

**Carlisle**

## **Cumberland County project launches to increase state-level pardon access**

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The Cumberland County Bar Association held a screening of the documentary “Pardon Me,” followed by a panel discussion at Penn State Dickinson Law in Carlisle Thursday afternoon. The documentary examines how pardons can affect lower-income communities by allowing people with criminal records to live as full citizens

On Thursday afternoon, Laurie Besden walked onto the stage at Penn State Dickinson Law in Carlisle and took a seat next to the man who saved her life.

A licensed attorney in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, her story includes a battle with substance abuse that stemmed from a car crash during law school. Between 2002 and 2004, Besden was arrested five times, caused 29 car crashes, received three prison sentences and entered three rehabilitation centers.

The day of her last arrest Jan. 29, 2004, became her sobriety date, and the same year, Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas Judge William R. Carpenter sentenced her to 11.5 months in prison.

“He just literally saved my life,” Besden said.

Fifteen years later, after she was reinstated to practice law in both states and joined [Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers](#), an organization dedicated to assisting lawyers with mental health and substance-abuse related challenges, Carpenter supported her application for a gubernatorial pardon.

On Aug. 28, 2020, Besden received that pardon.

The pardon allowed her to fulfill her desire to join the Hampden Township Volunteer Fire Company, something she couldn't previously do with a criminal record.

"I didn't serve the country and never even considered it, but that was one of my greatest regrets, among a list of other reasons that I sought a pardon," Besden said, adding that she's been with the company for about seven months.

She and Carpenter participated in a panel discussion at Dickinson Law Thursday during an event that officially launched [the Pardon Project of Cumberland County](#).

Pardon Project of Cumberland County

[Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity](#) started the Pardon Project in 2018 to help increase access to the pardon process for people who can't afford to hire a lawyer, according to its website.

The project expanded beyond Philadelphia in 2020, and the [Pennsylvania Association of Pardon Projects](#) was established the following year.

With support from Dickinson Law alumni and the [Cumberland County Bar Association](#), Cumberland County's branch will grow from an existing Pardon Project that began at Dickinson Law in 2022, according to the project's website. This consisted of nearly 30 students who helped low-income clients from the Philadelphia area apply for a pardon.



Pro Bono Coordinator and Law Association Admin Shannon Lenig with the Cumberland County Bar Association speaks during the organization's event at Penn State Dickinson Law in Carlisle Thursday afternoon.

According to the [Pennsylvania Board of Pardons](#), a pardon "relieves any legal disability resulting from a conviction," including the right to vote, the right to be a juror,

the right to hold a public office, the right to bear arms, the opportunity to serve in the military, the right to travel internationally and more.

It requires the state to erase criminal records as though they've never happened, according to the Pardon Project of Cumberland County.

The process of receiving a pardon in Pennsylvania does not require a lawyer, but attorneys can provide advice and assistance.

It begins with an application that can be found online at the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons' website. Once filed, the application is sent to the Board of Probation and Parole, Board of Corrections and district attorney and president judge in the county where the crime occurred so representatives can provide necessary reports and investigate the applicant's criminal history and personal status.

From there, the applicant's file will be sent to the five-member Board of Pardons, which will grant a hearing with the approval of at least two members. For people sentenced to life in prison or who are serving time for violent crimes, the approval of at least three board members is required for a hearing.

After the hearing, the majority of the board must vote in favor of moving the application to the governor for a decision on whether to grant the pardon.

There is no timeframe for the governor to act, and the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons said the whole process takes about four years.

'Pardon Me' event

Last week's event included the screening of the documentary "[Pardon Me](#)," which demonstrates how pardons can affect lower-income communities by allowing people with criminal records to live as full citizens and follows the stories of several people who have gone through the pardon process.

This was followed by the panel discussion, which featured several Pennsylvania voices on the topic of pardons including Besden, Carpenter and Shuja Moore, the film's producer and director.

An independent filmmaker based in west Philadelphia, Moore was convicted of a crime in his early 20s and shared his experience of moving forward when he was paroled.

"Going into the city, [I had] no network, no resume, no job prospects," he said. "It was harsh. Every turn, it was a no, I couldn't be an Uber driver. I couldn't work at Target. My family distrusted me, my community distrusted me, and I struggled for years, but I didn't give up."



Shuja Moore, producer and director of the documentary “Pardon Me,” shares his story prior to the screening of the film at Penn State Dickinson Law in Carlisle Thursday afternoon.

Wanting to share his story, he put an ad online, connected with a videographer and cinematographer and breeched the world of film with a mission of “telling the stories of why this is important.”

“We know some ... malicious people,” Moore said. “But there’s also people that just made wrong decisions, stupid mistakes and poor choices. But are we going to let them live in that forever?”

Shelly Watson, secretary of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, also spoke during the panel discussion, touching specifically on the Shapiro administration’s approach to the pardon system. With about 10 years of experience, she said the state has seen an increase in applications for pardons in the past five to seven years.

Watson said the current administration is working to help extradite the process.

“The unique thing about Gov. Shapiro is that he sat on the board, so he has an understanding of what we’re doing on a level that other governors have not,” she said. “And Gov. Shapiro finds the clemency process in general to be extremely important, an important arm of our justice system. So there is both an interest in supporting us, and there is a knowledge, an intimate knowledge that allows the work that we’re doing to just be more fruitful.”

While the board does not provide a reason for rejecting pardon applications, Watson said some who are denied applied too soon after their last conviction, that some might believe there wasn’t enough time since then for applicants to have transformed their lives.

“I think that this process is about showing the board of pardons that you’re no longer a risk, and so the people who have been most successful in our process are people who can show ... a long period of no contact with the criminal justice system, and then who can share a reason that their criminal record is affecting them and how a pardon would benefit them,” Watson said.

Craig Kauzlarich, an attorney with Carlisle-based law firm Abom & Kutulakis, shared his experiences of assisting clients through the pardon process.

While the situations vary, he said his clients were usually convicted years ago and are dealing with a specific problem related to their record.

“The problem can be ‘I need to get a license to do this job and my criminal record prevents that,’” Kaulzarich said. “Or it can be something as simple as I’d like to take my grandkids hunting and I’m not allowed to have a firearm, so I’d like to get this removed from my record so that I’m allowed to do that.”

To him, 10 years post-conviction serves as the “unwritten rule” to apply for a pardon, although applicants can start the process anytime by gathering paperwork like old records and character letters from family members and friends.

He said the process almost serves as a second judgment for pardon applicants.

“You were judged before what should the sentence be,” he said. “Now, the Board of Pardons gets a say on how long are we going to keep this record over your head?”

Aside from his experiences with Besden’s case, Carpenter spoke of the 180-degree change of his view on pardons.

As a prosecutor, he recalls how difficult it was to get a conviction.

“My thinking then was, well, if this person committed a theft, I don’t want the PTA or the Little League to let them be the treasurer without knowing,” Carpenter said. “I don’t want an employer to hire them and not have the opportunity to know that this person has a theft. Now my attitude has changed quite dramatically. I’m in favor of pardons.”

He said the change was a gradual shift as the nation began trying to help those who have been convicted to address their problems aside from just punishing them.

Carpenter said supporting Besden’s pardon application was one of the “highlights” of his judicial career.

“She’s done so much good,” he said. “And she’s an example of what can happen when someone does get the forgiveness that we’re talking about.”