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Editorial: New pardon program is good news for Berks

Helping the incarcerated transition to a successful life in freedom benefits us all.



BCPS Co-Executive Director Nicole Schnovel speaks during the press conference. Standing on either side of her are from left are, Brandon Flood, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, PA State Senator Judy Schwank, and Berks County District Attorney John Adams. During a press conference at Berks Connections Pretrial Services to announce the start of the Pardon Project of Berks County November 1, 2021. (BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE)

By **MARK NEMIROW** | mnemirow@readingeagle.com | Reading Eagle
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In these divisive times, there is one area where people of all political persuasions should agree: People exiting the criminal justice system need opportunities to succeed.

Consider that even amid all the political fighting that took place during President Donald Trump's term, the administration and a strong bipartisan majority in Congress pushed through the First Step Act, a criminal justice reform measure that aimed to make federal sentencing more fair and focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Local efforts to help ex-convicts transition to normal life have been going on for years, largely thanks to the work of Berks Connections/Pretrial Services, or BCPS. The organization provides job training and other important services aimed at helping clients and their families.

Now the people involved in this vital work have a new tool to help people move on from their troubled past.

Berks County has begun a program designed to allow those with past convictions to receive help in obtaining a pardon from the state. The Berks County Pardon Project is connecting pardon applicants with local volunteers who help guide them through the complicated process of attempting to have their convictions erased from their records.

The program is open to those who have completed their sentences and stayed clear of criminal behavior since their convictions, officials said.

BCPS is leading the program, which was established with key support from state Sen. Judy Schwank and Berks court officials, including District Attorney John T. Adams.

"One mistake has the potential to haunt you for the rest of your life," Schwank said during the recent announcement of the program. She said there are many in Berks who get rejected for things like jobs, apartment rentals and home mortgages because of convictions for which they long ago served their time.

The new program will help many of them finally get on track, she said.

As Adams noted, a pardon can serve as both a motivator and a reward for people who have turned their lives around.

"We should give forgiveness to those who are deserving," Adams said. "It's the right thing to do."



Counties across the state are enacting such programs, according to Pennsylvania Board of Pardons Secretary Brandon Flood, who said they programs greatly increase the chances of applicants getting approved. He noted that pardon applicants have a much lower rate of repeat offenses than others with convictions.

In Berks the project will start with a fairly small group of applicants and coaches to ensure it is being run smoothly before expanding early in 2022. There are 10 applicants enrolled and 11 coaches registered, according to BCPS Co-Executive Director Nicole Schnovel.

Of course there are limitations on who can apply. Those who have committed sex crimes, have open or pending criminal cases or have not served their full sentences are ineligible. Those with alcohol, drug or mental health issues must show they are committed to treatment and counseling.

We agree with Schnovel that it's wrong for so many in Pennsylvania to be limited by the crimes they committed years or decades ago, and that the Pardon Project should be an effective way to help fix that.

"This is a life-changing opportunity to finally break free of past mistakes," she said.

Ultimately that's what this is all about. The vast majority of offenders are not going to stay in jail forever. At some point they will be back among the rest of us. It's in everyone's interest to ensure that they can be productive members of society. Making sure their conviction doesn't burden them for the rest of their lives is a good place to start.



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