

## LOCAL NEWS

## Berks begins Pardon Project to help those with past convictions

The new program is designed to help those who have rehabilitated.



PA State Senator Judy Schwank speaks during the press conference. Standing on either side of her from left are , BCPS Co-Executive Director Nicole Schnovel, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons Brandon Flood, and Berks County District Attorney John Adams. During a press conference at Berks Connections Pretrial Services to announce the start of the Pardon Project of Berks County November 1, 2021. (BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE)

By **MIKE URBAN** | [murban@readingeagle.com](mailto:murban@readingeagle.com) | Reading Eagle

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Berks County has begun a program designed to allow those with past convictions to receive help in obtaining a pardon from the state.

[The Berks County Pardon Project](#) is partnering pardon applicants with local volunteers who help guide them through the complicated process of attempting to have their convictions erased from their records.

The program is open to those who have completed their sentences and stayed clear of criminal behavior since their



"One mistake has the potential to haunt you for the rest of your life," state Sen. Judy Schwank said.

She said there are many in Berks who get rejected for things like jobs, apartment rentals and home mortgages because of convictions for which they long ago served their time.

The new program will help a lot of them finally get on track, she said.

"We don't need to be this punitive as a society," the Ruscombmanor Township Democrat said. "These can be stories of redemption."

Schwank helped start planning for the program this spring and said she immediately got support from many connected to the Berks court system, including District Attorney John T. Adams.

People make mistakes, Adams said, but for those who have turned their lives around for the better, a pardon can serve as both a motivator and a reward.

"We should give forgiveness to those who are deserving," Adams said. "It's the right thing to do."

Schwank held up the thick packet that pardon applicants must fill out, which she said can be intimidating. The volunteer coaches will now be able to guide them through it, and assist them with their essays on why the governor should grant their pardon.



Secretary of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons Brandon Flood speaks. Standing on either side of him from left are BCPS Co-Executive Director Nicole Schnovel, state Senator Judy Schwank, and Berks County District Attorney John Adams. During a press conference at Berks Connections Pretrial Services to announce the start of the Pardon Project of Berks County November 1, 2021. (BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE)

## Berks not alone

Pennsylvania Board of Pardons Secretary Brandon Flood spoke of how counties across Pennsylvania are adding similar Pardon Projects and said those programs greatly increase the chances of applicants getting approved.

While Pennsylvania's pardon process used to be perceived as one that favored the rich and well-connected, it has changed to one where the rehabilitated are getting a fair chance to clear their records, he said.





From left are state Sen. Judy Schwank, BCPS Co-Executive Director Nicole Schnovel, Brandon Flood, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, and Berks County District Attorney John Adams. During a press conference at Berks Connections Pretrial Services to announce the start of the Pardon Project of Berks County November 1, 2021. (BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE)

## The program

In Berks the project will start with a smaller group of applicants and coaches overseen by Berks Connections to ensure it is being run smoothly before expanding early in 2022, said Berks Connections Co-Executive Director Nicole Schnovel.

There are 10 applicants enrolled and 11 coaches registered, she said.

There are limitations on who can apply. Those who have committed sex crimes, have open or pending criminal cases or have not served their full sentences are ineligible. Those with alcohol, drug or mental health issues must show they are committed to treatment and counseling.

Volunteer coaches do not need to have legal expertise, just a desire to help and a willingness to undergo an hour or two of training, Schwank said.

Schnovel said that for too long there have been many in Pennsylvania limited by the crimes they committed years or decades ago, but the Pardon Project will now help fix that.

“This is a life-changing opportunity to finally break free of past mistakes,” she said.

For more information about applying or volunteering with the Berks County Pardon Project, email [PardonMeBerks@bcpsreentry.org](mailto:PardonMeBerks@bcpsreentry.org) or go to [berksconnections.org/pardonprojectofberkscounty](https://berksconnections.org/pardonprojectofberkscounty).



### Mike Urban | Reporter

Mike Urban joined the Reading Eagle as a metro reporter in 2002, and since then has covered a wide range of beats and topics across Berks County, including working as an investigative reporter. He





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