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Pardon Me Impact Campaign; Second Report
January – June 2024

Back in the spring of 2020, we had a concept and a purpose, nothing else. Thanks to Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) and the new Secretary to the Board of Pardons (Brandon Flood), the pardon system in Pennsylvania was beginning to be reformed and opened up to people who were not its historic petitioners – professionals, predominantly white, with money and attorneys. No one knew anyone who had received a pardon in Pennsylvania, but if you were BIPOC, *everyone* knew a pardon was *not* for them.

Convicted of having caused an accidental death in a bar fight when he was 22 and now on parole, Shuja Moore had just joined The Enterprise Center, first handling their community engagement efforts, then managing business support along 52nd Street, the local business corridor – positions that would prove pivotal to the creation, four years later, of the West Philly Pardon Project. In his spare time, Shuja was an aspiring filmmaker who had started a series about individual transformation called *Walkies* and worked on the “treatment” for a documentary he was imagining about pardons. In June 2022, he made the bold decision to give up his salaried job and commit himself full time to become a filmmaker and use film to blend storytelling with community empowerment and activism.

The first backer of his idea was the Pardon Project Steering Committee (PPSC) – a group of low-income Philadelphians with lived experience in the Pennsylvania Criminal Justice System who were meeting regularly to discuss pardons and how they could be made more accessible to people like them. In October 2020, they agreed to contribute \$2,750 to it – almost half of the grant the PPSC had received from the Phoebus Criminal Justice Initiative of the Bread and Roses Community Fund. Now with funding for expenses and the support of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons (BOP), Shuja wrote and the BOP mailed a letter to several hundred pardon recipients, asking if they would be willing to tell their stories on film and serve as inspiration for others needing a second chance. Not one person responded. No surprise there: people with criminal records live with their heads down, and a pardon frees them to leave their past behind.

Fast forward to July 2024. His film, *Pardon Me*, is being screened in LA at its fifth film festival. The film has won several accolades (see Appendix One) including being a finalist for the

American Bar Association's prestigious Silver Gavel Awards for Media and the Arts "which recognize outstanding work that fosters the American public's understanding of law and the legal system." In just nine months, the film has been seen by over 3,000 people in Pennsylvania alone. As Shadd Maruna, President of the American Society of Criminologists (which had screened the film at its annual meeting in November), wrote: "Amazingly impressive. Consider the torch well lit for me and many others."

This report takes the film and its Impact Campaign forward by six months from the 90-Day Report issued in January.¹ The film would have languished at the end of that amazing experience but for the support of these major donors:

The Andrea W. and Kenneth C. Frazier Family Foundation
Kim and Tobey Oxholm
The Philadelphia Foundation
The Proteus Fund
Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity²

It is, of course, our hope that new donors will step forward to fund the second "Pardons4thePeople" screenings tour that will take the film back around the state with the intention of reaching the communities that need the hope that pardons provide.

The West Philly Pardon Network: *Pardon Me*'s Major, Unplanned Innovation

After having worked with countywide Pardon Projects all fall, Shuja Moore's personal commitment to his neighborhood, West Philadelphia, led him to decide to try to bring pardons to it in a way that hadn't been done yet in any other community. The initiative began in December with a meeting of business leaders Shuja knew, who discussed the prevalence of criminal convictions among their friends, neighbors, employees and customers. Skeptical that pardons were really "for them", they were energized by the idea of helping them get past their pasts. They and two elected officials from the neighborhood then invited civic and community leaders to a screening of *Pardon Me* at the Paul Robeson House (Appendix Two). The discussion that followed ended with the enthusiastic decision to try to create a "Pardon Project" for West Philadelphia. That was then followed by two information sessions taught by statewide Pardon Project Director Tobey Oxholm (who lived in West Philly) where organizations and individuals could see what it would mean to be a "Pardon Hub" (location providing pardon-related information) and a "Pardon Coach" (and individual trained to help others apply for a pardon).

What emerged is the [West Philly Pardon Network](#). Thanks to a leadership grant from The Bread and Roses Community Fund, the WPPN now has a coordinator who is responsible for activating the Pardon Hubs, responding to inquiries, connecting individuals with Coaches, monitoring the completion of applications, and ensuring a final review by a volunteer attorney before it is submitted. It is rapidly becoming a model that can empower any neighborhood, especially low-

¹<https://plsephilly.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Pardon-Me-90-day-report.pdf>

² The major donors who had contributed to the film and its first 90 days of traveling around the state are listed in the earlier report, and included: The Independence Foundation, Independence Public Media Fund Kim and Tobey Oxholm, Vanessa Starr, Victoria Connor, Paula Budnick, Glenn Barnes & Ruth Shaber, The Andrea W and Kenneth C Frazier Family Foundation, Bobby Bonds Memorial Foundation, York County Bar Foundation, and The Oxholm Family Fund.

income BIPOC communities, to “own” this issue of community oppression and lead to its economic transformation.³

Progress Report: The Five Goals of the Impact Campaign

Pardon Me was always intended to be more than just a good movie: it was intended to inspire and shape a public discussion across the state (and the nation) about criminal records and the harm they are causing, while inspiring those with criminal records to come forward and try to get their records erased. In September 2023 as the film was rapidly heading to its first screening, Shuja Moore and the Pardon Project Steering Committee – an organization of individuals with lived experience in the criminal justice system who are committed to making pardons accessible to low-income people – agreed on an “[Impact Plan](#)” for the film that set five very practical, very aggressive goals for the film to achieve by the end of 2024. None of the goals was within their control, but in nine months, there has been remarkable success.

1. Double the number of counties having volunteer Pardon Projects (from 15 to 30)

Thanks primarily to interest and enthusiasm generated by *Pardon Me*, four new countywide Pardon Projects are up and running: in Lancaster, Cumberland, Huntingdon, and Bedford. Discussions are currently far enough under way in nine counties to predict that the doubling goal may actually be within reach by the end of the year: Monroe, Adams, Schuylkill, Venango, Carbon, Elk, Cameron, Westmoreland, and Cambria.

2. Double the number of pardon applications (from 1,940 in 2022 to 4,000 by 2025)

In Calendar Year 2023, 2,173 pardon applications were submitted to the Board of Pardons (BOP) and, through June 2024, 1,093 pardon applications had been submitted. The Pardon Project does not claim that the increase is due solely to its efforts; but it is clear that the film and the attention pardons is now attracting from elected officials and a wide variety of community groups are resulting in people deciding to apply who would never have even thought about trying before.

3. Train 1,000 new Pardon Coaches to help people complete the pardon application

It is impossible to know just how many people have been trained as Pardon Coaches. That is because, once trained, organizations and individuals are training others. But during the period July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024, a total of 578 attorneys received continuing legal education credits in pardons law and practice. Perhaps the best news is that only 107 of those 578 were trained by Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity – which demonstrates that the topic has broad interest.

4. Cut in half the time from application to pardon (from 4 to 2 years), with at least 25% of all pardon applications receiving hearings within one year

Tragically, it is now taking the Board of Pardons one full year to go from “received” to “accepted and filed,” and the time between filing and the merit review has now *increased* to an astonishing *six years*. This is not because the number of applications has overwhelmed the staff. In fact, the Governor has added additional staff, and the office has been reducing the backlog (between “received” and “filed”). The delay is due to the reduced schedule of hearings that have

³The originality and creativity of this idea was highlighted in the June issue of the *Social Innovations Journal*, which is focused on “Innovations in Cross-Sector Collaborations: An Approach to Increase Ecosystem and Place-Based Impact.” <https://socialinnovationsjournal.com/index.php/sij/article/view/7771>

been held by the five-member Board of Pardons. This is a problem around which we hope to marshal statewide pressure on the Board to do its duty and not delay the applications of people who deserve a second chance.

5. Pass the following legislation:

- Automatic expungement of the record of any pardoned crime.

Achieved! The reform was signed into law on December 24, 2023, and went into effect on July 12, 2024.

- Protection for employers that hire people with criminal records.

In process. A bill has been written and a co-sponsorship memo is being circulated. Bipartisan support is expected.

- Prohibiting the use of a conviction to deny a state-awarded occupational license if the crime does not directly relate to the job, did not involve violence and the sentence was completed more than seven years ago.

Achieved! The look-back period will actually be five years in the new regulations, which have been approved by the Bureau of Professional and Occupational Licenses and by the Independent Regulatory Review Commission, and are now awaiting approval by the General Assembly.

A New Outreach Approach: Trade Associations and Umbrella Organizations

The initial approach to sharing the film and reaching the Impact goals was to work with and through the Pardon Projects that had been created across the state by Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity. While that approach continued for the first half of 2024 (see Appendix Three), a second approach was also developed and pursued: working through organizations whose missions dovetailed with criminal record elimination.

- **Pennsylvania's Department of Labor and Industry and its Workforce Development programs (including CareerLinks) across the state**, where the effort included:
 - Screening the film for the Reentry Committee of the PA Workforce Development Board, followed by a discussion focused on how pardons fit so easily into the work of workforce development professionals.
 - Screening the film and presenting a panel discussion about pardons at the statewide Annual Conference of the PA Workforce Development Association
 - Creating a one-hour program about pardons and how to integrate Pardon Coaching into their existing programs for EDSI (the major CareerLink provider) to use everywhere in the country
 - Presenting to Southern Alleghenies Workforce Development Association – the Regional Professional Development Training consortium in the Southern Alleghenies Workforce Region, covering Somerset, Cambria, Bedford, Blair, Huntingdon and Fulton Counties
 - Connecting CareerLinks regional offices to developing Pardon Projects in Erie and Luzerne Counties, and encouraging CareerLinks to take the lead in developing Projects in very rural Schuylkill, Elk, Cameron, and Bedford Counties

- **The General Assembly**
 - Screening with the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus which has allowed us to begin fostering a long-term relationship with representatives across the state
 - State Rep. Jordan Harris, long a champion of second chances in Pennsylvania and the architect of the Clean Slate legislation and Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, is working to include funding for Pardon Project coordinators in the state's FY25 budget.
 - State Rep. Tim Briggs of Montgomery County proposed the idea of state funding, and, as Chair of the House Judiciary Committee, will be critically important when matters affecting pardons come to the General Assembly
 - State Senator Camera Bartolotta, a co-founder of the very successful Pardon Project of Washington County, has agreed to sponsor legislation that would grant immunity from "wrongful hire" claims to employers that, like good Samaritans, step up and hire qualified people despite their criminal records
 - State Rep. Ismail Smith-Wade-El of Lancaster County is now sponsoring community criminal record events almost weekly in partnership with the Pardon Project of Lancaster County
 - State Rep. Patty Kim, a long-time advocate of record clearing, is now leading the effort to create a Pardon Project in Dauphin County
 - State Rep. Jesse Topper is now working to help create a Pardon Project of Bedford County
- **County Commissioners and Executives.** The Pardon Project of Lehigh County became the first to be supported in the budget of its host county, thanks to the vision and leadership of County Executive Phil Anderson, District Attorney Gavin Holihan and Public Defender Kim Makoul. As of this writing, Allegheny County is positioned to become the second. Thanks to the support of Mayor Paige Cognetti, funding for the Pardon Project of Lackawanna County is in the budget of the City of Scranton.
- **Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and its Criminal Justice Advisory Boards (CJAB).** In Pennsylvania, CJABs are local planning and problem-solving groups comprised of top-level county officials. The film and a panel of experts were showcased at its 2024 Annual Conference, the theme of which was "An Evolving Justice System: Adapting and Navigating New Directions."

An Example of *Pardon Me*'s Impact: PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

One of the people who attended the screening of *Pardon Me* at the CJAB conference in State College on April 10 was Samantha Cossman. She is Regional Program Outreach Coordinator for Central PA, in the Bureau of Veterans Programs, Initiatives, Reintegration, and Outreach of the PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. In her words, she was "blown away" by the film. The very next day, she "reached out to have a TEAMS meeting with me and my coworkers here in region 3/central PA so we can learn more about The Pardon Project." The next day (April 12), she wrote to all of her colleagues scheduling the meeting, and saying

We know that veterans and other military-affiliated individuals are no exception to involvement in the criminal justice system or from experiencing the after-effects of a criminal record after having served their sentence. A felony record impacts one's

access to so many areas of society including but not limited to housing, employment, travel, participation at a child's school functions, etc. etc. etc.

There was such interest that she ended up inviting colleagues from all 5 Regional Program Outreach Coordinator staffs. There were over two dozen people in that meeting which was held on April 29. Immediately after the program, she wrote:

I kept the team on after everyone else signed off because I wanted their opinions on whether a presentation would be good for the DMVA Open Forum. This is a weekly virtual meeting (TEAMS) where accredited Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) from all over the commonwealth receive education and training on topics they need for their role. They all agreed that this would be a wonderful topic, and with some of them being VSOs themselves and having previously worked in County VA Offices, they hoped you would consider presenting.

Brian Natali, Chief, Division of Veterans Services and Programs, connected with us the very next day (April 30), and asked us to present to his statewide group on May 13, which we did. This time 58 VSOs participated in the training, from all parts of the state; and the presentation was recorded so that it could be shared at any time. To date, we have received follow-up communications from four different DMVA regions asking for help in establishing pardon-related services.

Coming Up

We have several specific initiatives already underway that will be realized over the next three months:

- Convening the existing and emerging leaders of the Pardon Project Steering Committee from around the state for a Leadership Summit in Harrisburg. Made possible by a grant from The Independence Foundation, the event is bringing together 22 leaders from 17 counties and will result not only in the creation of a strong leadership team, but a shared vision of the projects and priorities that the PPSC will have over the coming years. The use of *Pardon Me* is key to its outreach and organizing strategies.
- Screening *Pardon Me* to the faculty, staff and students in the Community Nursing Program at the University of Pennsylvania's College of Nursing and training them to be Pardon Coaches so that they can integrate that sensitivity and service into their clinical education. We are eager for this to occur as it holds promise for spreading criminal record awareness to other graduate medical education programs.
- Creating a Discussion Guide to go along with the film. This is being authored by professors at Kutztown University primarily for use with undergraduate students so that they can appreciate the stigma and resulting discrimination that involvement with the criminal justice system has and the generational implications for families and communities

For the final phase, we look to establish long-term sustainability - financial as well as human capital - of the Pardon Project network and all Pardon Hubs. We hope to have copies of *Pardon Me* out in communities all across the state, being shown regularly to audiences who need the hope and those who can be inspired to help provide it. We also hope to help create a statewide reporting system that tracks submissions and processing time, and, over time, can monitor the impacts pardons have on communities across Pennsylvania. While each Hub and each Project is

independent, their experiences will become the data by which to prove legitimacy and impact that is necessary for funding from organizations such as the United Way and the legislature.

Pardon Me has been called “the best organizing tool imaginable.” Our goal at the end of this campaign is to have a long-lasting coalition of people, organizations and elected officials that appreciate pardons as a community-investment strategy and not charity for a chosen few. More than that, our goal is to have elected officials advocating for changes in the laws, rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures that currently allow - and in many cases require - discrimination against people with criminal history records.

Appendix One:

Awards and Recognitions for Shuja Moore and *Pardon Me*

1. *Winner of Excellence*, Impact DOCS
2. *Winner of Excellence*, IndieFEST Film Awards
3. *Best Short Film*, Justice on Trial Film Festival
4. *Best Short Documentary*, Northeast Pennsylvania Film Festival
5. *Immaculate Heart Community Filmmaker Award*, LA Shorts International Film Festival
6. *Community Service Award*, American Society of Criminology’s Division on People of Color and Crime
7. *Second Place Social Innovator - Workforce and Economic Development*, Social Innovations Journal
8. *Third Place, Silver Gavel Awards*, American Bar Association

Appendix Two: The West Philly Pardon Network



The flyer features a collage of three circular images: a gas station sign for '52', a street scene with a McDonald's, and a group of people's hands joined together. The text 'West Philadelphia Pardon Network' is at the top right. A quote by Paul Robeson is in a box: 'To be free... to walk the good American earth as equal citizens, to live without fear, to enjoy the fruits of our toil, to give our children every opportunity in life- that dream which we have held so long in our hearts is today the destiny that we hold in our hands.' Below the quote is the slogan 'IT'S TIME FOR US TO BE FREE!' and 'EASY ✨ FREE ✨ NO LAWYER NEEDED'. To the right, three points are listed with right-pointing arrows: 'So many of us in West Philly have a Pennsylvania criminal conviction in our past.', 'These convictions are holding ALL of us back. But, there is something WE can do about it. APPLY for a pardon today!', and 'All most people need is to have completed your sentence more than five years ago with no more arrests or convictions.'

GET STARTED NOW

Scan the QR code or type the link below in a web browser to search our community resources.



<https://shorturl.at/auEHS>



VISIT:

www.PardonMePA.org/westphilly

EMAIL US:

pardonmewestphilly@gmail.com

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Appendix Three: *Pardon Me* Events and Successes, Jan-June 2024

January

- 2024 began with *Pardon Me* headlining the effort to bring new life to the Pardon Project of Lancaster County. Receiving the backing of State Rep. Smith-Wade-El, the community record clearing event received 35 sign-ups and over 100 people showed up. The Representative was so impressed that he is now sponsoring one *per week* in his district. For its part, the Pardon Project developed a new model that does not assign Pardon Coaches to individuals, but schedules Pardon Coaches to attend the events and has the clients return for face-to-face coaching.
- The film was also shown to the staff of the Institute for Community Justice (ICJ). In February, the staff received Pardon Coach training. Now, ICJ has become its own Pardon Hub, providing pardon services directly to its own clients with back-up assistance whenever needed from PLSE. This has become the model for creating other Pardon Hubs, regardless of whether there is a Pardon Project in their county.

February

- In February, Penn State Dickinson School of Law and the Cumberland County Bar Association screened the film, hosted a panel discussion, and began the Pardon Project of Cumberland County.
- On February 14, the Paul Robeson House in West Philadelphia hosted a screening of the film for business and civic leaders. Discussion following the film led to the decision to form the West Philly Pardon Network, discussed below.
- Temple University in Philadelphia became the fifth undergraduate institution to host a screening of the film. Students are now working with faculty to see if they can create a club by which students can offer pardon-related services to people living in the university's North Philadelphia community.

March

- In March, the film led to discussions with representatives in Dauphin, Adams, and Schuylkill Counties, a second training for coaches in Luzerne County,
- The Pardon Project of Luzerne County held its second Pardon Coach training program, following up on the screening event that had been held in October.

April

- On April 17, the Pardon Project of Huntingdon County held a screening of *Pardon Me* and opened its doors to clients.
- In April, discussions about forming Pardon Projects started in Venango

May

- The Cumberland County Public Defender's Office screened the film, received Pardon Coach training, and started a new program by which it would seek waiver of indigent pardon clients' unpaid fines, fees and expenses – a first in the state

- Civic leaders in Bedford County got together to watch the film and discuss forming a Pardon Project there.
- Discussions began about forming a Pardon Project in Carbon County

June

- Having seen the film, the leader of a multi-county program met to discuss forming a Pardon Project to cover two very rural counties: Elk and Cameron. When launched in the fall, this will be the first to cover two counties.
- Bedford County volunteers received Pardon Coach training and opened the Pardon Project of Bedford County
- Discussions began about forming a Pardon Project in Westmoreland and Cambria Counties.