

PENNSYLVANIA PARDONS

LASP Legal Aid
of Southeastern PA

SELF-HELP GUIDE TO APPLYING FOR A GOVERNOR'S PARDON IN PENNSYLVANIA



Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania

Experiencing civil legal issues?



Intake Helpline: (877) 429-5994

Available Monday-Friday, 9:00am to 1:00pm



lasp.org/apply

This guide is provided courtesy of the Community Engagement Unit

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THE BASICS

WHAT IS A PARDON?

A pardon is an act by the PA Governor that formally forgives you for prior criminal acts. There is no application fee to submit a pardon application, and you do not need an attorney for your hearing. However, you are permitted to have an attorney represent you at any point during the process. There may be a nonprofit organization or *pro bono* attorney in your area that would be willing to represent you at little to no cost. Legal Aid of Southeastern PA is currently not representing pardon applicants.

WHAT DOES A PARDON DO?

If you are granted a pardon, your entire criminal record will be automatically expunged. An expunged record is completely destroyed and can never be used against you.

IS A PARDON RIGHT FOR ME?

You should pursue a pardon if you are willing to accept responsibility for your past criminal actions. A pardon is not an opportunity to challenge your conviction, and it is not an appeal to the courts. The Board of Pardons wants to see that you have rehabilitated yourself since your conviction, which means they usually want you to be off of supervision for 7+ years. The longer you have gone without any arrests or convictions, the better! Very serious crimes will typically only be granted a pardon if multiple decades have passed.

Due to a substantial backlog of pending applications at the Board of Pardons office, the current wait time from start to finish is estimated to be around 10 years.

APPLY



You can submit an application online or download a PDF application to submit via mail or e-mail by visiting <https://www.pa.gov/services/bop/apply-for-clemency>.

The PDF application, along with this guide and other supplemental information is also available at lasp.org.

THE TIMELINE

Submit Application

After submitting your application, you will receive a letter from the Board of Pardons that assigns your case a special ID number. Keep this letter for your records and mention your special ID number anytime you communicate with the Board.

Use this time to pay off your court debt!



You are unlikely to be granted a pardon if you owe money on your case, and guaranteed not to if you owe restitution.



Your application may qualify for expedited review.

This depends on the type of convictions you have and how long ago they occurred. The Board automatically determines your eligibility. You cannot request expedited review of your application.

Present Status Interview

A Parole Agent will contact you via phone to conduct an interview. The answers you provide in this interview will be forwarded to the Board, and they may bring it up at your public hearing.

Merit Review Hearing

At this hearing, the Board votes on whether you will have a public hearing. For non-incarcerated applicants, you need two out of five votes to get a hearing for non-violent offenses. If you committed a violent offense, you need three out of five votes. If you do not receive the required number of votes, your application is denied.

Public Hearing

If granted a hearing, you will be scheduled to attend a virtual hearing with numerous other applicants heard on the same day. The Board will conduct an interview, and vote on your application the same day.

Governor Review or Apply for Reconsideration

If you receive a majority vote from the Board (three out of five) at your public hearing, they will recommend you to the Governor for a pardon. If you are recommended, the Governor still has the option to deny your application, and there is no deadline for the time the Governor takes to review the recommendations. If you are not recommended, you can apply for reconsideration or submit a new application after one year.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Once you've decided to apply for a pardon, follow the steps outlined in this guide to complete the application.

1

COLLECT COURT RECORDS

(page 5)

Request an Access & Review Background Check from the PA State Police and request records from the court.

2

WRITE A PERSONAL STATEMENT

(page 6)

Draft a personal statement to include in your application that demonstrates your commitment to personal growth.

3

WRITE INCIDENT STATEMENTS

(page 7)

For each case on your record, write a brief statement providing context for the events that led to your arrest.

4

GET LETTERS OF SUPPORT

(page 7)

Ask family, friends, colleagues, local politicians, etc., to write a letter that shows they support you being granted a pardon.

5

INTERVIEW WITH PAROLE

(page 9)

An agent from the PA State Parole Board will contact you and conduct a phone interview. Your responses to their questions should be consistent with the statements in your application.

6

MERIT REVIEW & HEARING

(page 10)

Your case will go to the merit review stage, where the Board of Pardons votes whether to grant a hearing. If a majority of the Board votes in your favor, a public hearing will be scheduled shortly thereafter. At the hearing, the Board will interview you about your convictions and how you have changed.

1 COLLECT COURT RECORDS

Follow these steps to find the records for your convictions.

A PA State Police Access & Review Request

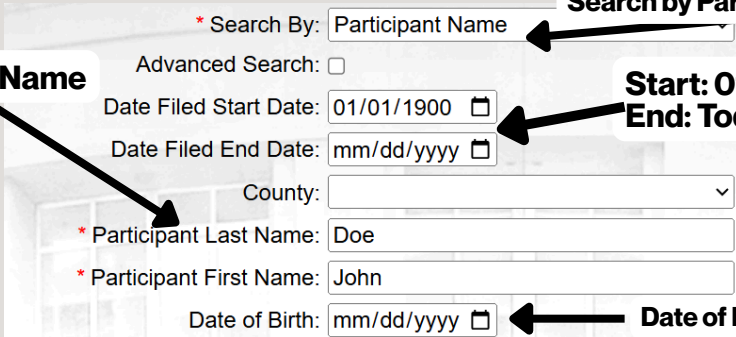
Order a background check from the PA State Police using the Access and Review Request Form, which can be found at the end of this packet.

You need to fully complete the form and mail it to the address provided on the righthand side. Place the completed form in a stamped envelope, along with a copy of your photo ID and a money order or certified check in the amount of \$20 made out to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. About 3-6 months after submitting this form, the State Police will mail you a comprehensive list of all convictions on your record. You will use this to get your court documents.

B Public Case Search

Visit <https://ujportal.pacourts.us/casesearch>.

- Search by “Participant Name.” Enter 01/01/1900 in the Date Filed Start Date and use today’s date in the end date box.
- Enter your last name, followed by your first name in the boxes below. Enter your date of birth if you have a common name.



The screenshot shows the UJS Case Search form with several annotations:

- Search by Participant Name**: An arrow points to the "Search By:" dropdown menu.
- Last & First Name**: An arrow points to the "Participant Last Name" and "Participant First Name" input fields.
- Start: 01/01/1900 End: Today's Date**: An arrow points to the "Date Filed Start Date" and "Date Filed End Date" date pickers.
- Date of Birth**: An arrow points to the "Date of Birth" date picker.

Below the form is a QR code labeled **UJS Case Search**.

C Request Court Records

After getting a background check and doing a public case search, you should finally have a clear picture of your entire record. For each case, you need to call the Clerk of Courts at the appropriate courthouse and request the records listed on the application (and on page 8 of this packet). Scan the QR code to see a useful breakdown on the Board of Pardons website.



BOP Court Records

2

WRITE A PERSONAL STATEMENT

You may want to consider addressing the following questions or topics in your statement.

REFLECT

If you spent time in jail/boot camp for this case, how did that impact you? What struggles did you face when you re-entered your community?

If you did not face incarceration, how else did your experience in the criminal-legal system impact you? What was your attitude or outlook at that time?

Include your entire work history, including an explanation of times when your convictions have held you back from getting the jobs you wanted.

GROW

Mention any work you have done in the community like volunteer work, church involvement, involvement in your political party, etc. What is rewarding about this work? What motivates you to help the community?

If you have children, tell the Board of Pardons about your children, raising them, and any struggles and/or joy that has brought you. How will a pardon help you be a better parent or grandparent?

If you struggled with substance use, how have you committed to your recovery? How do you value your mental wellness and what are your coping skills when difficulties arise?

CHANGE

How will this pardon help you? What specific job, degree, or business opportunity do you want to obtain? Will this help you get housing? Will this allow you to volunteer at your child's school?

Who is your support network and how do they hold you accountable? How is your current situation different than it once was?

How will the Board of Pardons know that you will never be involved in the criminal-legal system ever again? Specifically, how has your behavior changed? How have you matured?

Please note that everything you include in your personal statement is accessible by the general public and the press (by request), even if they have no involvement in your case.

3 WRITE INCIDENT STATEMENTS

Provide context for your convictions.

For each case on your record, you will need to write a short description of what happened on the day of the incident. The Board wants to know your involvement: where you were, what you did, and how you were caught/arrested.

Again, it's important to remember that **the Board wants you to take responsibility for your actions.** You should be truthful, but if your incident statement claims that you were completely innocent, you should at least provide context as to how you ended up getting convicted of the offense. As a reminder, a pardon is not the appropriate remedy for a wrongful conviction.

4 GET LETTERS OF SUPPORT

Show the Board that others support your pardon efforts.

Provide the final two pages of this packet to anyone who might be willing to write a letter that you can provide to the Board as proof of community support. Aim to have at least three letters.



You can send additional letters after you submit your application.

In addition to letters, you can send the Board any certificates or diplomas from education or training programs. You can also send proof of successful completion of treatment programs or any awards/honors you have received from community organizations.



If you haven't yet, PAY YOUR COURT DEBT.

The agent conducting your parole interview will likely notify you if you have any outstanding costs, but it is best to get ahead of it. You don't have to pay it before submitting your application, but it would be beneficial to set up a payment plan or budget for the expense.

FINAL CHECKLIST

Before submitting your application, check everything off this list. Incomplete applications will not be reviewed by the Board. It will be sent back to you for corrections, which further delays the process.

COURT RECORDS

For EACH case, you must have:

- Criminal complaint
- Affidavit of probable cause
- Criminal information/indictment
- Final plea or verdict
- Sentencing order
- Documentation of your financial obligation status

COMPLETED APPLICATION

Leave nothing blank! If there is a question on the application that doesn't apply to you, write "N/A." Applications with blank spaces will be considered incomplete. You should also have a **personal statement** in your application and **incident statements for each case**.

LETTERS OF SUPPORT

We recommend submitting at least three letters of support. **You can send in letters of support even after submitting your application!**

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS

Feel free to include any certificates, degrees, awards, etc. to show the Board your recent accomplishments.

PLAN TO PAY COURT DEBT

You should pay off your court debt as soon as possible, but you should submit your application even if you haven't yet. However, make a plan for how you can budget to pay it all off before your parole interview is scheduled in a few years. Your court debt includes all money owed to the courts, not just the fines associated with your conviction. This includes traffic tickets, citations, etc.



You will likely be waiting a long time after you submit your application. It is VERY important to update the Board if your contact information changes. If you receive any communication from them, reply in a timely manner and include your BOP Application/ID Number. When it's time for your parole interview, you should review the list on the following page and make sure you are prepared to provide answers.

5 PAROLE INTERVIEW

The Parole Agent may ask you the following questions, or similar ones.

A State Parole Agent will call you to schedule a time for an interview. Based off your answers, they will write an investigative report that the Board then reviews before the first vote. You should take this interview seriously. Remain respectful and answer all questions truthfully.

Residence

Where have you lived for the past 5 years? (Prepare a list of addresses).

Do you rent your home? If yes, have the rent amount and landlord's information ready.

What is the size of your home? Provide square footage and/or lot acreage.

Do you have any sheds, barns, pools, etc. located on the property?

Who lives in your home? What are their ages?

Employment

Where are you currently employed? Prepare the name of your employer, approximate start date, job title, salary, full or part time, and type of work.

If you have been at your current employer for less than one year, prepare the same information for your last place of employment.

If you are unemployed, how are you financially supporting yourself?

Education & Military

Did you complete high school, college, trade school, or a career certification program? Prepare names of schools or programs, area of study, time of attendance, and degree, diploma, certification, or license obtained.

Did you ever serve in the military? If so, have your DD-214 available and know your discharge status.

Community

Do you attend religious services? If so, where and what is your level of involvement?

Are you involved in the community? (volunteer work, public offices, etc.) What is the organization name? Provide your position and status within the organization.

Family

Are you married? If so, have your marriage license and date of marriage ready.

Have you been married before? If so, have their name and the date of separation, annulment, divorce, or death.

Do you have children? This includes foster, adopted, or step-children if you assisted in raising them. Have their name, age, and any information regarding child support, even if they are adults now.

Have you told your children about your criminal record?

Assets & Debts

What kind of vehicles do you own? List the year, make, model, and estimated value of all vehicles including ATVs, motor homes, and boats.

Have the addresses and amount of equity (the market value of your home minus how much you have left to pay for it) for each property you own, including time shares and vacation homes.

Do you have additional sources of income such as pension, alimony, child support, unemployment compensation, Social Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), or other forms of public assistance? Know the monthly amounts.

What is your total annual household income & total outstanding debts?

Are the fines, costs, and restitution related to your conviction paid in full? If not, what is the balance and when is the last time you made a payment? If you are unable to pay, what are your specific challenges that prevent you from doing so?

6

MERIT REVIEW AND PUBLIC HEARING

The Board will vote on your application.

All merit review and public hearings are held virtually via Zoom.

A livestream of the event is accessible to anyone via the Board's website.

Hearing Schedule: www.pa.gov/agencies/bop/board-meeting-dates.

MERIT REVIEW

At the merit review, the Board of Pardons will **vote to decide whether to grant you a public hearing**. You do not speak at merit review; you are not even required to attend. The Secretary reads a list of names and each Board member says "yes" or "no." You only need two out of five votes to be granted a hearing for non-violent offenses. For violent convictions, you need three out of five.

PUBLIC HEARING

If you are granted a public hearing, you will be notified by the Board Secretary. They will provide a date and time as well as a video conference link.

- Public hearings **only last about 15 minutes** per person, but there are dozens of people listed for a hearing each day. You may wait hours before it is your turn to be heard.
- You will need **strong internet connection** and an electronic device (laptop, phone, or tablet) with a working **camera and microphone**.
- You should **dress nicely and act professionally**. Think of the hearing as similar to a job interview.
- Join the hearing from a **quiet place with no distractions**. Stay seated in front of the camera the entire time.
- **Victims are permitted to make a statement**. You may have someone join to speak on your behalf, but you will be the one answering questions.

The Board may ask some tough or unexpected questions. Take the time to think about your response. Remain respectful and do not interrupt Board members while they are asking you a question, even if you already know the answer. **You should present the best version of yourself to the Board!**



The Board votes publicly at the end of each morning and afternoon session. You will know the result of your hearing the same day. You only need three votes to get a recommendation!

AFTER THE HEARING

If you are recommended a pardon, the PA Governor still has discretion to deny your application. Historically, the Governor almost always agrees with the Board and grants the pardon, but the recommendation is not a guarantee.

If you were not recommended for a pardon, you can always re-apply! You will need to wait 12 months to submit a new application, and the entire process will start over. If you have been denied twice, you need to wait 24 months before submitting a new application. You can also apply for reconsideration if your circumstances have changed significantly.

If you are granted a pardon, congratulations! Your record will be automatically expunged! This is a relatively new process, so you may want to follow up with the courts and state police a few months after receiving your decree. **Make sure you hold onto all of your pardon paperwork, but especially the decree, forever!**

DISCLAIMER

The information contained within this self-help guide has been aggregated from multiple sources maintained by the courts and state government, and is readily available online. This guide does not serve as a substitute for legal advice. LASP strongly encourages individuals to obtain counsel when participating in legal proceedings. It is the sole responsibility of the user of this guide to comply with all state and local rules.

REFERENCES AND OTHER RESOURCES

PA State Police

1800 Elmerton Avenue, Harrisburg PA 17110
Helpline: (888) 783-7972 | Expungement Unit: (717) 783-5499



PA State Police
Website

Other Organizations with Pardon Resources

PA Pardon Project: <https://pardonmepa.org/>

Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE): <https://plsephilly.org/pardons/>

PA Board of Pardons

555 Walnut Street, Suite 704, Harrisburg, PA 17101
Phone: (717) 787-2596 | E-mail: bop Clemency@pa.gov



BOP Website

PA PARDON APPLICATION

Letter of Support Instructions

Give a copy of this to anyone writing you a letter of recommendation to help guide them. There is no minimum or maximum number of letters required, but we encourage applicants to get at least 3 letters. The more letters, the better.

Why does the applicant need a letter of support?

The purpose of this letter is to **help the Governor and their staff at the Board of Pardons better understand why the applicant is deserving of a pardon of their criminal record from another person's perspective.** The Governor and the Board of Pardons like to see that an applicant has a variety of support from their family and community. A pardon is a long process that can take anywhere between 7-10 years. **You may or may not be contacted by the Board of Pardons throughout this process.** If the applicant is granted a pardon of their criminal record, they will be able to apply for jobs, housing, volunteer positions and more without their criminal record ever holding them back. Their entire criminal record will be expunged/destroyed.

Instructions:

1. Please **address the letter to the Board of Pardons.** You can start the letter by saying "Dear Board of Pardons:" or "To the Board of Pardons:" or something similar to that.
2. There is no minimum or maximum length, but these letters are usually about **1-2 pages.**
3. **Please type your letter.** do not handwrite the letter unless you absolutely have no access to a computer. The more detailed you can be, the better.
4. Please be sure to **physically print out, date, and sign** your letter.
5. **Include your phone number and email** in the letter, so the Board of Pardons can call you with questions if they decide to (they may or may not choose to).
6. Your letter should at the minimum include:
 - a. How long you have known the applicant?
 - b. In what capacity do you know the applicant (friend, family, mentor, co-worker, etc.)?
 - c. Why the applicant is deserving of a pardon of their criminal record?
 - d. If you are a relative or close friend of the applicant, how did their incarceration impact you personally? How have you seen them grow since then? Do you believe that they understand how their actions impacted their family, community, and themselves?
 - e. What are their positive characteristics in the community?

Note: The more detailed you can be, the better. Try to provide specific examples of their greatest qualities (hard working, respectful, non-violent, mentor, active volunteer, caring, good parent, etc.) It's also helpful to provide specific examples of personal growth that you have witnessed.

Once the letter is complete, please return it to the applicant, so they can attach it to their pardon application before submitting it.