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## ‘Pardon Me’ documentary aims to raise awareness about Pennsylvania’s pardon process

Many people convicted of non-violent crimes face years of discrimination long after they’ve served their sentence

By: [Christina Baker](#) - October 26, 2023 5:30 am



(Getty Images)

Vickie Rice was convicted on a drug charge in 2005, and sentenced to three months of house arrest, three years of intensive probation and 70 hours of community service.

The York County resident completed her sentence 18 years ago, but her criminal record prevented her from getting a job in human services, the field where she worked for 25 years.

This month, she learned she was eligible for a pardon, at a [screening](#) of the documentary “Pardon Me,” from the Pardon Project of York County and York County Bar Association.

Reaching people like Rice was the Pardon Project’s goal.

“I’m not the same person as I was on January 5, 2005,” Rice said in an interview after the screening. “I’ve paid my debt to society and I’m ready to be free.”

A pardon can remove the “civil disabilities” that come with a criminal conviction. Those with convictions on their records [face discrimination](#) in employment, housing and healthcare settings, and are barred from travel, gun ownership and volunteering with children.

Pardons have quietly become a leading method of criminal justice reform across the Keystone State, through a wave of nonprofit work and policy changes that have made pardons an attainable goal for millions of Pennsylvanians with criminal records.

The Pennsylvania Pardon Project has seen all of these changes. When Tobey Oxholm and the Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity founded the project in 2018, it cost \$100 just to start a pardon application — submitting the application cost another fee. The form was nine pages with 14 pages of instructions, Oxholm said, “written in eloquent bureaucrat.”

Applicants needed to obtain and provide records from several different state agencies for the application, then still more documents when they were interviewed by probation and parole officers. The process basically necessitated a lawyer, Oxholm said.

Around 86% of people who paid for applications never even made it to a hearing before the five-person Board of Pardons that recommends pardons to the governor Oxholm said, of those who received hearings, around half got a recommendation.

### **A shift on the board**

When John Fetterman was elected lieutenant governor and took control of the Board of Pardons in 2018, the board adopted a new form, which is just five pages, and [available for free online](#). The board’s attitude began to change too, according to Suzanne Smith, a lawyer who has been working with pardons for nearly 20 years.

“It seemed like when I first started, the board was really looking for a reason to not grant a pardon,” Smith said.

Now, more than 85% of people who get a hearing before the board receive a pardon, according to the [board’s data](#). The number of applicants has increased too, as pardon projects like Oxholm’s have grown. “It seems like they’re realizing some of these minor charges don’t need to be on somebody’s record for 30 years,” Smith said.

There are now 22 Pardon Projects in counties across the state, which help people complete applications, navigate the pardon process and coach them for their hearings. York’s pardon project began last year, as an offshoot of reentry nonprofit The Program, It’s About Change.

Many of the York Pardon Project’s partners were part of the documentary screening Rice attended; the York County Bar Association, which helps the project run legal clinics; the clerk of courts, which helps the project access documents needed for the application; and the York County District Attorney, which lets the Pardon Project know whether they will recommend applicants to the pardon board.

York’s services for pardon-seekers are unusually robust, Smith said, a sign that even conservative areas like York have embraced pardons as a method of economic stimulus and criminal justice reform.

### **Pro-reentry and pro-redemption**

York District Attorney Dave Sunday described his approach to pardons as “pro-reentry” and “pro-redemption,” and noted that pardons lower the likelihood of recidivism.

“Ninety-five percent of everyone that goes in [to prison] is coming back out, and we want them to not commit more crimes,” Sunday said. “We want them to work, we want to reunite families, and that makes our community safer and healthier.”

Sunday said his office doesn’t approve pardons for convictions that involved death, sexual assault or serious bodily injury, or in cases where the victim was a child or elderly. Sunday and the Board of Pardons also consider how much time has elapsed since the conviction and whether the applicant takes responsibility for the crime.

Pardons have also become a way to potentially stimulate the economy. A 2020 [study from the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia](#) found that the Pennsylvanians pardoned from 2008 to 2018 earned \$16 million in additional income. In his remarks at the documentary screening in York, Kevin Schreiber, president of the York County Economic Alliance, said granting pardons lowers unemployment and helps lift people out of poverty. He referenced [a study](#) from Northwestern University which found people whose criminal records were expunged had unemployment rates 10% lower than other people with criminal convictions.

But as support and the number of pardons has increased, so has the wait time. A backlog has amassed, and applicants can wait for up to four years for a pardon. None of the York Pardon Project’s applicants have received a pardon yet.

And most people who are eligible for pardons don’t realize it, Oxholm said. The documentary screening where Vickie Rice learned she was eligible for a pardon will be holding screenings across the state to raise awareness, with one [scheduled Thursday](#) at the University of Pittsburgh.

DaShawn Harrison, the pardon fellow for the York Pardon Project, said pardons provide hope and the promise of a fresh start. He knows this firsthand.

Harrison began working with The Program, It’s About Change when he needed housing after being released from prison. He hasn’t yet applied for a pardon, he says, because his parole ended so recently that he would likely be denied.

“I have yet to receive a pardon, I can’t even apply for a pardon. And yet my full-time job is helping people apply for pardons,” Harrison said in his remarks at the documentary screening. “Which I love, don’t get me wrong. I absolutely love it. Because it gives me hope that when it is my turn, I can get one.”

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