

May 7, 2025

Chair Tusler, Vice-Chair Jacobson, and Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Judiciary:

**The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to Assembly Bill 124.**

Assembly Bill 124 would create a lifetime ban on legal name changes for all Wisconsinites convicted of one of the ninety-seven enumerated offenses deemed a “violent crime” under Wis. Stat. § 969.001(3)(a). People in this category who change their name would be criminally charged with a Class H Felony punishable by a fine not to exceed \$10,000 or imprisonment not to exceed 6 years, or both.

This proposal would treat anyone with one of these convictions—no matter how many decades have passed since the date of the offense—as a permanent threat to the community, regardless of any individual circumstances or progress since the time of the conviction. For some, the act of changing their name could result in the same or greater length of incarceration than the “violent crime” itself. That’s absurd.

This approach fails to serve public safety by denying individuals the basic dignity of shaping their own identity and making it harder for people to rebuild stable lives after incarceration. Particularly concerning is the impact AB-124 would have on some of the most vulnerable Wisconsinites at risk of violence themselves: people who are survivors of abuse and transgender people. Even if a person was convicted as a teenager, has served their time, lived lawfully for decades, or is trying to escape trauma or danger, the law leaves no room for discretion or nuance.

An overwhelming majority of women facing incarceration at some point in their lives are survivors of domestic abuse—some studies estimate between 74% and 95% of incarcerated women have survived domestic abuse or sexual violence. AB-124 would force someone to retain the last name of their abuser following a divorce.

For many transgender people, a legal name change is essential to navigate the world without fear of being outed every time legal identification is required. Trans people are over four times more likely than cisgender people to experience violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple assault.

The ability to change your name implicates fundamental aspects of humanity, self-expression, and identity formation. A conviction should not deny Wisconsinites the safety and dignity a legal name change affords.