

My name is Sonya Williams. I am a Community Organizer with Return Strong! I also assist families with Visitation Denial Appeals. The majority of families that have reached out to us are denied visitation due to a felony charge or a felony conviction. Yes, I said "charge". NDOC is denying visits to people who were merely charged with a felony, no conviction. Families are denied for felony charges/convictions are decades old. 20-30 years old, in some cases. Charges like Possession of Marijuana; Shoplifting; Drunk and Disorderly. Mothers being denied to see their own children. Wives being denied to see their husbands. Grandparents being denied to see the grandchildren they raised. A few are adult children being denied to see their incarcerated parents.

The entire process of applying for visitation, being denied, and appealing is just crazy. Months, years go by. Some of our families have never received a response. If they do receive a denial because of their criminal history, these individuals must then obtain their criminal scopes from the Nevada Repository, which requires them to obtain a fingerprint card from Metro and send it out. All these steps take months to complete. Then they submit the Scopes to NDOC for review again. 9 times out of 10, NDOC will deny them again for reasons like "no disposition on a 1991 Felony Charge." So then the individual has to contact the Court to obtain a disposition (most do not even know what a disposition is) only to be told the Courts do not keep records older than 1997. What are they to do? After that, the individual is at a stand still. Some have gone decades without seeing their children because they were charged 30 years ago with a felony.

I send at least 5 to 10 appeals a week to the facilities in NDOC. Out of the six facilities, I have only received a response from the Warden at NNCC to discuss the appeals and what would be required to get the denials reviewed. Only one Warden who is actually putting in the effort to work with Return Strong and these individuals in order to maintain that family connection for an incarcerated person. In fact, the Warden at High Desert blocked my email address.

I am a civil litigation paralegal by trade. I work 40 hours a week at the law firm. In my spare time, my commitment to Return Strong and the families we represent, keeps me pretty busy. I spend my weekends helping these individuals gather documents to prepare and submit Petitions to Seal Criminal Records packets to the District Attorney's office, in an effort to bypass this whole denial process because it is so discouraging..

Return Strong has spent two years using every chance we have had to bring issues such as this to light to anybody who would listen. Thank you Senator Dallas Harris for hearing our pleas and presenting SB351. We are in total support.