

Questions for the Record from Senator Charles Grassley  
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
“Five Years of the First Step Act: Reimagining Rehabilitation and Protecting Public Safety”  
January 17, 2024

Questions for Matthew Charles

Since enactment of the First Step Act, I’ve heard from countless folks who received a second chance, turned their lives around, and became active in their communities.

1. Do you have any advice for folks who’ve committed crimes and are looking to turn their lives around?

My advice for people who have committed crimes and are looking to turn their lives around is: It is achievable. You have taken the first vital step which is a desire to change yourself, your life, and to rise above your past. Now, the next steps are equally important in letting your actions and future decisions bear witness to the decision you've made.

There may be times when you'll have to encourage yourself (the Bible speaks about when things look bleak, you have to encourage yourself) because others may not believe in you or take seriously your desire to turn your life around.

Make sure you don't harken on thoughts or memories that seek to derail your efforts. Know that it is certainly never too late to change. I encourage you to leave your past in the past and go forth proving to yourself, your family, your friends, and your community that you are not only capable of changing but are changed.

2. Can you give examples of folks released under the First Step Act that used their second chance to better their communities?

Recently I had the chance to meet with lawmakers here in D.C., and in our group was a gentleman named Hasson Hawkins. Hasson got 11 years relief under the crack retroactivity part

of the First Step Act. When Hasson was inside for decades, he spent that time getting educated, even earning his master's degree. Now he's out helping to take care of his new grandbabies, working hard, and volunteering at his church's food pantry. Then there's Eric Cabrera. He got a small amount of time back because the good time fix, but he took that time and has made the most of it – he had a job lined up on Day One of his freedom. Since then, Eric and his wife started their own flavored-ice shop in California, and they make it a point to hire teens who need structure and a leg up. Eric is a force for inspiration and motivation to these kids. Tanesha Bannister is another example; like me, Tanesha was one of the first people to get released under the First Step Act. Since she's been out, she has been taking care of her paraplegic son and her grandkids, working in the home healthcare industry, and she is the owner of a clothing boutique in Columbia, South Carolina, called Demi Dior. The shop is located in an underserved community, and provides jobs and an investment in the community. For her commitment to her community, Tanesha won an inaugural incentive award from the Joseph Outreach Foundation.