

## **Harnessing Hyperlocal Capacity to Change Lives and Revitalize West Philadelphia Through the Power of Pardons**

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### **Abstract**

Some 440,000 people in Philadelphia who have already served their criminal sentences remain shackled by the barriers erected by their criminal records. But the pardon is a powerful, effective, and significantly underutilized tool that can change not only the trajectory of individuals' lives but also entire communities. The pardon creates a second chance by erasing a person's criminal record. But a pardon must be applied for, and the application must be compelling to make it through the Board of Pardons and onto the governor's desk. Enter the West Philadelphia Pardon Network (WPPN), a cross-sector collaborative model that seeks to bring together a community to provide pathways to redemption for those who have been held accountable by the criminal legal system and establish a model of community forgiveness that other communities can follow. At its core, WPPN advocates for a self-help approach to ending the intergenerational poverty in West Philadelphia that is fueled by high rates of incarceration by tapping into the people who already live and work in the community and helping to expand the capacity of existing resources.

### **Introduction**

#### *The Problem: Criminal Records*

When Shuja Moore was released from prison in October 2016 after being incarcerated for 12 years, he was committed to fulfilling a vow he had made while in prison: to spend his life on a mission to see restorative justice pervade his West Philadelphia community. Like many prisoners, Moore had spent much of his time gaining the skills he knew he would need to be productive upon release. What Moore, a fourth-generation West Philadelphian, lacked in available resources, he more than made up for in ambition, community connections, and a deep, intimate knowledge of West Philadelphia. Moore personally understands the barriers facing an estimated 400,000 Philadelphians with criminal records—for example, barriers to obtaining

housing, gaining employment, earning licenses, and continuing education.<sup>1</sup> However, he also knows that a powerful tool exists to knock down these barriers: the pardon.

A pardon is the one way to eliminate a felony or misdemeanor conviction from a criminal record in Pennsylvania. It requires the court, prosecutors, and state police to erase the criminal record as if it never existed. Only the governor can grant a pardon, and the only way a pardon application gets to the governor is through a recommendation from the Board of Pardons. Anyone who has been convicted of a crime under Pennsylvania law can apply for a pardon, but they are rarely granted unless several years have passed since the applicant has completed the judicially-imposed sentence. The process of applying for a pardon is not arduous—rather, it is easily accessible and can be completed within a matter of hours without the assistance of a lawyer. Overall, pardon applications in Pennsylvania tend to be successful. Since 2019, 8 in 10 Pennsylvania pardon applicants have received a hearing before the Board of Pardons. During its first two hearings of 2024, the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons heard a total of 231 pardon requests and recommended 186 of them (80%) to the Governor.<sup>2</sup> A 10-year study conducted by the Economy League found that, over a ten-year period, pardons brought over \$16.5 million dollars in higher wages into communities across the state.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the success rate of pardon applications—and the tremendously positive impact pardons have—relatively few West Philadelphians apply for a pardon. The innovative cross-sector solution detailed below is informed by the following reasons for this disparity. For one, a lack of knowledge keeps many people with criminal records from applying for pardons because they are simply unaware that it is available to them and can apply easily and without hiring a lawyer. Additionally, cultural barriers keep some West Philadelphians from applying because they simply do not believe the opportunity is really for them—in other words, they do not believe the Board of Pardons would recommend the governor pardon someone who looks like them and comes from their neighborhood. Further, it is difficult for people to articulate their own stories of how they have changed their lives since they made contact with the law, and that compelling narrative is the key to a successful pardon application. As a result, every day, hundreds of thousands of people across the city of Philadelphia who have already paid their societal debt are prevented from pursuing their potential because their criminal record keeps them in the past.

### *The Solution: Hyperlocal Cross-Sector Collaboration*

The West Philadelphia Pardon Network (WPPN) began in response to the barriers created by criminal records in the community, the mismatch between pardon application success rate, impact, and availability, and the low levels at which this important resource was understood and utilized at the local level. At its core, WPPN seeks to apply an existing statewide model to the neighborhood level. Developed and launched in 2018, the Pennsylvania Association of Pardon

Projects is a statewide network of community organizations, elected officials, houses of worship, and other volunteers collaborating across sectors to see to it that Pennsylvanians are freed from the shackles of their criminal records through the power of pardons.<sup>4</sup> Spearheaded by Moore, WPPN seeks to implement this model on a hyperlocal scale by coming together as a community to provide redemption pathways to those who have been held accountable by the criminal legal system and establishing a model of community forgiveness that other communities can follow. At its core, WPPN advocates for a self-help approach to ending the intergenerational poverty in West Philadelphia that is fueled by high rates of incarceration. WPPN seeks to accomplish this goal by tapping into the people who already live and work in the community and helping expand the capacity of existing resources.

The Network consists of two primary components: Pardon Hubs and Pardon Coaches. Any interested and eager local organization—from nonprofits to community centers to places of worship to libraries to legislative offices—can serve as a Pardon Hub. As a Pardon Hub, these organizations serve as locations where residents can find information, become aware of the pardon process, and, if qualified, get assistance in completing the pardon application. Enter Pardon Coaches. Pardon Coaches are members of the community—presumably the volunteers or employees at a Pardon Hub—who have been trained to help applicants complete the pardon application and share their stories of transformation in the most compelling way possible. Because the narrative is the most crucial part of the application, the Pardon Coaches are trained to help bring out the applicant’s story in a way that will speak to the members of the Board of Pardons—the Lt. Governor, Attorney General, Victim Representative, Medical Doctor, and Corrections Expert.

The goal is to see West Philadelphians who have already served their sentences freed from the shackles of their criminal records. We will know that WPPN has succeeded when: 1) the number of West Philadelphians whose criminal records prevent them from obtaining housing, employment, or education shrinks, and 2) the percentage of pardon applications submitted through the Network surpasses the 80% statewide mark. Both markers of success will be measured through a standard form that our Hubs and Coaches will fill out after they have worked through a pardon application with a resident.

*The Novelty: Hyperlocal, Community-Led Web of Pardon Assistance*

The West Philly Pardon Network is the county's first neighborhood-specific network of pardon providers. While it is modeled on the larger statewide Pennsylvania Association of Pardon Networks, it is unique in its hyperlocal concentration within a specific neighborhood. Further, unlike many well-meaning community aid and development models, WPPN is driven and shaped by community members living, working, and recreating in West Philadelphia. WPPN does not

bring in lawyers from outside West Philadelphia or ask residents to travel to Center City law offices. Rather, WPPN provides local community advocates with the knowledge necessary to provide pardon application assistance to the neighborhood residents they already interact with on a regular basis. As such, WPPN will rely on the input and feedback of Pardon Hubs and Pardon Coaches—who know their neighborhoods and neighbors well—to continue shaping the overall structure of the Network.

*The Finances: Legwork to Be Sustainable and Scalable*

Given the relative simplicity of the concept behind the WPPN, it is a particularly financially sustainable and scalable approach to poverty alleviation by capitalizing on existing relationships and service providers in the community and providing them with the knowledge and training to be able to own and incorporate pardon applications into the work already being done in West Philadelphia. Harnessing these existing relationships means that there is already a foundation of trust within the community, making the tasks of spreading awareness about the availability and success rate of pardon applications and providing pardon coaching that much easier. The WPPN model requires no new buildings, no new organizations, and no new employees to accomplish its goals.

When it comes to garnering interest in joining the Network—whether as a Hub, a Coach, or a community member applying for a pardon—WPPN has a powerful tool in a short film called *Pardon Me*, which was produced and directed by none other than Moore.<sup>5</sup> The film documents the stories of two people who have suffered under the weight of their criminal record as it walks viewers through the process of being granted a pardon in Pennsylvania. The film has been screened in counties across the state and has played a critical role in helping community leaders and organizations better understand the power of pardons. Moreover, WPPN has been able to lay significant groundwork thanks to its collaboration with lawyers from Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) who have created training videos and guides and gathered useful, relevant content housed on a central Network website.<sup>6</sup> By curating all of the information that interested Hubs and Coaches would need to get started, WPPN has significantly minimized the lift required for organizations and individuals to get involved—and made way for the model to be easily scaled in other neighborhoods. Now, individuals and organizations interested in learning how to assist with pardon applications need only watch an hour-long pre-recorded training video on the WPPN website to be prepared to work on pardon applications.

*The Takeaway: Finding the Right Leader*

The beauty of WPPN's hyperlocal model is that it does not require large organizations with overflowing resources to sacrifice significant time, money, or space to help residents apply for

pardons. What's more, we already know this model is practicable at a larger level because of the success of the Pennsylvania Association of Pardon Networks, which now includes Pardon Projects in more than 30 counties across the state. The reasons articulated above, which make it easy for Hubs and Coaches to join the Network, also make the model easily replicable in other neighborhoods across Philadelphia—or any other city nationwide. The biggest challenge communities will face in replicating the West Philly Pardon Network will be finding another Shuja Moore, someone who is connected, rooted, and eager to see restorative justice infiltrate the homes and blocks throughout the neighborhood.

For more information, contact Shuja Moore, the founder of the West Philly Pardon Network, at [connect@domooregood.org](mailto:connect@domooregood.org), or the author at [crm379@drexel.edu](mailto:crm379@drexel.edu)

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<sup>1</sup> Nate File, *There are 400,000 people in Philly with convictions and criminal records. Expungement clinics can offer a fresh start.*, Phila. Inquirer (Oct. 20, 2022), <https://www.inquirer.com/news/clearing-criminal-record-clinics-20221020.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Board of Pardons*, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, <https://www.bop.pa.gov/Pages/default.aspx> (last visited Mar. 21, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Spolar et al., Economy League, *Pardons as an Economic Investment Strategy: Evaluating a Decade of Data in Pennsylvania* (April 2020), <https://plsephilly.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Economy-League-Report-Impact-of-Pardons.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Pardon Project*, Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, <https://pardonmepa.org/> (last visited Mar. 21, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> *Pardon Me*, <https://www.pardonsnow.org/> (last visited Mar. 21, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> *Pardon Project*, Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, <https://pardonmepa.org/> (last visited Mar. 21, 2024).