

The Pennsylvania Pardon Project: An Evaluation by Luke Hamlin, MPA *

Section 1: Introduction: People Change. Records Can Too.

In our society, when someone breaks the law, a judge imposes a sentence that is intended to “repay their debt to society,” and when the offender completes their sentence, they are expected to get back to work, doing the best they can. It does not work that way. The availability of criminal records over the internet makes it possible for employers, landlords, banks, educational institutions and others to reject candidates because of their past. This “invisible discrimination” holds individuals, their families and their communities back in a great many ways. It is a major public policy issue: as a leader of the United Way said in 2018, “Our society can invest every dollar we have in job training and workforce development, but we have no chance to succeed if these individuals are still prevented by the bad choice they made decades ago from getting the jobs or housing for which they are qualified today.”¹

Every state’s governor has the power to pardon (forgive) crimes. In virtually all states, the governor awards a dozen or so a year. In Pennsylvania, the governor is now awarding hundreds – soon, thousands – per year. This is largely the result of the Pardon Project – an organization that began advocating in 2018 for major reforms in the pardon process that have now made it accessible, and then has been helping to organize volunteer efforts in as many places as possible. The results are palpable: in 2018, the PA Board of Pardons (the gatekeeper through which pardon applicants must pass to get to the governor) received 300 pardon applications from all across the state, and by 2023, the number had surged to 2,600. As of June of this year, the BOP recommended 161 of the 188 applicants whose cases it heard, which is nearly an 86% rate of approval. We must come together to take advantage of this high acceptance rate.

As of writing this, there are 25 active county-wide pardon projects and 15 more in development. There is nothing like this anywhere else in the county. What makes pardon projects work, or not, is the subject of this paper. This is the first such assessment that has been performed. The author wishes to thank Tobey Oxholm, the founder of the Pardon Project, and his valiant efforts that have effectively made this whole thing possible, and all of the additional civic leaders around the state who were willing to share their experiences, good and bad, in creating what is now a Statewide Pardon Project.

* This assessment was performed by the author as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Public Administration, which he received from the University of Pennsylvania in August 2024. He may be reached via email at lhamlin@sas.upenn.edu.

¹ <https://www.plsephilly.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PLSE-Press-Release-UWay-Pardon-Hub-Partnership.pdf>

Section 2: Impact of Evaluation

More people are pardoned every year in Pennsylvania, cementing themselves in history since the launch of the Statewide Pardon Project effort in 2018. While the initiative and its impact continue at a record-breaking pace, the driving forces that are chiefly responsible for this dramatic change, pardon projects, struggle immensely to maintain periods of sustained growth. Reasons as to why project productivity fluctuates is precisely what this report intends to identify.

Included in this report are the results from a comprehensive evaluation of every active pardon project in Pennsylvania, possible mainly from interviews with current leaders and coordinators who are now, have been, and will continue operating on the frontlines of criminal justice reform. How the results were reached can be visualized as if they traveled through a funnel, begun by combining strengths and weaknesses unique to each project, complete to narrowly pinpointing the most significant components that can be uniformly attributed to their success or failure. Not one response can affect two projects the same, hence the difficulty of this task. What we know is that every project has faced a period of success and failure, in which a project has experienced growth or decline, often prompted by a change in resources. This analysis aims to expose the key similarities and differences from these periods to link and inform project leaders across the state. It is my hope that leaders will be inspired to capitalize on strategies that work for other projects and work to end the infestation of systemic problems that have collectively hindered their success. Success that is essential to maintaining the growing number of pardons granted in Pennsylvania and offering the low-income community unrestricted access to social and economic opportunities.

In this analysis, primary variables had to be considered which directly affect pardon projects and the statewide effort. These include the location of the pardon project or hub, its past and current stages of development, support from the “host” organization, access to resources such as funding and staffing, relationships with elected officials, partnerships with civic organizations, and amount of interest and availability from people in the community. Traditionally, most established projects were created using the PLSE “County Model,” a holistic and effective approach. However, more projects across the state are becoming as successful as they begin, rebuild, and morph into dynamic neighborhood networks which are community-focused and can often access primary variables. And individual pardon hubs are being formed without waiting for a county structure, or independently of an existing one.

The greatest challenge, and opportunity, for leaders of the pardon world, and people who are supportive of more people being pardoned is that systemically, within each county, community, and neighborhood that is supported by a pardon project or hub, success is achieved differently, from an independent recipe of primary variables.

Section 3: Methodology: Data Collection

Statewide Pardon Project Matrix Access Link:

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(Double-click to open the file in Excel).

Matrix Summary:

This evaluation and its results are largely based on the information included in the Statewide Pardon Project Matrix. It contains a comprehensive analysis of each active and inactive pardon project individually. Projects are broken down by county, and there is information on its host organization, stage of development, strengths and weaknesses over time, as well as its key players and other contacts. The information itself was collected mainly from interviews and conversations with leaders, clients, and many others affiliated in the pardon process. There is additional research based on websites, articles, videos, and even grant letters and event flyers. The goal of the Matrix was to compile as much information as possible about each pardon project from its start to today.

Section 4: Program Evaluation

(4a.) Part I: Components of Successful Pardon Projects

1. **Transparency and Accessibility**
 2. **Connect to the Host**
 3. **Target a Worker Pool**
 4. **Prioritize Partnerships**
 5. **Initiate Outreach**
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1. Transparency and Accessibility

The lead components that contribute to the success of a Pardon Project during any stage of its development are consistent avenues of transparency and accessibility. To begin without addressing their importance to the pardon application particularly would be as effective as baking a cake without the flour. For projects that saw a spike in their productivity at any point during their lifetime, the application was individually advertised on and accessible from their website. This has made a difference in Pennsylvania counties like Allegheny² and Berks³, that use Microsoft Word to support their application, which most prospective applicants are familiar with and able to navigate without assistance. The Pardon Project of Berks County streamlined their application process after struggling to recruit qualified individuals with their previous procedure that involved an initial screening, which required people to send personal information before being granted access to the application itself.⁴ While a PDF of the general application is now easily available on the Board of Pardons website⁵, many developing and some established projects across the state do not showcase the application on their website. Progress is hindered because of this, as making the application available on every project's website will instill agency in people to act on their interest, which will provide a motivating sense of responsibility, and build trust with the project and most importantly, government services. The application itself has been dramatically simplified to accommodate many levels of reading ability and overcome language barriers, and it is available as a Word document on the statewide webpage, along with a Spanish version in PDF (applications must be submitted in English). Therefore it is an emergency that the application is not available online for projects in development. In order to attract the audience, it is crucial for a project to adopt the application and develop their own list of resources from the existing list available on the PLSE website.⁶

² Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

³ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

⁴ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

⁵ Board of Pardons website, <https://www.bop.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

⁶ <https://plsephilly.org/pardon-project-statewide/resources/>

Simplifying the application process is just the beginning. A healthy project built to last counts on many other practices of transparency such as limiting restrictions. While most pardon projects include an income requirement, the PP of Berks does not; while most include a list of crimes where they will not help, the PP of Erie at Gannon University does not. The Pardon Project of Cumberland County recently created a standard operating procedure to waive unpaid fees, fines, and costs for indigent applicants that are a barrier associated with the application process.⁷ Leaders in Cumberland believe that this will promote endurance for applicants, which is directly correlated to improving the sustainability of the project itself.⁸ Over time, more applicants involved equates to longer-lasting projects.⁹ While there is not one policy that can act as an umbrella to cover the restrictions that affect each project individually, the most successful projects have developed creative strategies to avoid adhering to traditional guidelines altogether. After its rebuild, the Pardon Project of Lancaster County now sports a pardon coach who has more freedom because they allowed clients to bypass certain qualifications to receive their services. For example, a slashed restriction once was a full disclosure of personal financial information in the process of qualifying for pro-bono, which was historically invasive, and caused applicants to be uncomfortable and disinterested. Leaders in Lancaster removed it entirely, and today, a pardon-interested applicant is not even required to meet the baseline qualifications to receive their unique CareerLink services.¹⁰

Transparency improves the way that projects communicate with their audience. People must be aware of the advantages from obtaining a pardon. They should also know about the changes that are being made internally, within pardon projects, which have made the application seamless and the recruiting process almost entirely restriction-less. Attention in the press has been a separating factor between projects that fall dormant and those that expand. A recent article spotlighted the Pardon Project of Cumberland County and specifically praised its student volunteers that provided indispensable pro bono support.¹¹ This report strengthened the link between the project and the Penn State student pool, an infinite one at that, creating another venue for future law and undergraduate students to learn about the collateral consequences of criminal convictions and the reasons behind “restorative justice,” and potentially participate. Leveraging the reach of the press can be useful for attracting talent and recruiting people with specialized services that are often the secret ingredient to project success. A local, countywide newspaper recently covered the Pardon Project of Huntington County quite generally, highlighting only its birth and mission.¹² Still, the attention will bring in prospects for pardon fellows, a priority for the coordinator, because several projects have noticed an uptick in professional interest after that before. In addition, press releases attract more interest from the target audience. The Pardon Project of York County recently embraced the perspective of their District Attorney’s Office which involved increasing the amount of press conferences where pardons are being discussed. This will help them connect to eligible people that may not have access to narrow avenues of communication, as this adds one more. Alternative media avenues are also related to success. The film, *Pardon Me*, and its director, Shuja

⁷ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

⁸ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

⁹ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

¹⁰ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

¹¹ <https://www.psu.edu/news/academics/story/dickinson-law-students-provide-pro-bono-support-statewide-pardon-project/>

¹² https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/new-project-to-assist-with-pardon-process/article_266e015d-e411-5815-99ee-166537fe4e6d.html

Moore, excite the community and shift momentum especially in the helping a project find its footing.¹³ A screening of the film should absolutely be included when starting a project.

A project is more accessible if its sponsoring organization is based in an office, social service center, or another physical structure.¹⁴ The Pardon Project of Beaver County is currently hosted in the Franklin Center of Beaver, offering office space and support, and phone and internet support for many services including a part-time coordinator.¹⁵ Before offering pardons, the Franklin Center offered a wide range of services for the low-income community; thus, they were accustomed to going there for services, that, unlike government offices, were not perceived as being judgmental or a “government hand-out.” This is an advantage that gives people not only somewhere to go, but somewhere to learn about a variety of services that are available before or after obtaining a pardon. The Pardon Project of Huntingdon County has a similar situation with its base in the Center for Community Action, which is in close proximity to its audience. In addition to the advantages brought from having a physical base, a sponsoring organization, or what is also referred to as a host for a project or hub, should be the right fit according to the multiple sections discussed in the next section.

2. Connect to the Host

In many cases, the host is the organization that supplies the people and services necessary to a pardon project. Upon entering a neighborhood, community, or county, the first step in establishing a project is to determine where its initiatives will be most effectively supported. Every mature project has uniformly struggled with finding the right fit. A successful host is able to access the pardon audience, attract community partnerships, and appeal to a demographic with a variety of services. The most successful pardon projects have been supported by hosts with as many of these characteristics as possible. Since 2018, pardon projects have a higher likelihood of becoming dormant or failing altogether with a host that has access to a smaller number of these resources. The Pardon Project of Somerset County is currently hosted by Tableland Services, a community action agency (CAA) that has recently leveraged their Instagram account as a strategy to reach their audience.¹⁶ Surprisingly, many projects have not prioritized creating social media campaigns. However, many projects have formed very successful partnerships within the recovery community, such as the Pardon Project of Crawford County, and the Pardon Project of Cambria is hosted by a recovery community non-profit.¹⁷ According to Brian Gorman, coordinator of the Pardon Project of Washington County, people in recovery are most important because the drug and alcohol community deals directly with reform and referrals. Involvement in this community strengthens the host and expands the reach of services it can provide to previously untapped populations.

Each host offers and delivers pardon services differently, simply because there are many different types of entities that are qualified to host projects and because the sources of volunteers and clients are different. Recently however, workforce development organizations have separated themselves as possibly the best suited to host pardon projects. Alternatively to community non-profits or legal aid clinics, workforce development agencies deliver well-rounded support to prepare clients for jobs

¹³ <https://www.pardonsnow.org/>

¹⁴ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

¹⁵ Beaver county grant request doc

¹⁶ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

¹⁷ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

after a pardon. Each project tailors to a different community based on its specific needs, therefore legal services may be more useful in some areas over others. Not one project is in a matured phase hosted by a workforce development agency, however, because of the recent developments in Lancaster, as well as the interest across multiple state representatives in other areas, workforce development agencies make a strong case for becoming the most effective type of host.

Currently, Community Action Agencies (CAAs) are ideally positioned to host pardon projects. Their overarching mission to combat poverty and provide comprehensive support services to their communities has allowed them to support successful pardon projects. These agencies typically offer a broad spectrum of assistance, ranging from housing and employment support to educational and health services. Integrating pardon assistance into their service offerings aligns with their mission to address systemic barriers that contribute to poverty, making it a natural fit. Projects can serve as a valuable addition to the existing services offered by CAAs. By incorporating pardon assistance, CAAs, can effectively address the legal and societal barriers that individuals with criminal records face when seeking to reintegrate into society and secure stable employment. This holistic approach not only enhances the agency's service portfolio but also reinforces its commitment to promoting social justice and equal opportunity.

At a minimum, CAAs can function as informational pardon hubs, which are typically individual organizations, to provide self-help materials and service as a referral source to local pardon projects. This role is crucial to connect individuals with relevant resources and guiding them through the initial steps of the pardon process, thereby increasing accessibility and awareness within the community. The success of pardon projects hosted by CAAs, such as the Pardon Project of Somerset County under Tableland Services, exemplifies the benefits of this collaboration. Tableland Services, as a CAA, leverages its established infrastructure and network to support the project effectively. Key factors contributing to its success include dedicated staff roles like a pardon fellow and coordinator, who provide specialized guidance and support to clients navigating the pardon process. Moreover, strong partnerships with local stakeholders, including legal aid clinics, pro-bono attorneys, and other community organizations, enhance the project's capability to deliver comprehensive services.¹⁸ Furthermore, CAAs like Tableland Services often have inter-county connections, allowing them to extend their support beyond their immediate locality. In Somerset, this broader reach has ensured they have aided organizations and individuals in neighboring counties and regions that have benefitted from their pardon resources and expertise. Additionally, the Pardon Project in Allegheny County hosted the first CAA in the state which recognized the importance of pardons, and the first to hire a pardon fellow. In this case, it was not only a capable host for a pardon project but an essential partner in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals with criminal records.¹⁹ Their holistic approach, combined with their mission-driven focus on poverty alleviation and community support, has made them effective platforms that have boosted and maintained pardon projects, while fostering inclusive economic opportunities for all members of society.

However, one host cannot act alone to achieve the goals that an entirely successful pardon project depends on, as it needs the right workforce to rely on to distribute its services more effectively.

¹⁸ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

¹⁹ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

3. Target a Worker Pool

Targeting an agency, area, or location that is rich with workers with criminal records has led to the growth of the most successful pardon projects. Access to an excluded (by criminal records) worker pool is missing from many projects in their second stage of development. Projects that operate in close proximity to universities and civic centers have flourished because they attract specific populations of students and volunteers, who are, for the most part, educated and trained in social work and interested and energized to provide their services for free. Before and after its dynamic expansion, the Pardon Project of Cumberland County grew across two separate time periods because of its location within Penn State Dickinson Law, and its access to student workers.²⁰ Law and undergraduate students continue to fill critical positions such as pardon coaches.

Before describing the importance of a pardon coach, this brief will begin with identifying the type of candidate that is considered to be best suited to assume that role in any project. There are a few options that pardon projects have in hiring a Pardon Coordinator, and a project has seen success multiple ways. Some coaches are volunteers, as retired social workers in Berks²¹ or as previously mentioned, students. Others are hired and paid full time, who have backgrounds across many different career fields. It is no doubt that the most successful and cost-effective option for all projects is someone with lived experience, from the community, who is able to volunteer or receive grant-funding. Also, someone who has earlier connections with the source of clients - for example, has gone through CareerLinks or who is in recovery. Case studies have shown that a pardon coach with at least two of those traits has been instrumental in the success of the project as a whole. Successful projects are directly tied to the strength of their pardon coach. Success requires a champion. The impact from a community leader cannot be replicated in any other area of a project, and it has led to success in Erie, Washington, Cambria, Somerset, Crawford, Lackawanna, Lancaster, and Lehigh. Champions, or pardon coaches, must be a part of the project, and trained to know what their role is without doing too much and overtaking the responsibilities of others. They must know how to transfer responsibility to others and engage others to ensure project success and a joint movement. The Pardon Project of Washington County, which became the first rural pardon project to thrive and mature, has been continued in large part because of their coach, Kyle Duff. Part-time pardon coaches even make a difference.

The resources are available within the Statewide Pardon Project to train new and existing staff, as well as key players such as pardon coaches and coordinators. Projects have grown because they utilized the resources available to them, trained their staff the right way, which caused everyone to know their responsibilities.²²

Workforce development professionals are highly effective in conducting pardon services due to their diverse skill set and holistic approach. Their expertise in education, training, and motivational interviewing strategies has been widely praised by clients for providing a more supportive and well-

²⁰ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

²¹ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsMYa-6u1JY&themeRefresh=1>

rounded process.²³ For optimal results, it is recommended that pardon projects primarily hire workforce development professionals internally. These professionals can establish trust and rapport with clients through initial education and motivational sessions, preparing them for the legal aspects of the pardon process. At later stages, it's beneficial to partner with pro bono attorneys and public defenders as consultants to handle the legal intricacies of the pardon application. CareerLinks in Lancaster exemplifies this successful approach by leveraging the wide range of talents among their workforce. By hiring workforce development professionals and collaborating with legal experts as needed, they have achieved notable success in helping individuals navigate the pardon process. Another important consideration for a project is finding the balance between volunteer and paid workforce development professionals based on its scale and funding availability, ensuring a sustainable and effective service delivery model. By adopting these strategies, pardon projects can enhance client outcomes by combining the strengths of workforce development and legal expertise.

4. Prioritize Partnerships

Pardon projects rely heavily on their community partnerships. Each additional partner represents an additional set of services, individuals, and funding source that is available to the project. To receive the most from a partnership, projects must connect with outside organizations that provide different services from their host. Most projects tend to create partnerships with and linkages to legal aid clinics, pro-bono attorneys, the bar association, community non-profits, faith communities and universities, recovery organizations and other civic organizations. This allows the project access to an array of specialized and necessary services in the pardon process without falling into complete dependency.

All community non-profits are already overwhelmed by demand for their services; their employees simply cannot take on more work. For that reason, those organizations – already having credibility and standing in the lower income communities – are relied on not for the actual coaching, but for knowing about pardons, energizing their clients about the opportunities that a pardon can offer, and referring their clients to the pardon project for services if there is one, or to the extensive self-help materials that the Statewide Pardon Project has posted online.

Some of the most impactful relationships for pardon projects are their partnerships with locally elected officials such as the district attorney or a state representative. Pardon project growth and long-term sustainability is directly related to the state of its relationship with elected officials. Pardon Projects in counties such as Beaver, Berks, Lackawanna, Lehigh, and York have strong connections with their district attorney. The Pardon Project of Crawford County did not begin with that support because the district attorney is extremely conservative, which slowed success. The Director of Women's Services (the Project's Hub) has a connection with the current district attorney, which will help to gain representation and support for pardons in the area. The Pardon Project of Berks County was launched by State Senator Judy Schwenk, who was key to its success by advocating for large grants and using her platform to bring attention to the project, and in that she was strongly supported by the DA of Berks County.

²³ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

Local district attorneys and state representatives are integral to the success of pardon projects for several compelling reasons. Elected officials hold power in their communities, allowing them to build crucial relationships and advocate effectively on behalf of pardon projects. By leveraging their influence, they can connect pardon projects with other community leaders, organizations, and stakeholders, thereby expanding their reach and impact. Moreover, they possess the ability to secure essential funding through legislative channels and grants, ensuring the financial stability and growth of pardon projects. Advocacy from elected leaders extends beyond financial support; they are able to champion policy changes and legislative reforms that streamline the pardon process or enhance resources available to people seeking pardons.

In addition to advocacy and funding, district attorneys bring invaluable legal expertise that helps pardon projects navigate complex legal landscapes and overcome potential barriers. The pardon process always includes solicitation by the Board of Pardons of the district attorney's assessment of the pardon candidate. Furthermore, these officials play a pivotal role in raising public awareness about the importance of pardon projects and encouraging community engagement. By endorsing and promoting the work of pardon projects, they contribute to increasing awareness among individuals with convictions who may benefit from their services. Ultimately, the partnership between pardon projects and local district attorneys and state representatives not only enhances operational capabilities but also strengthens community ties and supports broader goals such as reducing recidivism and promoting rehabilitation. This collaborative approach fosters a supportive environment where individuals seeking pardons can access the necessary resources and assistance, leading to positive outcomes for both the individuals and the community as a whole.

5. Initiate Outreach

Initiating effective outreach is a pivotal component of successful pardon projects, essential for engaging the target audience and reaching individuals who may benefit from pardon services but are unaware or hesitant to seek assistance. The Pardon Project of Lehigh County has exemplified a proactive approach to outreach, setting a precedent by actively meeting community members where they are and creating opportunities for engagement. In Lehigh County, initiatives called "Outreach Days," organized in collaboration with the local public defender's office, have been instrumental in bringing in more people who are pardon qualified and eligible, and in turn, keeping the project alive.²⁴ These events have historically served as comprehensive resource hubs where community partners gather to provide information not only on pardon eligibility but also on essential services like housing, food, and clothing. The Public Defender there simply added a table at which she and her attorney provided information and counseling about criminal records. That has been expanded so that now attorneys are present using their volunteer hours to offer legal guidance and assess pardon eligible candidates, fostering a supportive environment where individuals can access multiple forms of assistance in one place.

This proactive outreach model contrasts with passive approaches that wait for applicants to seek out services independently, which historically have led to limited community engagement and project viability. This is what happened with the original Pardon Project of Erie County, which was sponsored by the bar association and hosted by a college but not embedded in its community engagement programs. By actively reaching out to the community, the Pardon Project of Lehigh

²⁴ Hamlin, Luke. "Pardon Project Matrix," *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

County has cultivated greater community buy-in and participation. This approach not only expands access to pardon services but also builds trust with individuals who may be skeptical or unfamiliar with the process.

Additionally, the role of pardon coaches is crucial in this outreach strategy. Coaches who have lived experience with the criminal justice system and the pardon process (typically called “Pardon Fellows” to acknowledge this expertise) bring invaluable empathy, understanding, and credibility to their roles. They are uniquely positioned to connect with individuals seeking pardons, offering guidance based on shared experiences and firsthand knowledge of the challenges involved. Fellows in counties like Washington, Lackawanna, Centre, and the second iteration in Erie are the best examples of how an effective pardon coach can uplift the effort as a whole.²⁵ Coaches who are embedded within the community possess local insights and connections, enhancing their ability to reach and assist those most in need of support.

Together, these initiatives—proactive outreach efforts and the involvement of experienced pardon coaches—create a stir that ultimately has a dynamic impact within the community and on the pardon project itself. They not only increase awareness and accessibility to pardon services but also form a supportive environment that encourages engagement and empowerment among individuals seeking to improve their circumstances. By prioritizing community outreach and leveraging lived experiences, pardon projects can effectively become more successful and expand with access to a stronger audience and personnel to serve their needs.

²⁵ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

(4b.) Part II: Challenges Faced by Pardon Projects

1. **Issues Faced by Emerging Hosts**
 2. **Persistent Legal Barriers**
 3. **Division of Labor**
 4. **Utilization of Hubs and Effectiveness of the Network**
 5. **Absence of Key Partnerships**
 6. **Visibility and Funding**
 7. **Establishing a “Champion”**
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Pardon projects run into problems when they do not have some amount of all of the five components above that lead to success. Pardon leaders across the state must not mistake these successes as solutions to issues that their projects face. Certainly, this is a guide for what every project should strive to do and be, however, the successes that some projects experience are merely goals for others to try to reach, in which solutions can be found. Other challenges impact projects directly and require solutions that are outside of the realm of goal-achieving, rather these specifically challenge the project itself and limit growth. The challenges described below are calculated based on some of the greatest barriers that projects face. Readers will find that the first three are general challenges, one unique to one type of project, and two others a challenge that all projects face similarly, and the two more that are something that is missing that I believe presents a challenge and limits to what all projects can achieve.

1. Issues Faced by Emerging Hosts

Workforce development agencies encounter specific challenges when hosting pardon projects, despite their effectiveness in providing employment and training services. One of the primary hurdles these agencies face is navigating the complexities of the pardon process, including determining applicant eligibility and progressing individuals through expungement, clean slate and pardon eligibility rules and procedures.²⁶ This task requires a nuanced understanding of legal requirements and procedures, which may not always align with the agency’s core competencies in workforce development. For instance, the Pardon Project of Lancaster County, hosted by a CareerLinks, has faced criticism regarding the inefficiencies in the pardon process, with calls from pardon leaders for system renovations to enhance transparency and streamline operations. These issues underscore the need for clear, well-defined processes that facilitate smoother transitions for applicants seeking pardons and related legal remedies. Workforce development agencies often struggle with sustaining pardon projects due to operational challenges and turnover among key personnel. The initial failures in Lancaster, attributed to the project being driven by the local CareerLinks which had higher income eligibility limits than the alternative option, a local legal aid program, highlight the partnership complexities and the necessary alignment between legal expertise and workforce development goals. Similarly, in Luzerne and Beaver Counties, turnover

²⁶ Hamlin, Luke. “Pardon Project Matrix,” *Excel Spreadsheet*, (2024, July).

among leadership at their CareerLinks, among other supporting organizations, has posed continuity issues, which affect long-term project stability and progress.

Another common issue for workforce development agencies hosting pardon projects is the difficulty in expanding beyond their initial hub status. Venango County's CareerLinks, for example, remains primarily a hub without significant expansion, reflecting broader challenges in scaling up services and establishing robust community partnerships essential for sustained impact. Furthermore, the outreach efforts of workforce development agencies often struggle to reach marginalized communities effectively, limiting their ability to engage with and assist individuals most in need of pardon services. Establishing and maintaining partnerships with community organizations, legal experts, and other stakeholders is crucial but can be hindered by resource constraints and competing organizational priorities. While workforce development agencies have shown promise in hosting pardon projects by leveraging their existing infrastructure and community ties, they must address these challenges to achieve sustainable success. This includes refining operational processes, enhancing collaboration with legal professionals, mitigating turnover risks, and improving outreach strategies to ensure equitable access to pardon services for all eligible individuals in their communities. Addressing these issues will be key to unlocking the full potential of workforce development agencies.

This is another problem of workforce development agencies which can be related to all other host organizations is that they all struggle with reach and establishing partnerships in the community.

2. Persistent Legal Barriers

Pardon projects hosted independently by legal aid clinics or public defender's offices, while strong contenders for effective hosting, face a variety of distinct challenges that can hinder their impact and operational efficiency. One significant issue revolves around staffing limitations and resource constraints within legal aid offices. In fact, pardon projects were designed to be volunteer projects that lived outside of legal aid precisely because their staffs are overburdened; and working on long-term, "speculative" remedies like pardons are therefore not on their list of "priorities." They can add pardons to the list of areas where they request "pro bono" help from the local bar association, but as the initial iteration of the Pardon Project of Lancaster County demonstrated, this led to slow service delivery and halting referrals, undermining the project's effectiveness.

Another critical challenge lies in the administrative and procedural hurdles inherent in legal services. Counties such as Carbon have seen the dominance of law firms in the pardon landscape, which often imposes high fees and rigid requirements that are inaccessible to low-income individuals. This financial barrier restricts access to pardon services for those most in need, further exacerbating inequalities within the criminal justice system. Moreover, the departure of key personnel, such as project coordinators or legal experts, can cause projects to stagnate or even collapse, as seen in various counties including Centre and Northampton.

The role of district attorneys (DAs) also poses significant challenges to pardon projects, particularly in terms of eligibility criteria and overall support. The Pardon Project of Cumberland County, for instance, decided to change its eligibility criteria, adding more crimes with which it would help, because of their local DA. In Lancaster County, the DA refused to participate in the formation of the Pardon Project, opining that it was a "conflict of interest." By contrast, the local DA has contributed to the early formation of the Pardon Project with enthusiasm in a majority of

communities, appreciating the fact that “hard on crime” should end when the sentence is fully served, after which society’s goal is to get the past-offender back contributing at their best level.

The local Clerk of Court also has a key role. It must provide copies of five documents from the underlying conviction that are required to be attached to the pardon application: the affidavit of probable cause, the indictment, the complaint, the plea of verdict, and the sentencing memorandum. The Statewide Association of the Prothonotaries and Clerks of Court was an early partner in the Pardon Project, but not all Clerks of Court have signed on, allowing pardon projects to request and receive the records via email. In Berks County, though, the Clerk requires that the individual come get their records themselves, or that an attorney “enter their appearance” in the underlying case to do so. Both are major barriers to success.

The political landscape adds another layer of complexity, especially with conservative DAs in rural areas of Pennsylvania posing formidable barriers to pardon projects. The election of a new DA can reset relationships and priorities, requiring proactive strategies and transitional planning to ensure continuity and momentum for pardon initiatives. Although, reelection poses another threat that includes virtually starting over a partnership. A possible protection might be to train someone to specifically handle transition methods for partnerships with the DA, and even other organizations.

While legal aid clinics and public defender’s offices bring valuable legal expertise and advocacy to pardon projects, they must navigate these multifaceted challenges to effectively serve their communities. Addressing staffing shortages, financial barriers, legal complexities, and navigating political dynamics are crucial for enhancing the impact and sustainability of pardon projects across Pennsylvania counties. There also is a challenge presented by large legal aid firms, such as MidPenn and LASP which dominate multiple counties across Pennsylvania and offer similar services in a mostly unsuccessful attempt to address specific pardon needs. There are also difficulties that Pardon Projects face when trying to break into the Bar Association. In particular, in Wayne County, there is a program that is a part of the Bar Association called the “low bono” program, which means that attorneys are paid a fee for doing the work. No one has volunteered.

3. Division of Labor

A balanced division of labor is crucial for to sustain a pardon project and its effectiveness. The experience in Monroe County serves as an example of what can happen when there is an imbalance or over-reliance on key personnel. Specifically, the stagnation observed over a year in Monroe underscores the detrimental impact of having a leading attorney who is over-committed. A pardon project cannot thrive or even function effectively on the shoulders of just one individual, no matter how dedicated or capable they may be. In Monroe's case, the over-commitment of the leading attorney likely led to delays and inactivity within the project, ultimately hindering its ability to serve the community and support individuals through the pardon process. Similarly in Allegheny, one person continues to operate an established pardon project entirely on their own. While it works more as a hub, it is not sustainable. Reliance on one person or one platform does not deliver on the responsibilities of a healthy project. It may a wise to reconsider what a project needs before it begins to clash with the goals of the statewide effort.

Dividing responsibilities among a team of qualified professionals, including pardon coaches, legal experts, administrative staff, and community outreach coordinators, is essential for maintaining

momentum and supporting pardon applicants. Each team member plays a vital role in their respective areas, contributing to the overall success of the project. Building and keeping a project requires a multifaceted approach that combines technological resources with dedicated human resources to effectively meet the diverse needs of their clients. Achieving a balance in the division of labor within pardon projects involves strategic delegation, clear role delineation, and robust support systems to prevent burnout and promote continuity. By distributing responsibilities appropriately and creating a collaborative team environment, pardon projects can maximize their impact, efficiency, and long-term sustainability.

4. Utilization of Hubs and Effectiveness of the Network

Pardon hubs are well-positioned to make a sizeable impact on the pardon network. The effectiveness of these hubs hinges on the availability and ease of access to critical information regarding the process. Simplifying this and making information readily available through multiple channels can strengthen the project, which is often detached from the larger project in the area. Information about pardon eligibility, application procedures, and legal resources should be widely accessible through websites and even physical literature. Hubs can be in organizations that have formal or informal partnerships with the host. While it can act as a stabilizer to balance the needs of the larger entity, the project, a hub must be equipped with similar tools to distribute information on the pardon process. Implementing a user-friendly website is crucial to modernize pardon hubs. As for projects, a “hub-site” could provide clear instructions, FAQs, downloadable forms, and links to additional resources, such as those available through PLSE.²⁷ This digital approach improves how key information is distributed within a community and connects people personally to the pardon process.

In addition to digital resources, providing literature in these organizations and community centers, libraries, and other public venues ensures accessibility for a larger audience. Tangible resources could contain eye-catching statistics and information. Either of these platforms could provide clear guidance on eligibility criteria, application procedures, and relevant legal resources. Additionally, incorporating self-help materials into the website allows users to educate themselves at their own pace.

Additionally, I believe that there is a hole in the statewide process that, with a few changes could unite the projects closer together to develop a greater sense of responsibility and commitment to the mission as a whole. Involving more people, pardon fellows in particular more in the statewide process could empower them and help each of them learn from others. A simple, administrative change could also be to further “technologize” the process by creating a central statewide document that keeps compliments the monthly meetings. It could serve as a live feed of updates that are made—people who are unable to attend the month’s meeting could plug an update into the document and leaders could check the doc every two weeks or so—because pardon projects grow with momentum, some money, the right people, and an audience all at the same time, then once established it can coast a little, but having the most recent updates on things could be vital to keeping a project alive and moving forward.

²⁷ Resources page. For formation of new pardon projects, see: <https://plsephilly.org/pardon-project-statewide/resources>. For self-help materials, see: <https://pardonmepa.org/>

5. Absence of Key Partnerships

The lack of partnerships between pardon projects and businesses, particularly (1) employers who are willing to hire individuals with pardons or previous criminal records and (2) chambers of commerce that recognize the economic value of pardons, represents a significant missing element, opportunity and challenge for these initiatives. Employment is often a crucial factor in successful reintegration and rehabilitation for individuals seeking pardons. Without viable job opportunities, individuals with criminal records may struggle to secure stable employment even after being pardoned. Incorporating business partnerships into the mission of pardon projects could strengthen their impact and interest more people. By establishing relationships with employers such as manufacturers, who often invite people with a pardoned background to apply, pardon projects can create more opportunities for people. Knowing that successful completion of the pardon process could lead to meaningful employment prospects could provide a massive incentive for people on the fence. Such collaborations benefit businesses as they are more easily able to tap into a diverse and often underutilized talent pool.²⁸ It would not only enhance employment prospects for individuals with criminal records but also strengthen community support and reduce stigma associated with past convictions. Bridging the gap between pardon recipients and employment opportunities, prioritizing these partnerships would lead to better opportunities.

6. Visibility and Funding

Pardon Projects, and their staff do not gain momentum or training without money. Funding at the front of a project has shown to be most effective. Firms such as United Way want to see deliverables upfront, which takes time and resources, before they are inclined to give grants.

7. Establishing a “Champion”

A pardon project arises from perceived need – which is another way of saying that the pardon project in a particular place will reflect, and depend on, the attributes of the person or people who brought it to life. The projects that have done the best have had a “champion” who has had standing in the community and the ability to remain involved in and lead the pardon project.

The pardon project of Beaver County was the idea of a community activist who had a strong relationship with, and the backing of, the local district attorney. When that DA was not re-elected, the project faltered and the community activist continues trying almost on his own. In McKean County, the champion was an employee who provided reentry services to the local prison. As passionate as she was about pardons, she was unable to get any “higher up” to adopt her vision as their own. In Schuylkill County, the story was the same; but there, the activist has succeeded in

²⁸ In 2020, Gerard Oleksiak, the Secretary of Pennsylvania’s Department of Labor and Industry said, ““One of our department’s key objectives is to make Pennsylvania’s workforce globally competitive, and that means preparing job seekers through employment and job training services. It’s enormously frustrating that a criminal record from 5, 10, even 15 years ago can stop them from getting good jobs today. This report shows that getting past those histories is key to Pennsylvania’s economic future. I applaud Lt. Governor Fetterman and the Board of Pardons for what they have already done to make pardons more accessible and encourage them to keep going.”

<https://www.economyleague.org/resources/pardons-economic-development-strategy>

getting the attention of the local CareerLinks and Community Action Agency, so there is now the possibility of creation.

On the other hand, it was the passion of state senators in Washington and Berks counties that led the creation of the pardon projects there, and of state representatives in Lancaster and Dauphin that are leading it in those counties. It was the passion of the executive director of the Bar Association and the First Deputy District Attorney in York; of the executive director of a religious non-profit and of a local attorney in Lancaster; of the Board Chair of the workforce development agency in Lackawanna; a professor in Centre, Cumberland and Erie; a Public Defender in Lehigh and Luzerne, and the Court Clerk in Beaver and Somerset Counties. These folks all had standing in the community and the ability to direct attention, legitimacy and resources to the issue of pardons, attracting others to get involved, supporting and participating.

Section 5: Conclusion

The true survival mechanism for all established pardon projects is momentum as it is responsible for the initial growth of a project and central to its establishment and survival. The findings depend on momentum, as the most successful projects were launched when the right people and resources were available and accessible at the same time. Each recommendation is a pillar that is essential to bearing the weight of a healthy project, and without existing simultaneously, projects are simply incapable of reaching their full potential.

Second chances start here. Key people in leadership positions must continue from the Statewide Effort and within Pardon Projects themselves. Restorative justice begins with making sure all Pardon Projects across Pennsylvania are strong and well-represented.

Luke Hamlin, July 2024