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Pardons beneficial to workforce, communities

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I was honored to be a federal judge in Pennsylvania for 25 years. I recently retired, and one of the first things I did was to start helping people to get pardons.

You should, too. So should Pennsylvania's lawmakers.

In criminal cases where the government had obtained a conviction, my job as a judge was to impose a punishment that not only fit the crime, but also provided the potential for rehabilitation. We want people to learn from their mistakes so they won't commit another crime.

One of my proudest accomplishments from my career is helping to start the Court-Assisted Re-Entry program in federal court in Scranton. It helps to provide a good foundation to those returning home from prison and a good start to their lives as our new neighbors.

I continue to be involved in reentry efforts, but the sad truth is that "paying your debt" to society by completing a criminal justice sentence and reentry program is not enough. Even if someone coming out of prison does everything we urge them to do, the mere existence of a criminal record erects overwhelming barriers to success.

Once you have a criminal record, it's permanent and available for anyone to see on the internet in just three clicks. Surveys suggest that more 90% of all employers, 75% of banks, 60% of

landlords and all of Pennsylvania's state universities check the criminal records of applicants. There are hundreds of jobs where licensing boards consider criminal records when deciding whether someone can start a career. Many jobs that COVID-19 has proven are essential to us all – not just teaching but child care, elder care, home care, health care, any job involving routine interaction with children – require background checks where a conviction will mean the end of that opportunity, no matter the crime or how long ago it occurred.

The only way to erase a conviction from your record in Pennsylvania is by getting a pardon from the governor. You might think that's not a real option, especially if you don't have money or connections – but our state leads the nation in pardon reform. Today, more than 80% of the people who apply receive pardons, as long as they finished their sentences at least five years ago and their crimes did not involve sex or violence – and that's the case for the vast majority. The application is short, the process is free and you don't need a lawyer.

People all around the state are learning the pardon process and volunteering to help others apply. They do this where they worship, at their colleges and universities, through their service organizations and community nonprofits. Even employers offer to help as an employee benefit.

A study by the Economy League showed that in communities like ours people who received pardons increased their earnings by \$16.5 million, just by allowing them to compete for and get jobs for which they were qualified. That's why the study called pardons a “no-cost community investment and workforce development policy.”

As part of what a former federal prosecutor has called our “continuum of care,” I volunteer with dozens of other local citizens in the Pardon Project of Lackawanna County to improve the chances for successful reentry to our community. The time commitment for volunteers is minimal – a couple hours, max – but the return on investment is huge: helping to change the futures of people (and their families) who have turned their lives around and deserve redemption.

In fact, so many neighbors help neighbors these days that the Board of Pardons is flooded. They are about 1,000 applications behind and that backlog's growing. Why? Because they only have seven employees reading, checking and working on applications – the same number they had five years ago when they only got a couple hundred applications a year.

The Legislature can fix this logjam by giving the Board of Pardons a few more entry-level positions – a small investment when considering how much extra money pardoned people will make (and higher taxes they’ll pay). With a pardon, parents will be able to coach their child’s T-ball or soccer team, go on school trips and volunteer in their communities – all of which is impossible with a record.

Pardons are more than redemption. They release the potential to be a full participant in our community. That’s good for all of us.

Tom Vanaskie was a Judge of the United States District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania in Scranton for 16 years, including 7 as its Chief Judge, and was then appointed to the Third Circuit Court of Appeals where he served for more than 8 years before retiring.