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Opinion

Pa. is leading the way on pardon reform

When asked about pardons, many people imagine Lil Wayne or Michael Flynn — not their father, their neighbor, or even themselves. This needs to change.



Lt. Gov. John Fetterman (back) stands as Secretary of the Board of Pardons Brandon Flood talks about the commutation process at SCI Dallas in Dallas, Pa., on Thursday, Oct. 10, 2019. TIM TAI / Staff Photographer

by Linda Dale Hoffa

With presidential pardons being extended to political allies and media personalities in recent years, pardons have gotten a bad name. Fortunately, in Pennsylvania, you don't need friends in high places to get a fresh start.

That was proven again just last week, when Pennsylvania's Board of Pardons — added to our constitution in 1872 to prevent such shenanigans by our governor — recommended pardons for 84% of the petitions heard, 110 of 131. Almost all of them appeared without attorneys or histories of political contributions, and none with “facilitators.” That makes 256 total pardons recommended just this calendar year, putting the board on pace to shatter [last year's record of 458](#). And Gov. Tom Wolf has been signing over 98% of them.

Often overlooked in discussions about criminal justice, gubernatorial pardons for state crimes play a critical part in helping people rebuild their lives after a conviction. That's because, for people with felony records, the limitations don't end once their sentence is over.

Having a record, even one that is decades old and for a nonviolent crime, can be crippling. Branded "felons" for life, those who have reformed and lead upright lives are routinely denied jobs, promotions, credit, admission to schools, and housing. The economic consequences are especially stark. A report by the American Bar Association suggested that [having a criminal record decreased earning capacity by about a third](#). This isn't so surprising considering that Pennsylvania, for example, requires state licensing for scores of occupations — including cosmetology, dental hygiene, and taxi driving — and that licensing boards may deny licensure to individuals with criminal records.

Such lack of economic opportunity not only affects felons themselves but also their families and communities. For example, having parents who cannot provide for their children contributes to the cycle of poverty and crime devastating communities across the state. Considering that in our city alone, [one in five people has a criminal record](#), it isn't difficult to see why Philadelphia remains among America's poorest big cities.

As a recent program hosted by the Scattergood Foundation demonstrated, pardons can play a critical part in reversing this cycle of poverty and crime, in restoring dignity to individuals and families, and in helping Philadelphia escape its persistent ranking as America's poorest big city. With a clean record, former felons can pursue their potential without the fear of discrimination — to the benefit of society. To illustrate: A report by the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia analyzing 10 years of pardon data found that [pardons had contributed about \\$16.5 million to Pennsylvania's economy](#) over the past decade, at no cost to anyone. Another report found [extremely low rates of recidivism](#) for those granted pardons (just 1.7%).

For many years, obtaining a pardon was an arduous, slow, and costly process that discouraged many from applying. I know because, for two years, I was responsible for reviewing all pardon applications for the attorney general, who sits on the Board of Pardons under our state constitution. Reforms by the Wolf/Fetterman administration have streamlined and greatly improved the process. Application fees have been eliminated, and the system will soon be digitized. Lawyers are not required. Applicants submit a pardon application — downloadable for free at [the Board of Pardons website](#) — and then, following an investigation by the Board of Probation and Parole and a preliminary review by the Board of Pardons, may be granted a public

hearing. Following the hearing, which is now held via Zoom, the board then votes on whether to recommend an applicant to the governor, who may approve or deny the recommendation.

The process used to take more than five years and ended in failure for over 92%; today, it's down to just over two years, and more than two-thirds end up with the second chance at life that only a pardon can give.

Pennsylvania leads the nation in pardon reform. We have the system in place to make a fresh start a reality for tens of thousands of individuals who have turned their lives around. Now, one of the biggest issues is lack of knowledge. When asked about pardons, many people imagine Lil Wayne or Michael Flynn — not their father, their neighbor, or even themselves. This needs to change. If you, a family member, or a friend has a state criminal record, especially one that is more than five years old, applying for a pardon could be the start of a better life.

Linda Dale Hoffa is a partner at Dilworth Paxson LLP and was a senior executive deputy attorney general from 2013-2014. Lorraine Marie Simonis, an associate at Dilworth Paxson LLP, contributed to this piece.