**Invitation to Brainstorm around Pardons**

Pennsylvania is one of the most heavily incarcerated states in the country. Pennsylvania’s Auditor General has reported that there are more people under state supervision (probation and parole) than live in the entire city of Pittsburgh. Every one of them will have a criminal record, forever, that is available 24-7-365 over the internet in just three clicks. Those records – no matter if they are decades old - are used every day to deny people opportunities for better jobs, credit, housing, education, licenses, custody of their nieces or nephews, even going on school trips or coaching their own children’s t-ball and sports teams. That’s why the prevalence of criminal records has been called a “public health crisis”.

The only way to get rid of a conviction in PA is through a pardon. In April 2020, The Economy League issues a pathbreaking report that studied pardons in Pennsylvania. Evaluating a decade of data (2008-2018), it found that the simple act of signing pardons resulted in $16.5 million going into communities across Pennsylvania. Most of those dollars flowed to lower-income communities. The Economy League called pardons a “no-cost workforce development and community investment policy.” A follow-up report found that an incredibly low percentage (1.1%) of the people who had applied for a pardon – including the 1600 who had been denied pardons – went on to commit another crime.

As a result, the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the Attorney General, the Auditor General, the Secretary of Labor & Industry, and the statewide Workforce Development Board have all urged that pardons be given to more people more quickly. **This is happening!**  In 2020, the Board of Pardons (which must recommend someone for a pardon before the Governor can grant one) heard hundreds more pardon applications than ever before in its 150-year history. Of the 528 pardon applications it heard, it approved 458 – a remarkable **86.7%,** and the Governor is signing **99%** of them.  Earlier this month, the Board considered 190 pardon applications and agreed 178 of them merited a hearing – an amazing **93.7%.**

Thanks to reforms made by the Board, applying for a pardon is simple and straightforward. What’s key is telling your story of rehabilitation in a clear and persuasive way. Most people need help with that. To help them, the Pardon Project has been training “Pardon Coaches” around the state, and is setting up Pro Bono Pardon Projects in more than a dozen counties.

We’d like you to join us and the leader of the Pardon Project at a brainstorming session to discuss if we should start one here in Washington County and, if so, to starting thinking and planning how we do that.