

**Press Release of the PA Bar Association  
Announcing the 2024 Clarity Award Recipient**

# **Pennsylvania Board of Pardons Administrative Officer Pamela Brightbill to Receive PBA Clarity Award**



HARRISBURG, Pa. (May 2, 2024) –

The Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) Plain English Committee will present its 2024 Clarity Award to Pamela Brightbill, administrative officer for the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, Harrisburg, at an awards luncheon on May 9 during the PBA Annual Meeting in Hershey.

The charge of the Plain English Committee is to “reward and encourage efforts to improve access to the law by demystifying its language.” This “enable[s] lawyers to better counsel clients and increase[s] respect for the legal profession by removing the barriers of legalese.” While usually the award is given to a noted attorney or judge, this year’s award is given to an unsung hero of the justice system: a staff employee in Harrisburg.

Brightbill is receiving the PBA Clarity Award for her work to simplify the language on the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons Application for Clemency. In the past, many people who rightfully qualified for a pardon could not solve the morass of the application form. Under Brightbill’s leadership, the language of the application was transformed into plain English. She improved the justice system by allowing many people who legitimately qualify for a pardon to now understand the application and apply.

Since the application’s revision, the number of clemency applications from across the commonwealth went from 430 in 2017 to 2,173 in 2023. In addition, the Pennsylvania Continuing Legal Education Board has approved 50 pardon courses and awarded more than 1,000 continuing legal education credits to nearly 800 attorneys for those courses.

Currently, Brightbill is overseeing a project to ensure the online Application for Clemency will be accessible to individuals who experience challenges with computer literacy. The application is scheduled to launch in late 2024.

“The impact of the reforms extends far beyond the individuals applying for pardons,” said retired Judge Richard B. Klein, co-chair of the PBA Plain English Committee. “The way she simplified the forms galvanized support from diverse quarters, including paralegal programs, law schools and universities, faith communities, workforce development and recovery programs, and social service organizations. People are coming together everywhere to help their neighbors get a second chance.”

**Remarks of the Hon. Richard B. Klein (ret.)  
Presenting Pamela Brightbill with the Clarity Award  
May 9, 2024**

I'm honored to be here today representing the PBA "Plain English" Committee, and also on behalf of my co-chair, Judge Maureen Lally Green, and vice-chair Colin O'Boyle. This is a special event for us today, not only because of the recipient, but also because It's been 25 years since we introduced the first Clarity Award. The Clarity Award recognizes "those who have done the most to foster Plain English in the legal field."

The past awardees have been those whose names are probably familiar to you. Judges Mary Ann Bowes, John Cleland, Jeannine Turgeon; and prominent lawyers such as Leslie Anne Miller, the first woman to serve as PBA President; and Dan Siegel, who among many other things is known for his articles that clearly explain technology.

This year's winner, Pam Brightbill, is not a familiar name. She's not a judge, not a law professor, and not even a lawyer. Pam is an administrative assistant in the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, working hard and generally invisibly as a civil servant. But what Pam did, through the use of Plain English, was to start a revolution that is today bringing justice to thousands of Pennsylvanians.

A little background. Many of us associate pardons with high-profile cases, such as when some political crony is given a pardon, or a violent criminal is released from prison. But the reality is completely different. Governor Wolf signed over 2500 pardons. They were granted to people who were convicted of relatively minor crimes, especially crimes that arose from addiction. Many of these "criminals" were likely induced to take plea deals, sometimes for crimes they may not have committed, because their only punishment was probation. They finish their sentences and then live a crime-free life. It is only years later that they come to realize that the conviction on their record ended the chances they have for jobs, housing, education, licenses, loans, even coaching t-ball, or soccer or going on field trips with their children.

In Pennsylvania, there is a method to get a conviction erased when it is in the interests of justice. But until recently, it was a labyrinthian process. The only way to erase a conviction is by getting a pardon from the Governor, and the only way to get to the Governor is first by getting a recommendation from the Board of Pardons – a 5-person panel created by our Constitution. While in theory this should have worked, in practice it did not.

Five years ago, the application for a pardon was 9 pages long with 14 pages of instruction, and it was written in "dense bureaucratese." According to an Auditor General report, the application was so difficult to understand and complete that:

only 16 percent of people who began a pardons application in 2017 actually completed the form. More than 3,400 people paid to access the form, but only 564 submitted it to the board.

Enter Pam Brightbill – just an administrative assistant for the Board of Pardons. She was assigned the task of making pardons more accessible. She seized the opportunity to make a difference. Pam was not the only one helping, the four other hard-working Pardon Board employees also deserve praise. But Pam had the laboring oar and kept at it. As you will see in the next award presentation, with the help of volunteer lawyers, incredible progress has been made in making pardons possible. Pam took the first step by making the form understandable and user-friendly. Starting with her initial assignment five years ago, the form has gone through

multiple revisions, and today the form is only a few pages long, with instructions in Plain English. Now almost anyone can understand what has to be done.

The results speak for themselves. In 2018, before Pam got started, the Board of Pardons received 425 pardon applications from all across the state. Last year, the Board received 2,773. This may seem a lot – and it is – until you consider that there are probably upwards of 200,000 people in Pennsylvania with criminal convictions that are years if not decades in their past but keep holding them back.

And Pam's not done. Now she's working to make sure there is accessibility when the forms go online, to make sure that the online application does not include computer-speak questions and instructions and glitches that frustrate and defeat just about everyone, not just those who cannot afford a lawyer.

As a lifetime judge in Pennsylvania's justice system, I'm honored to present this year's Clarity Award to a public servant – to Pam Brightbill for her unwavering commitment to justice. Pam, thank you for turning a simple assignment into a catalyst for change, and through the use of Plain English empowering thousands of deserving Pennsylvanians.

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**Remarks of Pamela Brightbill  
Upon Accepting the Clarity Award**

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, and fellow advocates for justice,

I am sincerely humbled to accept the Clarity Award and honored that our efforts to simplify the clemency application have been recognized by a community that values accessibility and transparency in the law.

Laws can be complex and intimidating, especially for those who most need to understand them. Justice should be blind to wealth and education and translating the clemency application and instructions into plain English make it possible for more people to navigate the system and seek the relief so many deserve. Empowering individuals to take control of their lives through a second chance makes a positive impact in our communities.

The Board of Pardons is a very small, but growing agency. I'm immensely grateful to be surrounded by colleagues who care deeply and go out of their way to help our applicants and improve our processes. They inspire me daily.

As we celebrate this achievement, we must also keep in mind that the work is far from finished. There are still so many people and communities facing barriers to justice. May the good people of this Bar and the justice seeking advocates who work tirelessly continue pushing for clarity and simplicity in all aspects of the law.

Thank you again for this honor. I accept it not as a personal achievement, but as a call to action to continue making the clemency process more understandable and available for everyone.

Pamela Brightbill  
Administrative Officer 3  
Pennsylvania Board of Pardon