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Pardons, for the good of us all

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With all the news coming out of Washington about January 6 and people who tried to get pardons, or didn't, you might have missed some incredibly important news from Harrisburg: Governor Wolf just signed his 2,000th pardon. This is the most of any Governor in Pennsylvania history, and probably the most of any Governor in the country.

So why is that such good news?

By day I am an attorney working at the CGA Law Firm, where most of my practice is helping families and small businesses work through their financial problems by debt restructuring or bankruptcy. What I do is to give second chances to people and their businesses, people that are fundamentally good but have made some wrong choices and have fallen into economic trouble. I am also the Solicitor for Manchester Township, where I have lived for over 40 years and where I served as a Township Supervisor for ten of those years. In that capacity, I helped my community avoid problems and get the best goods and services they can out of the tax dollars it has to spend.

For people who have been convicted of a crime, that is what a pardon is all about: it gives people a second chance by allowing them to do better things for themselves and their families. It also restores to their communities a productive citizen who can contribute to society in a meaningful way.

In Pennsylvania, pardons are only given to people who have already fully served their sentences for the crimes they committed. They have completed whatever probation or rehabilitation was imposed upon them by the courts. They have all "repaid their debt to society" and have been living without any government supervision for anywhere from 5 years on up. Many of these offenders were under the age of 25 when they committed their crimes, and most are now older members of society with families to support, but their past holds them back.

How? A criminal record is available in just 3 clicks over the internet. Those records are used every day as a reason to deny people housing, loans, financial aid for education, entry into apprenticeship programs, licenses, jobs, and promotions. Pardons forgive the past and give people a clean record.

But there's more to it than just helping the individuals. Pardons help all of us.

A recent study showed that pardons bring millions of dollars into communities all across the state, just by letting people get jobs they are qualified for. Criminal records can stop communities from filling jobs that are critical to all of us: jobs in child care, elder care, home care, health care, and almost any job involving "routine interaction with children." They can end your chances for a commercial driving license, so you cannot operate a truck, bus, or snowplow. No matter how many years or decades ago it was, a conviction can make it impossible to coach your child's t-ball or soccer team, go on a field trip with other parents, or volunteer in your community.

What sense does it make for us to keep punishing people this way, once they've finished the punishment that a judge decided fit their crime? Why wouldn't we want them to get back to work, providing for themselves and their families as best they can? Why keep them down, where they might see no other choice than commit another crime?

Pardons have gotten a bad name these last few years because of Washington ... but so have lots of things.

Here in Pennsylvania, there's no question that pardons are doing good. That's why I am so pleased to be part of the group forming the Pardon Project of York County, where neighbors will be trained to help neighbors apply for pardons. Our District Attorney is helping, too, and he estimates that we have thousands of people in our county who have earned the opportunity for a second chance. When we open our doors and start asking for volunteers, we hope you'll step up and answer that call.

Pardons release potential. And we all benefit from that.

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