



# CANNABIS CONVERSATIONS

An exploration of cannabis and hemp topics from  
multiple perspectives: medical, historical, social  
equity, ecological and more.

## Featuring:

**Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity:**  
People change - records should too!

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# GROWING FOR GOOD with Green Thumb

**Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity: “People change—criminal records should too.”**

Featuring Andrea Lindsay, lead investigator and mitigation specialist at PLSE

**Q:** What is the difference between someone getting their record expunged and being pardoned? In Illinois I know of organizations providing pro bono expungement support but don't hear about support for pardons. I'm not aware of social equity organizations doing large-scale pardon work. Are there roadblocks that make the pardon process more complicated?

**Andrea Lindsay:** Expungements are a legal proceeding and can only erase crimes that you were not convicted of: not guilty verdicts, dismissals, withdrawals, and things like that. If you have convictions, for the most part, a pardon is a necessary step to getting your record erased. In general, a pardon is a type of executive clemency, a formal recognition from the governor that you have been forgiven for the crime.

When PLSE started out more than a decade ago, we only offered services for expungements, but we soon realized that—with Philadelphia being one of the most heavily incarcerated and poorest big cities in the U.S.—almost all our clients still had one or more convictions holding them back. This led to the creation of the Pardon Project, which helps low-income Philadelphians prepare their pardon applications and provides support throughout the entire process, which can take more than two and a half years from start to finish.

While we're starting to see some success in Pennsylvania, so much of that is specific to our state's context—the laws and regulations about the process, as well as the specific people making those decisions. One major barrier is that

the process is different state by state as well as at the federal level, which makes it hard to coordinate a uniform national, or even regional, response promoting clemency. One thing that's been working well in Pennsylvania is that we're encouraging people to look at pardons as a broad community investment tool, rather than simply a matter of individual forgiveness. Pardons allow people to get better paying jobs, loans, and other opportunities for which they're otherwise already qualified, and that benefits all of us.

**Q:** On a job, rental, loan, passport application, kids daycare form, and so many others, if a past “offense” is expunged, may one check the “No” box? What about if they were pardoned?

**AL:** The first question depends on whether you have any convictions or not. In Pennsylvania, if you never pleaded guilty to nor were found guilty of any charges and you get an expungement, you're good to go. On the other hand, even if you get parts of your record expunged, you'll still have a criminal record for any convictions until you receive a pardon. A pardon in Pennsylvania allows you to expunge those convictions and check the “No” box when asked if you were ever convicted of a crime.

This, too, varies state by state. In Illinois, convictions that you've had pardoned are only eligible for an expungement (resulting in a totally clear record) if it is explicitly stated as one of the conditions, but it's still an important tool for restoring many civil rights.

**Q:** PLSE recently started a Marijuana Amnesty Program. What does that landscape look like in Pennsylvania?

**AL:** While our services are general, meaning we can help people with a wide variety of criminal record histories, we launched our targeted Marijuana Amnesty Program in October 2021 to greatly increase the number of marijuana-related cases reaching the Board of Pardons. The Board of Pardons is the first gate before reaching the governor's desk on the road to clemency in Pennsylvania, and they introduced an expedited review program for nonviolent marijuana-specific convictions in 2019. This program, which allows a qualifying case to be heard in less than a year rather than over two, is an important first step, especially in a state where recreational marijuana is still criminalized. At the same time, we also wanted to make sure that the people most targeted by the failed war on drugs are at the forefront of these initiatives because of its ongoing devastation in primarily Black and Brown neighborhoods here in Philly.

As an example, in a ten-year period ending in 2019, there were roughly 57,000 new convictions—saying nothing of the number of arrests—for marijuana-related offenses across Pennsylvania, and those numbers are still growing. Yet we also know that, until very recently, there were less than 100 people from Philadelphia with marijuana-related convictions

who had applied for a pardon in the last five years. PLSE's Marijuana Amnesty Program seeks to change that by reaching people where there is the greatest need so that pardons aren't something obtainable only to the historically advantaged, but rather a crucial component of racial and economic justice.

**Q:** Is there anything our readers can do to help U.S. citizens get the right to vote while incarcerated?

**AL:** This is such an important question! The laws vary state by state, but even in states like Pennsylvania, where incarcerated people are able to vote unless they are serving time for a felony, and where there are no other restrictions on voting even for those on probation or parole, there is a huge information and accessibility gap. So many people (1) don't know they even have the right to vote, or (2) don't know how to exercise their rights even if they know they have them, especially while incarcerated. I recommend connecting with local organizations doing this work on the ground, since they're going to be the experts on local laws and regulations to help people exercise their existing rights, and that work naturally makes connections to the national landscape and the movement to end felony disenfranchisement more generally.



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This is a paid sponsored content article from Green Thumb Industries.  
Andrea Lindsay, MSW, is the lead investigator and mitigation specialist at Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE). In addition to her research challenging Pennsylvania's felony murder rule and mandatory life sentences, she also directs PLSE's special projects.  
To find out more about PLSE, visit [plsephilly.org](http://plsephilly.org).

