The word repentance is defined as having both a change of mind and a change in direction. For many ex-offenders leaving the correctional system without the prospect of support, shelter, or a good job, the change of mind is much easier to achieve than the change of direction.

I believe policies in the area of public safety must also include forgiveness. While it's important for people to face the consequences of their criminal activity, we must also strike a balance that allows individuals who have paid their debt to society to have a fair chance to rejoin society.

Newly released inmates are often driven right back to prison by their difficulty in obtaining jobs, education and housing, as well as by the social stigma that accompanies a prison record. In addition, many of these people suffer from mental illnesses but have no access to treatment. If past patterns hold true, more than half of the prisoners released this year will be back behind bars within a few years. Nationwide, nearly 2 million children have a parent in prison and those children are 6 – 10 times more likely to end up in prisons themselves.

With the prison population exploding and the price of incarceration rising faster than our state coffers (current costs are more than $30,000 per year per inmate) we must focus on ways to reduce recidivism.

Last week, I joined Sen. Mee Moua, the Council on Crime and Justice and other community organizations, ex-offenders and their families to discuss the importance of second chances and offender reentry issues as part of "Second Chance Day on the Hill." I've also introduced legislation with Sen. Moua and others that would help ease the transition back into society for ex-offenders who have paid their debts to society, giving them a fair shot at a second chance. There is a growing realization that a criminal justice system that simply punishes cannot be effective. Sanctions against ex-offenders in Minnesota restrict people from pursuing certain careers and obtaining professional licenses, limit housing options and access to education. Those who were arrested but who may have never been convicted of a crime are also harmed by collateral sanctions that deny them employment or housing based solely on an arrest or court appearance. Additionally, unofficial sanctions from landlords and prospective employers are often more severe and longer-lasting than the actual criminal punishment.

At a rally at the State Capitol on Second Chance Day, we heard stories of personal redemption from people who have successfully turned their lives around. One woman, released from prison after a conviction for fifth-degree drug possession, found the initial challenges she faced nearly insurmountable. Finding long-term housing was difficult. Her desire to go back to school was hindered because she wasn't eligible for federal student loans. While she overcame those obstacles and now owns and operates a halfway house for ex-offenders, she summed it up when she said: "Although we are good people who made poor choices, we deserve a second chance."

So this issue really is about redemption – and about moving forward. It's about helping people who have paid for poor choices pursue the things that most of us take for granted - like renting an apartment, driving to work, obtaining a job and going to school.

We know reformed offenders are far less likely to commit new crimes if they have better

housing, educational and work options. And we all benefit when good people are able to find and keep work. Removing some of the barriers that keep people from moving forward will go far toward helping more people move beyond their past to become contributing members of society.

Questions? Please feel free to contact me any time by email at rep.bobby.champion@house.mn, by phone at (651) 296- 8659, or by mail at 329 State Office Building, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55155. I look forward to hearing from you.