

**Narrator:** Celebrating the history and importance of Second Chance Month. People who have been incarcerated face seemingly insurmountable barriers when they return to their families and communities. Second Chance Month offers a time for the nation to come together to remove barriers and promote equitable access to opportunities for all people to reach their fullest potential resulting in safer thriving communities. Second Chance Month started as a grassroots effort to raise awareness in local communities about ways to support people to reenter their communities with hope, equity, and dignity. Second Chance Month has now grown into a national movement every April with events across the country, including those sponsored by the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance, and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The movement has enhanced both practice and policy around re-entry.

**Caitlin Dawkins:** I'm Caitlin Dawkins from the National Reentry Resource Center. I will be interviewing Heather Rice-Minus, whom I had the honor of collaborating with through Prison Fellowship, along with other partner organizations to proclaim April 2017 as the first Second Chance Month in history. In 2018, the Presidential Proclamation was signed making Second Chance Month the official national initiative that we celebrate today. Heather and I will discuss the history of the launch of Second Chance Month, as well as what people can do to get involved with Second Chance Month and promote second chances. Hi, Heather. Thank you for being with us today to discuss Second Chance Month.

**Heather Rice-Mi...:** Thanks for having me, Caitlin. Excited to be here.

**Caitlin Dawkins:** Well, let's jump right in, Heather. There was once a moment in time when Second Chance Month was just an idea. Tell me a little bit about how that idea was sparked and what the original intent around Second Chance Month was.

**Heather Rice-Mi...:** Sure. First, I would say, as the nation's largest Christian non-profit serving people in prison, their families and advocating for justice reform, Second Chances is in our DNA and we have long walked alongside those who are facing barriers because of their criminal background. But I would say that it crystallized into more of a campaign when my colleague, Jesse Weiss, who is an amazing Second Chance story himself, really started looking at what Singapore had done through their Yellow Ribbon Project in terms of raising awareness about the barriers people have with a criminal background and trying to promote a culture of welcome and acceptance for those with a criminal background. He started modeling some of what he saw in that campaign abroad here in the United States, and that provided some impetus for then saying, "What if we not only continued this work year round but had a catalyzing month, Second Chance Month?"

There were a number of reasons why we chose April. There was already re-entry week during April, Second Chance Act was passed in April many years ago, and for those who follow the Christian tradition, it's also when we celebrate

Easter and our God of Second Chances, and so it was a great time for us as Prison Fellowship to identify this month and rally around it. I can still remember our marketing team saying, "Can you just do that? Can you claim a month?" We said, "Well, you know what? Let's try." Here we are so many years later and it's become so much bigger than just one organization. We have over 700 partners, businesses, organizations, churches who celebrate April as Second Chance Month alongside Prison Fellowship.

Caitlin Dawkins: Thank you, Heather. I do remember how bold I felt like that was at that moment when Jesse was talking about claiming a whole entire month and everyone was on board. We know that Second Chance Month was founded nationally by a presidential proclamation in 2018. However, there was some earlier grassroots efforts and trailblazers in that effort before that time. Can you talk a little bit about those efforts and trailblazers and how you think that went from this grassroots effort to this larger national campaign?

Heather Rice-Mi...: Yes. I mentioned my colleague, Jesse Weiss, and he was putting together these five Ks modeled after what he saw in Singapore, there were other grassroots events happening. Then, I would also say there's so many organizations who have been doing this work. The first year we started Second Chance Month, we held a press conference at the National Press Club in 2017. We had a much smaller group of our core partners that year, but really fun coalition. Everyone from the ACLU to Heritage was there and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers who had been doing this work for a long time. We rolled out a scroll that had printed on it all of the documented barriers that people with a criminal record face at the time, over 48,000 on this scroll that we rolled across the floor at the National Press Club.

There was also, looking back to the Second Chance Act and really some of that legislative momentum for raising awareness around this issue, you can look back at trailblazers like Congressman Danny Davis and Senator Portman and Senator Klobuchar, who became some of the first folks who put together resolutions in the House and Senate. Actually, in 2017, the Senate passed a bipartisan resolution recognizing April as Second Chance Month and then the administration the next year started and has ever since.

Caitlin Dawkins: Yeah, and you jumped a little bit into talking about the impact of Second Chance Month, which is really the important part. It's more than just an awareness campaign, it's more than a month that we take to commemorate second chances and promote second chances, but there has been a lot of impact around policy and program. Can you talk a little bit about the impact of Second Chance Month, specifically as it relates to the Second Chance Reauthorization Act through the First Step Act?

Heather Rice-Mi...: Sure. I think so much momentum was created through Second Chance Month for some of the key justice reforms that happened. The First Step Act really focused in on the federal system, but did include, as you mentioned, Caitlin, this

reauthorization of Second Chance Act funds, and so recognizing not only do we need to support rehabilitation in the federal system, but we can continue the tradition of the Second Chance Act by reauthorizing it and expanding the grants available for people to help provide opportunities while people are still incarcerated, as well as post-release, making sure that they really get access to the opportunities and skills needed for them to have a flourishing life. If we ask folks to transform in prison and to start fresh, we've really got to make sure that they do have those kinds of opportunities and community in place.

But even more so, Caitlin, I would say that while policy change is so important, law really follows culture. What has been most important with Second Chance Month is raising awareness about the stigma of a criminal record and helping to really change that narrative and let people know that people with a criminal record have so much to offer and are ready and willing to give back to their communities. They can really be actually the folks transforming the very communities that they once harmed. They can be the catalyst for change there. A bigger part of this is really narrative change and removing that stigma by uplifting the stories of those who have had a criminal background but are now giving back to their communities.

Caitlin Dawkins: The support around Second Chance Month has really just been incredible, Heather, as you know. This has grown into a very large national campaign that a lot of organizations, people, people who have been impacted by the justice system have really gotten behind, it's really incredible. We're getting ready to move into year six of Second Chance Month, which is really, really hard to believe. Why do you think that the White House or people in general, the general public, why do people continue to support Second Chance Month?

Heather Rice-Mi...: I think when you look at the scope of the issue, there's an estimated one in three American adults with a criminal record and an estimated one in two Americans have or had a family member who was incarcerated. If you think about that person and what your hopes and dreams are for them, or if you are that person and what you know want to do in the community, it makes it real, it puts a face on the issue. The scope of the problem is so large that now so many people are affected or they know someone close to them who has that criminal background and they do see those barriers. Barriers to employment, barriers to an occupational license to housing, and I think people are rallying around understanding that we really have to be part of unlocking second chances. We can each play a role in being the key that unlocks second chances. I think that's moving it forward is the scope of the problem and everyone having someone close to them or being that person who wants to live out a second chance and is running into these roadblocks.

Caitlin Dawkins: I like how you mentioned that we can all take a part in this effort and we can all unlock second chances for our families, for people impacted by justice, for our neighbors, and for our community members at large. I do think that people who work in this field of re-entry or justice have done a really good job of integrating

Second Chance Month into their activities. We see every April these events, there's galas, podcasts, interviews, these high-impact events that occur during the month of April. Can you tell me a little bit about what the general public can do, people who may not work in this space or be in this field to promote second chances and participate in Second Chance Month?

Heather Rice-Mi...: There are a whole host of ways for the general public to get involved. I would say to really see a menu of that, I'd encourage those listening to come to [prisonfellowship.org/secondchances](https://prisonfellowship.org/secondchances). We've got ways for you to share your story of second chances. We've got a social media toolkit. We have a church toolkit to host a Second Chance Sunday and lots of other ways that you can get involved.

I'm going to give just two simple things, Caitlin. I would first say, number one, I really think language has the impact to change culture. One of the things we've really tried to instill at Prison Fellowship is using language that really reflects the person first and foremost, and recognizes that a criminal background is yes, reflective of a choice someone made, but not who they are as a person. Then, when you speak with labels like ex-offender, that can really be a stigma that carries with that person as part of their identity instead of recognizing that yes, someone has made a poor choice in their life, but we do believe they're so much more than that. We're all worth more than our past mistakes and choices.

One thing I would encourage is just thinking about language. You can Google, we have a blog called Hello, My Name is Felon, and gives you some rationale behind that and particularly for those from the Christian tradition, talks about why we care about this as Christians and should be leading the way in that. Second, I would say, for this year, we are really trying to do more to spread the word on social media and can be as simple as a post to share about this and spread the word. One of the things we'll be asking for people to do this year is to join the #BeTheKey campaign to unlock second chances, and we're encouraging folks to take a selfie, hold a key, and share why you believe in unlocking second chances for people with a criminal record.

There's going to be more available on our social media toolkit of how to get involved in the #BeTheKey campaign. Again, [prisonfellowship.org/secondchances](https://prisonfellowship.org/secondchances), we'll get you keyed in to all those great resources that you can use on social media to spread the word. Those are just two simple things, but lots of other things available on that platform, as well as so many other organizations have events and ways to plug in. There's the Second Chance Business Coalition as well that can really help employers think through Second Chance hiring for people with a criminal record as well. Lots of ways to get engaged depending on your vantage point and whether you're a business owner or just a concerned community member. There's someplace for you to be the key.

Caitlin Dawkins: I love that Heather. What I really love about Second Chance Month is that it's inclusive and everybody can get involved, there's something that everyone can do. You gave some great tools and resources, your website. We'd also like for people to go to the National Reentry Resource center at [buildsecondchances.org](http://buildsecondchances.org), where there are some other opportunities for people to get involved in Second Chance Month. I really think that this is something that people in our nation can rally around. We can really unify around second chances during Second Chance Month in April, and it's something that we really should celebrate opening opportunities and second chances for people who are impacted by the justice system. As far as we move together as a nation, Heather, around second chances, what would you like for our focus to be? Where can we evolve or expand as a nation to really unify around providing second chances?

Heather Rice-Mi...: I think, Caitlin, I would say, it starts with really listening to people's stories. I think so many of us do know someone who has been impacted by the justice system. It starts with just those conversations around, what kind of barriers have you faced as a result of your record? We expect people to come home and live crime-free, but when you can't get a driver's license or you can't find a place to live or even 10 years after you've paid your debt and you're still struggling with someone raising your criminal history as a way of getting into a job, really trying to understand what people are facing and who they are as a person today. I think, first and foremost, have those conversations with folks who are impacted. I think a lot of times it will shatter this black and white thinking we can have about people with their criminal record and help us to understand the nuance of their situation and what they've done to rehabilitate and what they're looking for in a second chance.

The other space I would say that I think we have a ways to evolve is continuing this momentum on Second Chance hiring. I mentioned the Second Chance Business Coalition and there really is more and more of a movement of large companies, as well as small, saying yes, we believe in being inclusive and that includes hiring people who have a criminal background and thinking with more nuance about appropriate roles that people can step into. I think, to take that to the next level, we have to not just look at entry-level roles, but how do we give people who have paid their debt not only a job, but a career and a career path. That's where I hope to see a lot more momentum in the coming years.

Caitlin Dawkins: I love that, Heather, and I think something that you said that's really important. I think sometimes if we take the opportunity to talk to people and get to know them, we can really change our own perceptions around what a criminal background is. Providing second chances, you talked about employers and really the benefits to employing people who are returning to our communities, so that they can advance economically and really, this nation just taking the time to sit back and think about what they can provide as part of not just Second Chance Month but year-round to open up opportunities for people.

I am looking forward to Second Chance Month 2023, as I'm sure that you as well as your colleagues at Prison Fellowship and all the many partners of Second Chance Month are. I think it's going to be a monumental year for Second Chance Month, and I look forward to partnering with organizations like yours and others across the nation to really open up opportunities for people who are impacted by the justice system and support families that are impacted by justice, Heather. Thank you so much for joining today to talk to us about the history of the launch of Second Chance Month, way back in 2017. Year six now, we're excited to roll into the next year and for providing some real concrete items that people can do to get involved and promote second chances.

Heather Rice-Mi...: Thank you, Caitlin, for having me. It's a joy to be able to share and look back at how far we've come. Likewise, looking forward to 2023 and continuing to unlock second chances with you and so many others.

Narrator: To learn more about the Department of Justice's Second Chance Month activities and ways you can promote Second Chances, please visit the Second Chance Month 2023 page for the National Reentry Resource center at [buildsecondchances.org](http://buildsecondchances.org). This video was supported by Grant #2019-MU-BX-K015, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime and the Smart Office. Points of View or opinions in this video are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice.