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First Lady Wolf Discusses Clemency, Expungement, and Clean Slate for Women with Criminal Records

Harrisburg, PA – Today, First Lady Frances Wolf hosted *Women In Reentry: Clemency, Expungement, and Clean Slate*, the fifth in a series of virtual conversations with reentry advocates. The panel discussed each process and the impact they can have on women reentrants.

Panelists included:

- Celeste Trusty, *Secretary of the [Pennsylvania Board of Pardons \(BOP\)](#)*
- Naomi Blount Wilson, *Commutations Specialist at the [Office of the Lieutenant Governor](#)*
- Taylor Pacheco, *Deputy Executive Director at [Philadelphia Lawyers of Social Equity \(PLSE\)](#)*
- Katie Svoboda-Kindle, *Senior Staff Attorney at [Community Legal Services of Philadelphia \(CLS\)](#)*

"Pennsylvanians who have paid their debt to society and are positively contributing to their communities deserve a chance to reestablish their lives without the burden of their criminal record following them," said First Lady Wolf. "It is imperative that we empower women to seek clemency, expungement and record sealing through Clean Slate if they are eligible as these are the kinds of mechanisms that can truly give them a fresh start."

Clemency typically falls into two categories: pardons and commutations. A pardon constitutes total forgiveness by the state for a crime of which you were convicted, regardless of whether your sentence included time in prison. Applying for a pardon is free for individuals seeking forgiveness and the application can be [downloaded online](#). The process does not require a lawyer. Since 2015, Pennsylvania has been leading the country in pardon reform, with Governor Wolf issuing almost 2,000 pardons.

Secretary Trusty started the conversation by defining what a pardon is and highlighting the application process for eligible individuals.

“A criminal conviction can impact opportunities for employment, housing, and education, and can even restrict parents from volunteering in their children’s activities,” said Secretary Trusty. “Clemency is a critical process in Pennsylvania, providing life-changing second chances for our community members impacted by the legal system. Applying for clemency in the Commonwealth is free, and application materials are easily accessible to the public on the Board of Pardons website. Everyone deserves the opportunity for a second chance, and Pennsylvania is proud to have become a leader in clemency reform under the current administration.”

Blount-Wilson then shared her personal experience with the commutation process. Before working in the Office of the Lieutenant Governor as a commutations specialist, Blount-Wilson served 37 years at SCI-Muncy. In 1983, she received a life sentence without the possibility of parole, but Governor Wolf commuted her sentence, and she was released in 2019. Now, she helps others seeking clemency.

She iterated her appreciation of the First Lady’s endeavor to educate the public about commutations.

“There is greater interest in criminal justice right now than any time in recent memory, and we must make sure that women are not left out of this vital conversation,” said Pacheco. “When people are shackled by their criminal records, entire families suffer. Our commitment to reducing the collateral consequences of criminal records through the pardon process is one that has the potential to change the life outcomes of entire generations, and it is work that we can and must all do together as a statewide community.”

In the United States, 1 of 3 adults has a criminal record, and 1 of every 2 children has a parent with a criminal record. PLSE provides free legal representation to low-income residents of Philadelphia whose criminal records are hindering their progress. They formed the statewide [Pardon Project](#), an initiative that empowers community leaders to create community-based hubs that educate and engage people with the pardons process. Currently, seven counties have adopted a Pardon Project including Allegheny, Beaver, Berks, Erie, Lackawanna, Lancaster and Washington. Other PLSE services include assistance with seeking expungements in criminal court and pardons from the Governor.

Pacheco also discussed the difference between a pardon and expungement. Expungement is the only mechanism to permanently and completely remove criminal history record information. This process must be completed through a court.

“Nearly 1 in 3 Americans has a criminal record, and even a minor record can cause lifelong barriers to opportunity,” says Katie Svoboda-Kindle. “Clearing those records would allow access employment, housing and education, but 9 out of 10 people who are eligible for record clearing don’t get it done. Clean Slate solves this ‘second chance gap’ using technology that seals eligible records through an automated process.” Svoboda-Kindle also stated that Pennsylvania started implementing Clean Slate in 2019 and to date, over 1 million Pennsylvanians have benefitted from Clean Slate automated sealing, while over 40 million cases have been sealed.

Founded in 1996 by the Philadelphia Bar Association, CLS works to fight poverty, challenge systems that perpetuate injustice, and change lives through cutting-edge advocacy and exceptional legal representation. This includes helping individuals navigate the Clean Slate

process, so their minor offenses no longer impede access to employment, housing and other basic needs. In the past year, CLS has represented approximately 10,000 people.

Governor Wolf [enacted the Clean Slate law](#), which allows individuals to petition the courts for their records to be sealed if a person has been free from conviction for 10 years for an offense that resulted in a year or more in prison and has paid all court-ordered financial debts. Offenses eligible for Clean Slate include second- and third-degree misdemeanors, and misdemeanors punishable by two years or less in prison; summary convictions; and charges not resulting in convictions. Ineligible offenses include crimes involving danger to persons; crimes against families; and firearm offenses. The full list can be found [here](#).

The next *Women in Reentry* roundtable is scheduled for Wednesday, January 19.

The conversation can be viewed on the [One Lens Facebook page](#) or [PAcast](#).

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