

Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity Selected for Pennsylvania Bar Foundation Goffman Award for Pro Bono Service

HARRISBURG, Pa. (May 13, 2024) – The Pennsylvania Bar Foundation presented its 2024 Louis J. Goffman Award to [Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity](#) (PLSE) in recognition of its Pardon Project on May 9 during the [Pennsylvania Bar Association Annual Meeting](#) in Hershey.

The Goffman Award is named for a late Pennsylvania Bar Association president and recognizes individuals and organizations committed to outstanding pro bono service.

PLSE, a nonprofit legal aid organization founded in 2010, provides free legal advice and representation to low-income Philadelphia residents who have experienced the Pennsylvania criminal justice system. Through individual representation, strategic litigation, community education, research and legislative support, PLSE advocates for a more equitable social environment for those with criminal records. It seeks expungements in criminal court and pardons from the governor; educates community leaders; empowers under-resourced communities; and leads legislative, administrative and systemic reform.



PBA President Mike McDonald (left), joins Wesley R. Payne IV, Chair of the Goffman Award Committee (right) in presenting the Award to members of the Pardon Project Steering Committee (from left) Angel Fox (Dauphin County), Mary Hoskins (Lancaster County), Paula Budnick (Secretary), Anna Joyner (Allegheny County), and Tobey Oxholm (Philadelphia County)

Through the pro bono work of lawyers and law students, and help from community partnerships, the PLSE Pardon Project strives to clear the criminal records of clients who have obtained expungements and have had an extended period of no new convictions.

This effort also aims to remove the barriers for individuals seeking jobs, education, housing, credit and other opportunities. PLSE created a network of “pardon hubs” throughout Philadelphia where individuals can access information and get assistance. It also developed a free pardon coach toolkit to train volunteers. Its documentary *Pardon Me* shares the stories of two people who have navigated the pardon process, defines what a pardon is and outlines the steps involved with granting a pardon in Pennsylvania.

Remarks of Wesley R. Payne
Presenting the 2024 Louis J. Goffman Award
To Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity for its Pardon Project

Good afternoon, all. Since 1989, the Louis J. Goffman Awards have rewarded exceptional people and organizations whose commitments to pro bono have enhanced the delivery of legal services to Pennsylvanians, making a critical difference in the lives of those in need of legal representation, who could not otherwise afford it.

The Goffman family’s original intent in bestowing this gift in memory to Louis Goffman is to recognize those who can be an inspiration and as a model emulated by other legal professionals and organizations. The work of PLSE affords the Foundation the opportunity to honor the memory of Louis Goffman and his zealous support of the cause of pro bono.

I have the honor of thanking two more warriors for justice, and of presenting to them the Louis J. Goffman Award for having created an exemplary pro bono program. The organization we honor today is Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE). Those of you who’ve been coming to these luncheons for a while will remember that we presented PLSE with the Goffman Award back in 2017 for its single-minded focus on criminal records and how those records continued to hurt low-income people years and years after they completed their sentences. Back then, PLSE was filing more expungement petitions than any other organization in the country, helping almost 800 indigent clients a year. It’s still doing that today for almost 3,000 low-income Philadelphians a year.

Courts can only expunge convictions for misdemeanors and felonies if the Governor has first signed a pardon. As you’ve heard, the pardon application form was greatly simplified starting in 2019. That made it possible for attorneys who don’t practice criminal law to help, and that allowed PLSE to start recruiting and training pro bono lawyers. Today over two dozen law firms and corporate law departments are helping low-income Philadelphians apply for pardons. In 2023, PLSE submitted 516 applications, and they’ve already submitted another 208 this year.

But PLSE did not stop with Philadelphia. The new technology of zoom made it possible to teach remotely, so long-time pro bono advocate Tobey Oxholm started hosting pardon brainstorming meetings around the state. They started in Allegheny County with the leadership of President Judge Kim Clark. Then in Lackawanna County with the leadership of IOLTA Board member Joe Price. Then Lancaster County and the leadership of PBA Past President Sharon Lopez. Then York County with the leadership of Bar Executive Victoria Connor. Today, lawyers are volunteering with Pardon Projects in 21 counties, with another 10 counties on the rise.

In each county, PLSE was careful to make sure that client voices were at the table, being heard. So another Warrior for Justice I am honored to introduce to you today is Paula Budnick. After receiving her pardon in 2018, she saw the opportunity to help others. She joined PLSE, appeared in videos encouraging others to apply, helped form the Pardon Project Steering Committee and today serves as its Secretary. She volunteers an enormous amount of her time every week to give information and hope to people all around the state. Paula, you are someone who, like Pam, has never been recognized for your public service and your contributions to our justice system. And I am proud to be the first to do so.

Paula and Tobey, please come forward and accept the Louis J. Goffman Award for having led PLSE in creating an exemplary volunteer program, the Pardon Project.

Remarks of Paula Budnick upon accepting the Goffman Award on behalf of PLSE and the Pardon Project

Thank you, President Wes Payne, for your presentation. I thank you on behalf of the Pardon Project and Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity. The impressive nomination letters highlighted our achievements. Whew!



I, too, am a pardon recipient. Dare I say, I was recommended for a pardon the “old-fashioned way” on September 20, 2017. The application process was exhaustive, the counsel regrettably expensive, the wait interminable, the Capitol chambers majestic, the hearing intimidating. The Pardon Project, formed in 2018, made up of volunteers with lived experience, set out to change all of that.... Eating cold pizza, drinking high-caloric soda, we embraced our potential as change agents.

Thanks Carla Hagy and Steve Burk for connecting us to Tobey [Oxholm]. If anyone knows Tobey a brilliant visionary, master collaborator, mediator by trade and instinct, and a tireless leader, he refuses to take credit. He had a vision and we have our voice!

We’ve been so busy “doing” the work, there’s no time to list our accomplishments. For resources, visit our website. Become a Pardon Coach/attend a virtual pardon application training. Schedule a screening of the award-winning film Pardon Me produced and directed by our colleague Shuja Moore. The prospect of a second chance IS attainable. Help IS available!

Speaking of help, I wish I had known about pro bono assistance YOU can make all the difference: helping someone submit their application can change the trajectory of their future.

The members of the Pardon Project have proven that we are much better at doing the work than accepting accolades for it. However, in the humble spirit of Louis Goffman, take it as a call to action to emulate his career. I received my signed pardon in 2018. Time is of the essence.

Thank you for this honor.

Paula Budnick
Secretary, Pardon Project Steering Committee
www.plsephilly.org/ppsc