

A clean slate: Local group focuses on record sealing and pardon applications

By Chloe Forbes Meadville Tribune

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Marcia Metcalfe (left) and Chris Youngs are volunteers with Crawford County Clean Slate.

At the core of their work, a group in Crawford County believes that people can change, so their records should too.

“Our philosophy is kind of that once a person who’s been an offender has paid their debt to society, they should be encouraged to continue on,” said Don Goldstein, a Crawford Clean Slate volunteer. “It should not be a life sentence, and that’s what we try to do, is remove the impediments to that.”

Crawford Clean Slate is a local organization that focuses on facilitating the process of record sealing and pardons.

Its inception was about four or five years ago at a meeting with community partners focused on reducing the impact of trauma on the county. In Pennsylvania, the Clean Slate

law enables people convicted of low-level crimes to have their records wiped after a certain number of years.

For many people, even a low-level conviction can be a barrier to education, employment and housing.

“It’s been traditional for employers to ask if a person has a clean record, has any criminal record,” explained Goldstein, who was an economics professor at Allegheny College before retiring. “Usually it’s a box that you have to check on an application. Oftentimes, unfortunately, if somebody checks that box, their candidacy for that job kind of ends right there.”

The same is true for training programs and housing applications, in some cases. Goldstein and other members of Crawford Clean Slate said they’ve heard horror stories of people who went through entire training programs, like to be a nurse’s aide, only to find they can’t be granted their final certificate because of their criminal background.

Record sealing can hide a criminal record from public view and is available for some misdemeanor and felony convictions, in addition to records that didn’t result in convictions. Filing for record sealing does not require a lawyer, but some people need guidance in the process, which is where Crawford Clean Slate comes in.

The group of 18 volunteers currently and one part-time coordinator, which they have through their affiliate, Women’s Services Inc., looks over records and helps people determine what they may be eligible for under the law.

They began work about two years ago and have since grown to include pardons, too, as record sealing means the record is still available for government agencies to see.

“If they want the record completely disappeared because maybe they are applying for a job that requires an FBI background check or maybe they want to apply to carry a weapon, they’re still going to run into an issue because those records are available to the state police and the courts,” said Marcia Metcalfe, a retired health care worker and volunteer for Crawford Clean Slate.

A pardon can realistically happen right after a crime occurs, but the group asks that anyone who would like a pardon wait at least five to 10 years from going through the court system to show they’ve turned their life around and can show evidence of that.

Metcalfe explained that many of the offenders they service are people who want to move on with their lives but are unable to. Seeing the impact of trauma, she says there’s no need to re-traumatize people by making them relive the criminal choices they made previously with constant barriers and stigma.

“These folks are motivated, highly motivated to get behind that and not be defined by mistakes they’ve made in the past,” she said.

Goldstein said there are some employers in the area who are willing to give second chances to people with criminal records, and according to the businesses, those are the employees who don’t take the opportunity for granted and work the hardest.

A report from the National Crime and Justice Research Alliance found that record clearances reduced ex-offenders’ likelihood to commit future crimes and increased their chances for reintegration into society.

Still, if a parent wants to chaperone a school trip for their children or own a gun for self-defense, they may be unable due to a criminal record.

“A pardon, if successful, automatically produces what’s called an expungement, which is a complete destruction of the record. It just goes away,” said Chris Youngs, a retired lawyer and Crawford Clean Slate volunteer. “So for people who don’t meet the eligibility criteria for record sealing or who meet it but would like to have a more thorough removal of the record for their reasons, a pardon is the best route.”

The process to pardon

Requesting a pardon requires the person to provide numerous documents, including a personal statement.

“They have to describe what happened, why they were caught, what the circumstances were, and then they have to write a personal statement that has to describe what has happened to them since that crime and how their lives have changed,” Metcalfe said. “They need to be taking full responsibility for the crime, not blaming it on anyone else or providing any excuses and be able to point to things that they’ve done to try to become active and productive members of the community.”

That can be in the neighborhood or church, or through family or a social organization. Letters of support from people who have witnessed the person’s commitment to their community are part of what makes someone a good candidate for a pardon.

Then, the application goes to the state pardon board, which will meet twice to review a case and decide whether to accept or reject it. After that, it moves to the governor’s desk to be signed.

Currently, that’s where a backup is occurring, according to Goldstein, Youngs and Metcalfe.

“The governor has granted quite a few, but it’s still only a fraction,” Youngs said, as Goldstein noted the hundreds untouched.

The governor can pardon any state crime, no matter the nature of the crime. Although some are unlikely to be pardoned, like homicide or sexual violence. Typically, the process takes about five years.

Sometimes, the application to be pardoned is an obstacle in itself, though.

“It’s difficult for potential applicants to write their criminal history,” Youngs said. “It’s difficult for them to do that. Some of the people I have met with can’t get through that hurdle of writing out what did I do, why did I do it, even though they’ve talked to people about it.”

For many people, this is a part of their recovery process.

Moving forward

Metcalfe explained that there’s a pardon application awaiting Gov. Josh Shapiro’s signature right now from Crawford County that sticks out to her.

The woman, who now has a husband and two children, has a crime that’s about 19 years old. When she was with a prior partner, the two of them were using illegal substances and decided to steal the partner’s mother’s wallet and a friend’s bank card to withdraw money from a Sheetz gas station. The Sheetz had a camera, so the two were caught and charged.

“There were numerous conversations where there were tears. It’s hard to go back and talk about the details of those things, especially when you’re really ashamed of it, but gradually, she did,” Metcalfe said.

One of the most effective letters for a pardon is a letter of support from the victim. In this case, the woman contacted her ex-partner’s mother, despite being wary.

“(The mother) wrote a letter, a very nice letter, and she said, ‘I just can’t believe how being clean can clean somebody so completely,’” Metcalfe said. “Even if she (the woman) doesn’t get a pardon, this has changed her life.”

“She’d been walking around, feeling miserable and gutted for 19 years,” Goldstein added. “One of the really big factors that I personally had not anticipated before we started doing this is just the feelings people have about themselves. Having a criminal record, even from a long time ago, can be something that’s just hanging over their heads, making them doubt their capabilities or their access to the community and its resources, in its participation.” Youngs said that he’s come across multiple people who accumulated low-level crimes while they were young, and now, years later, it’s given them a bad outlook on life. Instead, this process gives them hope for their future.

Goldstein said that’s part of why local officials like the district attorney, common pleas judges and clerk of courts are supportive of Crawford Clean Slate.

“I think through their experience, they see the ways that people end of being repeat offenders and they — like we — see this as a very effective means to breaking into that cycle,” he said. “You give people hope. You give people the notion that if they keep their nose clean for a certain number of years, there’s a light at the end of the tunnel.”

In another instance, a woman approaching retirement felt the weight of her criminal background continually weighing on her conscience and asked Crawford Clean Slate to help her get record sealing. In turn, she found that her record had been automatically sealed through a recent expansion of the Clean Slate law.

The Clean Slate law has had a few changes in the past several years, and to keep up with it, the steering committee meets quarterly. They’re hoping that as the law continues to expand, so will their ranks.

The team would like to add more volunteers and gain a modest amount of money to have more part-time staff support. The current staff member through Women’s Services is thanks to a grant through the Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity’s Pardon Project. Monetarily, people can donate to Women’s Services and ask that their donation go toward the work of Crawford Clean Slate. For those who would like to volunteer with the organization, they have to go through training first, which is done through Crawford Clean Slate and Northwestern Legal Services.

Youngs said that being a volunteer is a great way to give back to disadvantaged members of the community.

“I want the applicants to feel that we’re here to listen to what they have to say whether they choose to go ahead with a pardon application or not, whether they just get bound up in the middle of it and don’t get it finished, that we — whoever their coach is — has taken the time to listen and say ‘yea, we’d like to help you out,’” he said.

Crawford Clean Slate can be reached at cleanslate@womensservicesinc.org or (814) 724-4637. They are also available on the first Friday of every month at the Meadville Public Library’s Community Coffee Hour, from 10 to 11 a.m. on the upper floor of the library, 848 N. Main St.

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