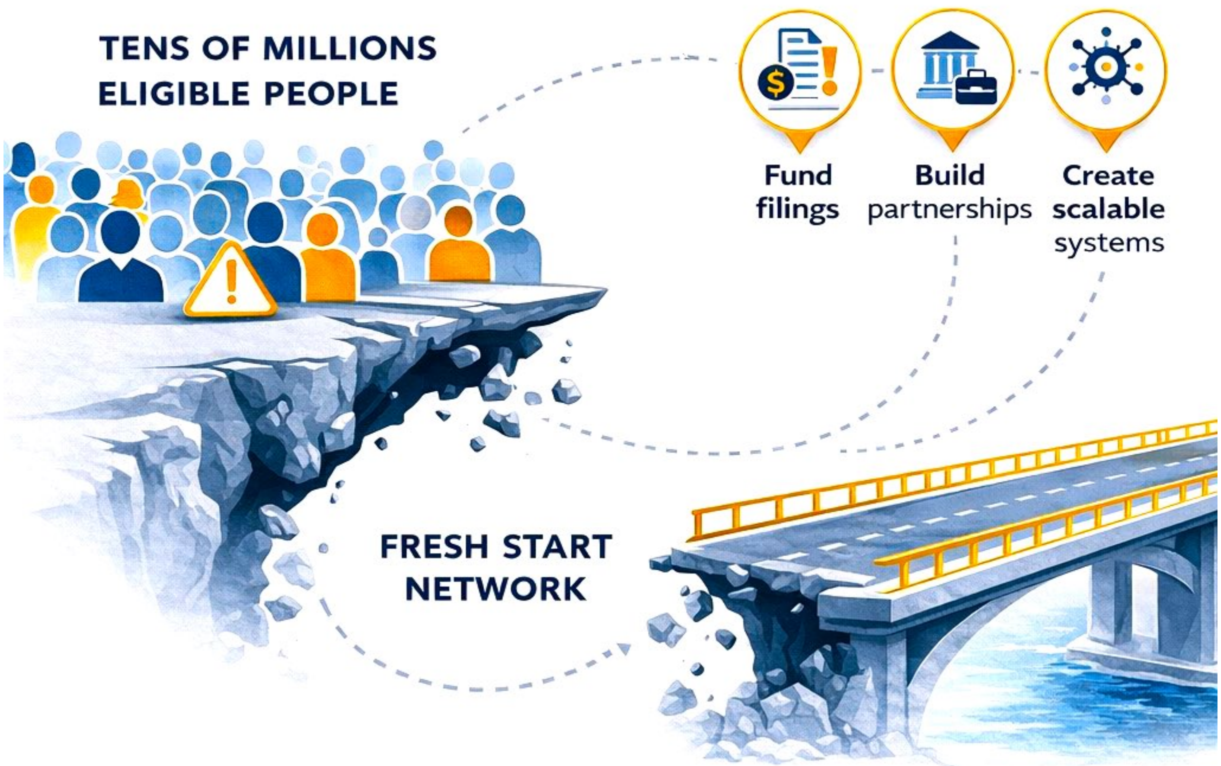
The barrier is not legal eligibility. It is operational access, filing fees, document retrieval, court navigation, and the absence of legal support that make a nominally accessible process functionally out of reach.

Why This Is an ESG Issue

Workforce inclusion, economic mobility, and labor market equity are not peripheral ESG considerations, they are core to the "S" in every major reporting framework, from GRI to SASB to the UN SDGs. Expungement sits squarely at the intersection of all three. The question is not whether it belongs in your ESG strategy. The question is whether your current strategy addresses it at the level of access, or only at the level of aspiration.

The Infrastructure Gap

Passing expungement laws solved the first problem. Access remains the second, and it is the harder one. The scale of unmet need requires institutional partners willing to invest in implementation, not just legislation. The organizations built to close that gap are few. The funding behind them is thin. And the gap itself, tens of millions of people who are eligible right now and cannot navigate the process alone, has no realistic path to resolution without infrastructure built to meet it.



The Problem at Scale

Tens of millions of Americans are eligible for expungement today. Fewer than 10% complete it within five years. The process requires legal knowledge, filing fees, document retrieval, and court navigation that most people cannot access independently. Awareness campaigns and simplified forms have not moved the needle. Operational infrastructure is the only intervention that works at scale.

The gap between eligibility and access is not a gap that advocacy alone can close. It requires systems — funded, staffed, and purpose-built — that meet people where they are and carry the process through to completion.

What Fresh Start Network Provides

Fresh Start Network was built to be that infrastructure, by funding filings, building court and employer partnerships, and creating the systems that allow expungement to function at scale rather than case by case.

- Full cost coverage for expungement filings
- Mobile clinics delivering end-to-end assistance directly to communities
- Court and employer partnerships creating systematic pathways
- Scalable systems built for volume, not isolated cases
- Documented outcomes: filings, fees, wages recovered

What Partnership Looks Like.

Founding partners support the build-out of operational infrastructure that does not yet exist at the scale the problem requires. In practice, that infrastructure includes:

Fund filings at scale

Covering the cost of expungement filings, while building the systems and partnerships that allow those filings to occur at scale.

Run mobile clinics

Running mobile clinics that deliver end-to-end assistance directly to communities.

Build partnerships

Building the court and employer partnerships that create systematic pathways to relief rather than isolated cases.

Partners receive documented outcomes: filings completed, fees covered, wages recovered. The return is measurable, attributable, and aligned with workforce participation, economic mobility, and labor market inclusion commitments that most ESG frameworks already require.

The scale of unmet need is large. The window for founding partnership is not. Fresh Start Network is seeking founding partners at three levels. Founding partners set the terms of how this infrastructure gets built, the communities it reaches first, the court relationships it prioritizes, and the employer networks it integrates. That position does not stay open indefinitely.

Associate Partner

$5,000 – $25,000

Entry-level founding partnership supporting direct filing costs and community clinic operations. Documented outcomes reported quarterly. Named recognition in Fresh Start Network founding partner materials.

Catalyst Partner

$25,000 – $100,000

Mid-tier founding partnership funding expanded clinic reach and court partnership development. Full outcome documentation aligned to ESG reporting frameworks. Co-branding opportunities on community materials and impact reports.

Cornerstone Partner

$100,000 and above

Lead founding partnership shaping infrastructure priorities and geographic focus. Direct engagement with program design, named recognition across all Fresh Start Network platforms, and dedicated impact reporting for board and investor use.

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Expungement AI Foundation, operating as Fresh Start Network. 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.