

Section 5: OPTIONAL Personal Statement (Supplement)

If you decide to include a personal statement, it **may** include:

- ✓ A summary of how your life or circumstances have changed since your last arrest
- ✓ Reasons you seek clemency
- ✓ Reasons you feel you are a good candidate for consideration
- ✓ Information you feel supports your request

In September 2006, a doctor prescribed me an opioid painkiller after I was injured in a motorcycle accident. I developed a dependence on the medication and, when my prescription ended, I found other ways to buy what I needed to make me feel better. I started using Percocet and also benzodiazepines. As a result, my life quickly spun out of control. While my actions never physically hurt anyone—thank God—I committed several crimes during my addiction, including shooting at a car in anger at my girlfriend (Case #1), operating a motor vehicle under the influence (Case #2), being in possession of a controlled substance (Case #3), and stealing so I could eat and so I could buy more drugs (Case #4).

My last arrest was on September 8, 2011. I was shoplifting at Shoprite under the influence of opioids and benzodiazepines. In the eight years since, I turned my life around. I am clean, sober, and on track -- and I'm proud of who I've become. I now work for Mental Health Partnerships; have won awards for my advocacy on behalf of individuals struggling with opioid addiction, mental health conditions, and/or homelessness; and am halfway through my coursework at Widener University, where I am taking graduate classes in social work. I am on track to graduate in December 2020, and am now asking for a pardon so that I can put my Master's of Social Work degree into practice and continue to help others.

Unfortunately, my felony conviction prevents me from reaching my long-term goals: Becoming a hospital-based Clinical Social Worker and teaching at a local college or university. My felony prevents me from being both, as a person with a felony conviction, I am viewed as risk or liability to the hospital, college or University. I am seeking clemency so that the mistakes of my youth do not disqualify me from reaching my full potential in life, and to role-model to others that if you can change the trajectory and set educational, family, and community involvement goals, not only do you improve yourself but you improve the community and the world.

It was in September 2011, while I was alone in a dark jail cell at the House of Corrections going through withdrawal, that I had my awakening. I decided to improve my life, which to me meant that I needed to begin my lifelong transformation. At my request, I was assigned to an intensive housing unit that, which provided me access to the Opportunity for Prevention and Treatment Interventions for Offenders Needing Support. I also sought employment and was assigned to become the assistant to the Chaplain at the House of Corrections. I was dedicated to my substance-use disorder recovery but was worried about how things would turn out following my release from this controlled environment.

The first treatment plan that I co-developed along with a social worker consisted of making amends to those whom I had wronged during my addiction, paying off all costs and fines, and completing Probation and Parole; and I ended up doing all of that. But, most importantly, I wanted to go back to school, earn a High School Equivalency Certificate, build a healthy relationship with my children and family, and complete SUD treatment and maintain my sobriety. I succeeded in doing these things too.

In January of 2012, I was released and started to go SUD treatment four times a week. I also immediately enrolled in a GED program. While I was working on my G.E.D., I began to volunteer my time at the Philadelphia Recovery Community Center (P.R.C.C.). During my time at the P.R.C.C., I created a program for Spanish-speaking Latinos in

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██████████ Statement, page 2)

Recovery where we continue to provide peer-to-peer self-support groups and partner with local Philadelphia SUD treatment providers to offer this free service to the Latinx community. This made me want to continue to gain training and education to further develop opportunities and resources for Philadelphians experiencing substance use disorder, etc.

On December 12, 2012, my hard work and dedication paid off: I obtained my High School Equivalency Certificate, and on that same day I married my wife, ██████████. We are still married, she supports me in all that I do, and together we are raising five wonderful children, two from my former relationship. But I was not done with school, improving myself, or contributing back to my community. I enrolled in the Community College of Philadelphia, where I majored in Behavioral Health and Human Services and completed the City of Philadelphia's Peer Specialist program. The purpose of a Certified Peer Specialist is to support others in their recovery process. While at CCP, I accepted a part-time position with the Philadelphia Recovery Community Center (C.R.S.), for which I was trained and certified through the Pennsylvania Certification Board (P.C.B.). I excelled both in school and at work, which led to a promotion to a full-time staff member and a salary increase.

On June 25, 2015, I graduate from CCP with an Associate Degree in Behavioral Health in Human Services, with a certificate in Recovery and Transformation, both of which I earned with highest honors. I had already been thinking about my next educational goal, and so I enrolled at Eastern University's adult learning program, and I majored in Organizational Leadership. In 2017, I earned a Bachelor's Degree from Eastern University with honors, which has allowed me to enroll in a Master's of Social Work Program at Widener University, where I am maintaining a 4.0 average and am on track to graduate in December 2020.

My education led me to get involved in advocacy to help advance the way we look at and treat SUD, mental health conditions, and people with criminal justice involvement. My children, family, community, colleagues, and those in need of services were a motivating factor in my life to continue to achieve for the greater good of our society. I became, and continue to be, involved with numerous organizations, as a person with lived experience and in my capacity as a Program Manager for Homeless Peer Services at Mental Health Partnerships. Since my release in 2012, I have been an active member of my community and have been dedicated to serving those who are most marginalized in our community.

It has been a great honor for me to be recognized for my advocacy and have an opportunity to share my personal story. In particular, I was honored to be selected to work with governmental groups such as Philadelphia Mayor's Task Force to Combat the Opioid Epidemic, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

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Statement, page 3)

National Recovery Month Planning Partner, and Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services Peer Culture Transformation Advisory Board. As well as with nonprofit groups such as being chosen to serve on the Pathways to Housing PA Board or as a partner for Independence Blue Cross Foundation's Someone You Know Public Awareness Campaign.

It has been a privilege to have had my advocacy featured in news outlets including WHYY, ABC6, BillPenn, and Philadelphia Magazine. I have received a number of recognitions, awards, and commendations, including from Attorney General Josh Shapiro, for my work in saving a life in the community through the use of Naloxone in August of 2019.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to inspire others with my substance use disorder recovery story and to be able to help others in their journeys toward recovery. I am excited to continue and expand on this work but have gotten to a place where my status as a convicted felon has become a ceiling. As a person with lived experience, I bring a unique perspective to policy and advocacy conversations about SUD, mental health, criminal justice involvement, and homelessness. That includes how these issues impact not only the individual but the person's family, friends, school, economic class, and community. I bring value that is too often ignored because in the eyes of many people, having a felony on my record will be the only thing they see, not what I have done since then. A pardon says something entirely different to them: It means that I am worth their time to listen to.

Additionally, I want to continue to be a role model to people experiencing SUD, mental health conditions, and poverty; I want to be an example of what is possible and what can be achieved by following a productive and fulfilling life of purpose past SUD and criminal justice involvement.

A full Governor's Pardon will allow me to achieve my goals. With a full pardon I will become employable in a hospital setting, be able to teach at a local college or university, which will enable me to reduce the stigma associated with people in recovery from homelessness, SUD, mental health conditions, and criminal justice involvement, as well as provide hope by being the face, voice, and evidence that recovery is possible, while dispelling the myth that an ex-offender does not have much to offer society.

I thank you in advance for your consideration of my request.

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