

## FELS FUND AWARDS SOCIAL JUSTICE GRANT TO PLSE

**OCTOBER 22, 2018** – Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) announced today that the Samuel S. Fels Fund has awarded PLSE a Social, Racial and Economic Justice Grant in the amount of \$20,000. The grant is intended to support PLSE as it expands beyond criminal record expungements into a new area of critical importance to low-income Philadelphians - pardons - and develops related outreach, education and organizing programs in partnership with established community organizations.

“We see how mass incarceration of people of color harms so many families and neighborhoods, but we had not focused on how criminal record histories continue to devastate our communities of color long after people have served time. Now that we’ve talked with PLSE, we understand the importance of expungements and pardons,” said Sarah Martinez-Helfman, President of the Fund. “The Fels Fund is thrilled to be able to support this critical work.”

An estimated 60% of those living in minority and low-income neighborhoods have been arrested at least once and therefore have criminal record histories that are publicly available, for free, over the internet. In Pennsylvania, a court order is required before anything can be expunged (erased) from an arrest record, even if the charges were dropped or the person found not guilty. Only a pardon from the governor can erase a conviction, even if it was for a misdemeanor that happened many decades ago. PLSE has helped over 3,000 low-income Philadelphians obtain expungements, with a success rate of over 98%. This month, with the support of the Fels Fund and others, PLSE is beginning to train volunteers to help low-income Philadelphians obtain pardons for crimes they committed over a decade ago.

Data show that over 80% of all employers consider criminal records as part of background checks when considering applications for employment or promotions. That percentage is even higher for credit agencies, landlords and schools. Parents with criminal records are frequently disqualified from volunteering in their communities, coaching their children’s sports teams, or even going on school trips.

“It’s crushing that what someone was charged with 10 or 15 years ago, very often when they were young adults, can completely wipe out everything that person has done since then to improve themselves, even if they have accepted responsibility,” said Martinez-Helfman. “We need to address unjust systems as we work to repair individual lives.”

“For those of us who are involved in social justice work in Philadelphia, support by the Fels Fund is the mark of excellence,” said Ryan Hancock, one of PLSE’s co-founders and chair of its Board of Directors. “For more than 80 years, Fels has focused on improving the daily lives and futures of average Philadelphians. We are very proud to have the Fels Fund recognize us for making a big difference.”

**ABOUT PLSE:** PLSE provides free legal representation to low income residents of Philadelphia whose criminal records are holding them back from achieving their potential as productive, contributing citizens. The services include seeking expungements in criminal court and pardons from the Governor, educating elected and community leaders, and empowering under-resourced communities to seek a greater voice and needed legislative reforms. PLSE was twice recognized in 2017 as an exemplary non-profit, with both a 2018-19 Barra Award, and the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation’s Goffman Award.