



A Guide to Parole Preparation In Pennsylvania
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A. INTRODUCTION

This Guide is offered as a resource to people who have upcoming appearances before the Pennsylvania Parole Board (“Parole Board” or “the Board”). It draws on the expertise of people who have previously appeared before the Parole Board, as well as some advocates who have assisted them.

This Guide assumes that people incarcerated in Pennsylvania prisons who have appeared before the Parole Board are the ultimate experts in both their own experience and specifically in the parole preparation process. The following materials are meant to serve only as an additional resource to that expertise. The strategies suggested here are by no means the only ways, or guaranteed ways, to achieve release. In the end, only you can know what’s best for you, and this Guide simply offers suggestions for you to consider.

The parole process can be a difficult and sometimes painful journey, but it is the deepest hope of those who put together this Guide that whatever you do to prepare will ultimately lead you home.

B. FIRST STEPS

Identify your strengths

Once you learn that you have a Parole Board appearance, take some time to explore what it is you want to convey to the interviewers through your parole packet and during your interview. What do you want them to know about you? What do you want the interviewers to think and feel after they meet you? What parts of yourself do you want to highlight? What parts do you want them to know you recognize as still needing work?

Begin by reflecting on your experience of incarceration. You can start at the beginning of your sentence or look back from your most recent interview with the Board (if this isn’t your first time). Identify things about your experience that have gone well, such as completing programs, earning certificates, maintaining a good disciplinary record, working toward your GED or higher degree, becoming close with others inside, taking on leadership roles, maintaining relationships with loved ones outside, developing a long-term release plan, etc. Identify things that you feel proud of, and begin to think about not only how you accomplished them, but why they matter to you. If you haven’t had leadership roles in prison, perhaps you want to emphasize how you have come to accept the leadership of others and how that is a change in your life.

Identify your “truth”

We define “truth” broadly to include how you define and see yourself, and how you understand yourself to be in the world and in relation to others. You also have your own truth about the crime of which you were convicted. However, from the moment people are arrested, they are usually advised by their lawyers not to talk about the incident for which they were arrested. This advice makes sense in the context of a pending prosecution because anything the accused says to anyone except their defense attorney can – and usually will – be used against the accused to prosecute them.

Because of the adversarial process of the criminal legal system, there usually isn’t much room for someone accused of a crime to talk openly about what they actually did, or to explain the full context surrounding what happened (including various life events and factors that led to the crime). Often the adversarial legal system process leads people to remain silent about how and why things unfolded as they did, particularly when it seems that not talking about it helps protect them from judgment, loss, alienation, and punishment.

Because of these experiences of holding in such significant life events (especially events often rooted in childhood trauma or experiences of systemic oppression), it generally can be hard for people who are in prison to get in touch with their truths and feelings about their past actions. Prison is also usually not a safe place for people to share their real feelings or reflect on their experiences. Your feelings may include a sense of injustice or betrayal, anger at the government or others, and possibly remorse for your previous actions. It is important first to process your feelings about your conviction before speaking to the Board about them. You are not likely to put your best foot forward if you are first considering these ideas as you sit in front of the Board.

We believe that exploring your truth about your conviction and your own life, and coming to terms with that truth, is a crucial part of the process that will ultimately make being released far more likely. Later in this Guide, you will find some tools to help you engage in this difficult, but rewarding, emotional work.

Identify your resources

Identify what resources you already have that you can draw upon to build support for your release. Are there family members and friends on the outside who are willing to offer you housing, employment, or other kinds of support after you have been released? Are there organizations that you’ve worked with before or had contact with since you were inside that might be willing to write a letter of support to the Board, offering support when you get out? Are there programs you’ve completed, classes you’ve taken, or experiences you’ve had behind bars that contributed to your growth in ways that you can describe to

the Board? Is there a religious group you've been active in that has helped you understand yourself and helped you take accountability for your past actions, or that serves as a guide for your current behaviors?

Begin to gather materials such as certificates, notices of completion, letters of support, and other documents. These materials will help show the interviewers the resources you have drawn upon during your incarceration to become the person you are now. They also will help to show the interviewer you have grown into someone who does not pose a risk to public safety, and to demonstrate that you will put to good use the support of individuals and/or organizations after you are released to help you succeed in the community. Later in this Guide, you will find more specifics about these documents, and a list to help you keep track of them.

Also think about the more personal resources you have. Who can you ask for support in the parole preparation process? Who can help you practice for your interview? Who can you confide in if you start to feel anxious in the days leading up to or after the interview? With whom can you process your experience? There may be other people inside who can help serve as a resource for you, and/or you might identify people outside of prison who can support you.

If you can't identify another person you feel comfortable asking for support, then make a commitment to be that support for yourself. Rather than avoiding the necessary parole preparation work because you don't feel that you have another person to bounce ideas off of, schedule time for self-reflection and practice. If you've ever spent time in solitary confinement, then you might already be familiar with tools for coping with isolation. Whether you visualize for yourself answering the Parole interviewers' questions, or you imagine talking through the parole preparation process with a friend (perhaps someone who has gone through this process before you and has been released, or even a historical figure who endured the experience of incarceration), invest time and intention in the preparation project, regardless of whether you have external support to draw upon. Later in this guide, there are common interview questions you may wish to prepare for.

Lastly, make a plan for how you will take care of yourself and attend to your needs in this process. How can you ensure that on the days leading up to and on the day of the interview, you are your full and best self? Does that mean getting enough sleep the weeks or nights before? Does it involve reading books that comfort you? Writing letters to people you trust? Avoiding situations that might result in a disciplinary ticket? Perhaps practicing meditation to help you manage the stress of anticipating and then experiencing the interview, and of waiting for the Board's results?

Whatever your process is, building in daily practices that help you face the reality of your interview with the Board, rather than avoiding it, may help you feel more confident and steadier on the day of.

Identify challenges and obstacles

If you have been denied release in the past, consider what the reasons are that you think the Board denied you. Plan for how you can address those reasons. Are there concerns the interviewers expressed during your interview or in the Board's decision that you can work to address before your next interview (such as a lack of post-release plans? Or a lack of programming? Or lack of genuine remorse?) Or, if they expressed concerns about things that you cannot change (such as the facts of the crime for which you were convicted), are there specific aspects of the Parole Board's concerns that you can respond to in a different way in both your written materials and during the interview?

Also work to identify obstacles in yourself. We recognize that there are many different kinds of physical and emotional responses that people have when they face the challenge of preparing for the Board. It's an incredibly heavy, high-stakes process, and often people become defensive, shut down, or just avoid the process altogether. If you find yourself shutting down when thinking about parole preparation, explore possible fears that keep you from engaging in the process. Are you afraid of being asked questions you can't answer? Are you afraid of what it might actually mean to be released? Are you afraid of what awaits you once you return home? While these are incredibly difficult and personal questions, spending time with yourself and even writing down your answers could make all the difference.

C. COLLECTING DOCUMENTS

The interviewers are required to review particular documents before (or during) your interview as a part of their release consideration. If possible, it can be helpful for you to get these documents, too, so you have a fuller picture of what the interviewers see, and so you can respond to the questions or concerns these documents might raise for the interviewers.

Key Documents

This is the bare minimum required to present a parole application to the Board:

1. **Parole Application** – this is the one-page form provided by the Department of Corrections. It's necessary to fill out this document to start the parole process, but several other documents are required for a complete application. The application includes a small space for a personal statement explaining why you should be granted parole, but you are allowed (and encouraged) to write a personal statement significantly longer than will fit on the one-page form.
2. **Home Plan** – This is another one-page form provided by the Department of Corrections, the institutional agent, or your counselor or unit manager. The home plan needs to include who you will be living with when you return home, their relationship to you, and that person's address and contact information. Parole staff will then review the home plan and decide whether to approve the

plan you've submitted.

3. **Employment Plan** – This is similar to the home plan. You will need to submit something in writing to the interviewers that explains where you will be working, your supervisor or contact person for the job, and what your responsibilities will be, or, if you're still figuring out what your plan will be, explain in as much detail as possible how you plan to look for work once you're released and the skills that you have that will help you to be successful.
4. **Restitution/Crime Victims Compensation Fund Payments** – You are required to pay any money owed to the Crime Victims Compensation Fund before being granted parole. You are not required to have paid all your restitution, but if you have any receipts or documentation that show that you have made progress towards paying, this would be very helpful to include in your parole packet.

Documents You Should Acquire For Your Parole Packet

In preparation for appearing before the Board, a lot of applicants create their own “parole packet” to help explain to the interviewers why they are suitable for parole release. When considering whether to release you on parole, the interviewers want to know whether you have a plan for housing, education or employment (including job training programs), drug or alcohol treatment (if relevant to your previous history), and emotional support from family or friends.

They also want to know about your accomplishments inside and the emotional work you've done in coming to terms with the crime for which you were convicted.

The following are advocacy materials that can be created or obtained and then compiled into a single packet that you can submit to the Board. These documents can help demonstrate how and why you are suitable for release. Everyone's packet will be different – and should be different, because each packet should be personalized to the individual going before the Board. However, here are some common parts of the packet that you might want to consider including in the materials you submit.

This is a list of documents that you (or a family member or friend) should try to collect, either by requesting them from your counselor or unit manager. If you ask someone on the outside to request these documents on your behalf, you will likely need to give them a signed (and sometimes notarized) release form showing that they have your permission to get these documents.

1. **Your Educational or Programming Records** – Make sure to include copies of all of your certificates, notices of completion, awards, diplomas, training and employability report, resume (if you have one), and anything else similar in your packet. This should include certificates from any and all sources that show your achievements while incarcerated, including, but not limited to: GED

programs, trade school, vocational training, higher education/college (whether you received several credits or a degree), completion certificates for PADOCC programs (ART/ASAT) or non-DOCCS programs, religious studies, other voluntary programs, charity/fundraising work, or anything else. Be sure to emphasize and explain programs you have completed or certificates you have received that require the most time and effort and are the hardest to achieve. Also explain what these certificates mean to you. How will they empower you to return to life outside without reverting back to crime? The chances are that the interviewers do not know what is required for you to earn the certificates you have achieved.

2. **Your Trial Transcript/Sentencing Minutes** – If you think that there’s something in your trial transcript or sentencing minutes that you think would help you prepare for your interview (even if you don’t include it in your parole packet) you can request a copy of your transcript through your counselor. The Board already has a copy of your transcripts, but you may wish to address certain negative facts in them. And you want to ensure that you understand the version of the events you were convicted for.
3. **Health Records** – These might be useful to obtain if you have significant medical issues or have received mental health services through PADOCC. Anyone requesting these documents from the outside on your behalf will have to submit a HIPAA-compliant release form (HIPAA stands for the “Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996,” federal legislation that seeks to ensure the privacy of your medical information). Consider whether you need ALL of your health records or just specific ones — your entire medical record could be an overwhelming amount of material.
4. **Your Institutional Discipline/Misconduct Records** – The interviewers will have access to a copy of this, but it might be helpful to have a copy yourself in advance of your interview. You can request this yourself through your counselor or unit manager.
5. **Personal Statement** – This is a chance for you to share with the interviewers your thoughts, feelings, and discoveries about your conviction through open and honest reflection. You can use your statement to give your personal history, talk about your childhood, share information about your family and other loved ones, and/or talk about your accomplishments and time in prison, and your plans for when you are released.
 - a. Many people want to talk in their personal statements about how they’ve changed over the course of their incarceration. When talking about your own transformation, if you feel you’ve undergone one, try not to list accomplishments, but rather give a real explanation for what drove the change. Was it a part of your education? A certain teacher, class or concept that created a revelatory moment? Was it something a friend or mentor shared? A loss of a loved one? A religious experience? At the end of this guide are some writing prompts for you to

consider that might help guide you as you write your personal statement.

- b. Consider instances in which you put your strengths and truths to work. Such instances may have occurred in the context of your relationships with friends or family on the outside, or interactions with prison staff or other incarcerated people. Providing the interviewers with concrete, real life examples of challenges you have faced in prison and how you have handled them can powerfully illustrate character traits, growth, and change.
 - c. Try to keep the statement as concise as you can and avoid long introductions or long conclusions. The interviewers are unlikely to read the entire packet, and if you can reduce the amount of excess material, there is a greater chance they will read the things that really matter to you.
 - d. Even if you don't end up including your personal statement in your packet, it can be a great exercise for self-reflection. Keep in mind, however, the risks that can come with putting things in writing that you don't want others to read until or unless you're ready to share them with the interviewers (risks we imagine you're very familiar with, given your time in prison). If you do decide to write out your thoughts, you might want to label your statement as a "draft" so that it's clear that it's a work in progress.
6. **Letters of Support** –_These can be letters from family, friends, members of the community who have supported you, community or religious leaders, potential employers, supervisors or teachers while in prison, or mentors. Think of people who know you well, who can speak to your character, good qualities, and the positive changes they've seen you make in your life. At the end of this guide are suggested instructions for you to send these people to assist them in writing your Letters of Support.
7. **Additional Documents** – Include any additional documents that you reference in your statements and materials. You can also include transcripts from educational programs or an evaluation from a supervisor or mentor. You can also include photographs or artwork that you have done, if you believe they will carry a positive message.

How to Obtain Documents for Your Packet

1. **Educational or Programming Records:** Your counselor should be able to provide you with all the individual certificates as well as a master list identifying what you have completed.
2. **Trial Transcript:** Fill out the form on the county website and mail (or email if allowed and able) to the clerk of the county.

3. **Health Records:** Can be obtained through a counselor or institutional agent.
4. **Disciplinary Records:** Can be obtained through a counselor or institutional agent.
5. **Letters of Support:** Ask friends, family, valued professional acquaintances or religious personnel you have a close relationship with to write these, using the sample in this Guide if you would like.

Structure of the Packet

Use a table of contents to summarize the materials in the packet and dividers or even colored pages to separate the sections. You want to have a really specific table of contents (i.e., certificate of completion for [x] program on page 20) so that even if the interviewers don't have the time or inclination to read all of the materials, they have a quick snapshot and can get a sense of the scope and the depth of your accomplishments.

Where to Send the Packet

A copy of the packet should go to the institutional agent, who will forward an electronic copy to the Board.

Keep a Copy for Yourself. Keep a copy of the packet for yourself, or if a supporter on the outside sent the packet, make sure they send it to you as well (and keep a copy for their own records). The materials you've compiled will certainly be a useful resource either at future interviews if you are denied, or for various purposes once you are released (such as obtaining certificates of relief from disabilities, job applications, and so on). Also, because the interviews are commonly conducted via video conference, if you have your own copy, you can reference it and ask the interviewers whether they have their own copy as well.

What the Interviewers Receive

The interviewers receive a lot of documentation in addition to your parole packet. Here's some of what they're likely to have and look at prior to your interview:

- The official version of the crime, otherwise known as the "49" sheet;
- Your misconduct and disciplinary history while in prison;
- The results of any tests or assessments that PADO has conducted while you were incarcerated. These can include the intake assessments and any tests that determined your security or "risk" level;

- Recommendations from the prosecutor in your case, the judge who sentenced you, and/or the victim(s) in your case. Whether or not you are recommended for release, the Board cannot tell you if the victim expressed their wishes or whether this factored into the Board’s decision;
- Recommendation from PADOCC and your unit manager;
- What programs you were required to complete while inside, and whether or not you’ve been able to enroll in or finish the class.

D. THE INTERVIEW

Seeing the interviewers can be difficult and preparation is key. We recognize that the actual interview can be draining emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Interviewers are asking you questions about the most intimate and sometimes painful parts of your life, and the pressure you feel about answering their questions can be overwhelming. Thinking about the interview far in advance, practicing with someone you trust, and finding ways to be fully prepared for any questions that may arise can help you build confidence and strength. Also thinking about how you can ensure that the message you want the interviewers to walk away with will be communicated, no matter what questions are asked, will also help you feel more secure. Just remember that it is better to be your true and authentic self than who you think the Parole Board wants you to be.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Reflection and Practice

If you have had a Board interview before, identify what has gone well at past Board appearances (e.g., answers to interviewers’ questions that you feel good about). Make a plan for how you can try to repeat what went well (in the case that those parts are within your control).

Also, think about the parts of a Board interview that are most challenging for you. Or, if this is your first appearance, think about what you imagine will be the most difficult part, based on what you have heard from others. Identify what makes those parts of the interview difficult. Some examples might be the interviewers’ attitudes; the requirement that you speak about yourself; the impersonal nature of video conferencing; interviewers’ questions about topics that may bring up painful memories or difficult feelings; interviewers asking questions based on inaccurate information; interviewers asking questions about topics that you have been advised by your trial attorney not to talk about; interviewers asking lots of “yes” or “no” questions, and/or multiple questions in a row without giving you time to answer them all completely, etc.

Previous Board Appearances

If you've been to the Board before, think about what went well, and what you wish had gone differently. The questions below might be helpful starting points:

- How do you think this interview went?
- Which responses did you think were effective?
- What do you think you could have done better?
- Which responses (if any) do you think were particularly problematic?
- Is there anything that you feel hasn't been addressed? Is there something you wish you had said?
- What do you wish the interviewers had asked?

Role play and Common Questions

Find someone you trust inside, or even a friend or family member on the outside, to practice with (ideally in person, during a visit, because phone calls are recorded). Ask your supporter to pretend to be an interviewer and go through questions you've been asked at prior interviews and/or questions from the list below.

Some of the Board's questions are likely to come from information contained in the official version of the crime. Common topics include: what happened and why; any previous convictions; the circumstances of your life before you were arrested (especially any references to gang involvement, drug or alcohol addiction, prior convictions, etc.); your disciplinary history while incarcerated; programming; education and future goals; community support and release plans; and the general "What else do you want us to know?" question.

Here are some frequently asked questions by the interviewers to help you with role-playing:

- Were you involved in this crime?
- Why did you [insert fact from the crime, such as hit him/shoot him/run from the police/sell drugs/carry a gun]?
- Why did you think you needed a gun?
- Do you think that selling drugs is a victimless crime? Why?
- You said that you were high/drunk at the time of this offense. Why did you use drugs/alcohol?
- How do we know you won't use drugs/alcohol upon release?
- Were you offered a plea bargain in this case? Why didn't you take it?
- Who else was involved; what happened to them?
- How do you explain this escalating pattern of violence when you were a young person?
- What were you thinking when you committed this crime? What was going through your mind?

- What would you say if you could speak to the victim of your instant offense or that person's family?
- In cases where there was a claim of self-defense: why didn't you just walk away?
- What have you learned from [required program]?
- Were you a member of a gang?
- Why should this panel grant you parole?
- Do you think you've served enough time?
- Do you have anything else to add?

While you're practicing, you might want to write out sentences that you'd like to say in response to questions. While the point is *not* to just develop a script that you memorize, sometimes writing can help clarify the answers you'd like to give and may help you remember the points you'd like to make during the actual interview. Again, keep in mind the possible risks of having such answers in writing (given that you don't have control over your papers); some people prefer to write down answers to help them practice and then destroy them if it feels too risky to keep them around. You'll figure out what works best for you.

Also spend time imagining yourself in the interview room. If you can, try to make the space and questions feel familiar; this might help you reduce your nervousness or feelings of discomfort during your actual time with the interviewers.

And remember, if need be, it's ok to say "Can you repeat the question?" if you need more time to reflect during the interview.

Get your mind right

Consider how you want to feel during and after your next interview (e.g., calm, prepared, confident, humble, steady, and so on). Identify the steps you can take every day between now and your interview to help you feel the way you want to feel during and after your interview.

Going to the Board is so difficult. You want to be confident and positive, but you may be afraid of getting your hopes up or giving yourself a false sense of security. During the weeks leading up to the interview, be kind to yourself. Explore your own feelings of fear and anxiety as they relate to seeing the Board, and perhaps sharing these feelings with others you are close to may help relieve some of that tension. Practicing, preparing, and having a plan, as well as getting good rest the night before will make you feel that much more ready for the interview.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Time is short!

The average interview is very quick, about 15 minutes! Decide what are the most important things you want the interviewers to understand about you and why you're ready for release, and highlight them in whatever ways you can.

Strategies for talking to the interviewers

Use material from your personal statement. You can keep a copy of your personal statement in front of you for the interview so you remember what you want to convey if you get nervous. You could even bring the written answers you drafted along with you if you think it might comfort you. Just avoid reading from a page during the interview or sounding rehearsed. Try to make eye contact with each interviewer, if possible, especially if the interview happens via video conference.

Stick to your talking points and come back to them

This is a common strategy for anyone facing difficult questions in a public setting, such as political candidates, people talking to the media, or attorneys making arguments before a court. They know what message they want to get across. You should have a good sense of what your most important points are and stick with those or circle back to those points even if the interviewers ask you questions that head off in another direction. This is especially true for yes/no questions. Be prepared to provide complete answers such as "Yes, and I would like to explain why..." or "No, because...."

This doesn't mean that you should avoid the question asked. Always answer the question in every way you can, but see every question as an opportunity to share the main points you know you want the interviewers to hear. For this reason, "Do you have anything else to add?" is a great, but sometimes intimidating question. It's an opportunity for you to say anything that the interviewers didn't cover, or to share thoughts that you may have forgotten earlier. Spend time drafting and practicing your answer to this question. It can be one of the most important.

Highlight the positive

The interview is your opportunity to convey to the interviewers that you are ready for release. While much of your record speaks for itself, this is your time to highlight your strongest qualities, demonstrate how special you are, and show the interviewers that you've spent the past years preparing yourself for this moment.

Talking about the crime: accepting responsibility while showing insight

Your job in the interview is to make your case, and part of that case involves acknowledging and accepting responsibility for your actions, whatever they might have been. You must be able to discuss the crime and even the most unpleasant details relating to it. This means being able to talk about injuries, weapons (if there were any), and the moments leading up to and after the crime.

It's also important to show that you understand why you committed the crime and caused the harm, while at the same time being able to totally accept that does not excuse the act. Perhaps it was your difficult childhood, the wrong group of friends, or drugs and alcohol that led you to harm another. While all of those things are deeply important, demonstrating too much insight and not enough acceptance of responsibility may sound to the interviewers like rationalizing, minimizing, and excusing.

What you can emphasize is that you accept responsibility for everything that happened, regardless if you caused the harm directly, were just a bystander, or played a different role altogether. Ultimately, a big part of this is about being accountable and responding to questions about your life and the crime for which you were convicted with humility and in a non-defensive way. It's also important not to over-intellectualize the crime and your feelings about it. Try hard to stay in the realm of feelings, as opposed to thoughts. This part of the process is always about speaking your truth, and sharing with the interviewers your own narrative of the crime, as genuinely and in the most heartfelt way possible.

Also, be aware of the distinction between characterizing your conduct as a mistake versus a bad decision. Although these words may convey the same meaning in some people's mind, Parole interviewers see a difference. A mistake tends to suggest a lack of responsibility—that the conduct was simply careless, a slip-up, or an oversight. A bad decision acknowledges an intentional act that caused harm for which you are taking responsibility. Try in general not to use words that may sound to the interviewers as if you are trying to avoid taking responsibility (for example, avoid words and phrases like "It was an accident" or "I made a mistake").

Most importantly, walk into and leave the interview with dignity and self-respect. You don't have to and shouldn't unconditionally embrace a story of "transformation" and redemption if it doesn't feel genuine and true. Being your real and authentic self and describing your own experiences as they happened is the best way to show the interviewers that you take them seriously.

How to address inaccuracies in the Board's materials

Sometimes the materials the interviewers consider contain factual inaccuracies (or things that you might disagree with). **Try not to waste your precious few minutes with the interviewers focusing on attempting to correct any factual errors.** While they may rightfully feel very important to you, generally the interviewers aren't interested in debating facts. They may even see your desire to debate

facts as you avoiding responsibility.

If you feel yourself getting stuck on a particular fact or issue, try to find a way to turn the conversation back to your ability to accept responsibility for the crime and your growth in prison, regardless of those inaccuracies.

Sometimes you may feel like the interviewers are asking you to admit to untrue “facts” (maybe something in their official version of the crime). It’s okay for you to disagree with the interviewers at times if something is truly false, but try to avoid either (1) letting the whole interview turn into an exploration of how many disputed “facts” you’re willing to admit, or (2) letting a few denials of facts turn into evidence that you do not have remorse or refuse to accept responsibility.

Don't make complaints

While you undoubtedly have complaints about the practices of the Board, your experiences in prison, prison conditions or practices, and/or other aspects of the legal system, the interview is not the time or place to make those complaints.

Maintaining innocence can be a difficult approach, but not an absolute barrier to Parole release

We recognize that many people inside simply did not commit the harm they were accused of committing, or perhaps had a different role in the crime than what they were convicted of committing. If you do maintain your innocence, then speak about it in the ways in which you feel comfortable. Be aware that the interviewers may see your claim of innocence as an attempt to re-litigate the case and be less inclined to release you, so try to find ways to highlight your accomplishments, your low risk of recidivism, and any other factors that speak to your eligibility for release. If you feel that you became involved in bad or dangerous situations because of poor decisions you made, and have since learned how to make better decisions, that can be a productive angle to discuss that does not involve admitting to a crime you did not commit. Perhaps explain what led to you being in a position where you were convicted of the crime and how you won't be in a similar position again. Avoid disparaging the victim or minimizing the seriousness of their harm even if you are maintaining innocence.

THE INTERVIEWERS AND THEIR ROLE

Greet the interviewers

There will be one or two interviewers in the room or over video conference. If you have any problem seeing, hearing or understanding the interviewers, respectfully let them know this.

One interviewer may take the lead

Throughout the interview, address your answers to all of the interviewers, not just the person who asked the question.

What are they looking at?

Assessments that you've been given while incarcerated, your disciplinary and misconduct record, the recommendation from PADOA, any recommendations from the prosecutor, sentencing judge, and victim(s), your home and employment plans, and hopefully the rest of the packet you've submitted.

What's the law?

Pennsylvania state statute § 6137 says that the Board has the power to release to parole applicants who have served their minimum sentence when, in its opinion:

- i. The best interests of the inmate justify or require that the inmate be paroled.
- ii. It does not appear that the interests of the Commonwealth will be injured by the inmate's parole.

The statute also says that the Board must do the following when making decisions:

- 1) Give primary consideration to the protection of the public and to victim safety.
- 2) Provide for due consideration of victim input.
- 3) Design the process to encourage inmates and parolees to conduct themselves in accordance with conditions and rules of conduct set forth by the department or other prison facilities and the board.
- 4) Design the process to encourage inmates and parolees to participate in programs that have been demonstrated to be effective in reducing recidivism, including appropriate drug and alcohol treatment programs.
- 5) Provide for prioritization of incarceration, rehabilitation and other criminal justice resources for offenders posing the greatest risk to public safety.
- 6) Use validated risk assessment tools, be evidence-based and take into account available research relating to the risk of recidivism, minimizing the threat posed to public safety and factors maximizing the success of reentry.

E. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Have a plan for what you are going to do after the interview. How will you decompress? Think about whether you'll want to talk to anyone about your experience. Would you prefer just to forget it and move forward until you receive their decision? Do you want to have a planned phone call with a friend or loved one? Do you want to take some time to write down some of the Board's questions and the answers that you gave?

F. WRITING PROMPTS

Here is a series of writing prompts you may consider using when writing your personal statement and preparing for your actual interview with the Board. Remember, anything you put in writing could be confiscated by DOC, so keep all writing as confidential as possible, and make sure to label your materials as "drafts."

- Describe your childhood/adolescence/young adulthood
 - How would you describe yourself?
 - What were you passionate about; what did you like to do?
 - Who did you spend a lot of time with?
 - What was challenging for you?
 - What did you envision for your future; what were your goals?
 - What toys did you play with?
 - Who did you play with?
- Describe your family life
 - Who raised you?
 - Who did you live with and where did you live?
 - What was your room like?
 - Did you grow up with siblings and/or cousins?
 - Were you close with any members of your family or extended family? How did these individuals influence you?
 - Did you have any difficult relationships with people in your family?
- Describe your life leading up to your incarceration
 - Explain any major life changes you might have been going through
 - Describe what you often thought about; describe how you felt on a day-to-day basis.
 - Were there any changes in your plans for the future or your goals?
 - Describe how you felt about yourself. Were you proud of yourself, upset with yourself, happy with who you were, frustrated by perceived mistakes or flaws?
- Describe the crime and your role
 - What happened on the day of the crime?
 - What were the events leading up to the crime?
 - What actually happened? Describe in detail
 - What was your role?

- o What memories do you have of the event? What pieces are missing?
- o What thoughts were going through your mind?
- o What did you feel in your body? (Anger, sadness, fear, numbness, power, etc.)
- Describe your feelings right after the crime
 - o How did you feel afterwards?
 - o What did you do with those feelings?
 - o Did you tell anyone what had happened?
 - o Did you look for support? Did you hide?
 - o If you could re-live the experience, what would you do differently?
 - o What would be your new course of action?
 - o If you did not commit the crime, explain your feelings after being accused, and what it feels like now to still be in prison
- Describe your feelings during your trial/plea process
 - o How was your experience with the criminal legal system?
 - o Did your attorney explain the process?
 - o Did you feel prepared for the process?
 - o What were your expectations?
 - o How did you feel throughout the process?
 - o Did you have a system of support throughout the experience? Explain what it felt like to have (or not have) support
 - o How would you go about this process differently if you knew what you know now?
- Write about your accomplishments/positive experiences on the inside?
 - o What have you achieved while being incarcerated?
 - o Have you received degrees and certifications?
 - o Have you been recognized for your accomplishments?
 - o What are you most proud of?
 - o Describe some of the friends you have made and the impact they have had on you
 - o What is the best piece of advice you have received?
 - o What is the best piece of advice you have given?
 - o What goals have you set for yourself?
 - o What would you still like to accomplish?
 - o What are your aspirations if you were to be released?
- Write about the victim's experience and the experiences of their family members
 - o What do you think the victim(s) felt before and during the crime?
 - o What do you think they felt afterwards, if they didn't die?
 - o What do you think the victim's family felt when they found out about their loved one's death? How do you think they found out?
 - o How do you think the victim's death changed their family? What became different in their lives? What impact did it have on them?
 - o Think about financial, economic, emotional, social, romantic and interpersonal consequences
 - o What do you think their family felt one week after their loved one died? One month? One year? Ten years?
 - o If the victim hadn't died, what do you imagine their life would have been like? What do you think they would have accomplished? What job would they have pursued?
- Write a letter to your victim(s)

- o What would you say to them?
- o What do you want them to know?
- o What were you thinking about at the time?
- o What were you feeling at the time?
- o What have you thought about since the incident?
- o How have your thoughts and feelings changed? What has shifted for you? How did that shift happen?
- o What was the reason for your transformation, if you feel you had one?
- o What do you feel now?
- o What must be done to repair the harm/make things right? What efforts have you made?
- o What would you say to them today?
- Write a letter to each of your loved ones affected by your crime
 - o What would you say to them?
 - o What do you want them to know?
 - o What were you thinking about at the time of the offense?
 - o What were you feeling at the time?
 - o What have you thought about since the incident?
 - o What do you feel now?
 - o How do you think they have been affected by your incarceration?
 - o What would you say to them today?
- Other Prompts to get your mind moving!
 - o Write about your favorite animals or your favorite song
 - o When do you feel the most fulfilled?
 - o What are your favorite foods?
 - o Write about the last dream you had
 - o What is your favorite book?
 - o What is your favorite movie?
 - o If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?
 - o What is your favorite holiday? Do you have any traditions for that holiday?
 - o If you could have a superpower, what would it be and why?

G. SAMPLE LETTERS

Sample Letter to Request Transcript

Applicant's Name
DIN XX-X-XXXX
X Correctional Facility
Address

Date

[County and Clerk Where Sentencing Took Place]
[Address]

[Same County as above, Probation Dept.]
[Address]

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is [NAME] (IN XX-X-XXXX). I am writing to request a copy of my [trial transcript; sentencing transcript] that was created in connection with case number XXXX-XX, for which I was sentenced on [DATE] in [COUNTY] County.

I am scheduled to appear before the Board of Parole for consideration for release on [DATE] or earlier.

Thank you for your attention in this matter.

Respectfully,
[Applicant's Name]

Guidance for Writings Letters of Support

- You should state your name, age, occupation, and the parole applicant's relationship to you. Are you their cousin, sister, partner, or spouse?
 - Include the length of time you have known them.
 - If you knew them before you were incarcerated, you can include details about them before you went to prison.
 - Talk about how often you are in contact. Do you visit them? Speak to them on the phone? Write letters to them?
- Describe the qualities and characteristics you admire about the applicant who you are supporting.
 - In your experience, who are they? What makes them unique?
 - Why do they feel you are a strong candidate for release? Specifically, what changes have you seen in them as a person?
 - Include any of their accomplishments in prison that you know about (e.g., drug and alcohol programs, educational achievements, personal hobbies)
- Talk about times the applicant has spoken with you about their crime.
 - Address any feelings of remorse that they expressed to you about the crime.
 - A letter writer should not ignore or make excuses for the crime of conviction. Supporters should also avoid attempts to re-litigate the facts of the case.
- Include any contributions or support you may be able to offer them after release.
 - Housing
 - Employment or a job referral
 - Financial support
 - Clothing
 - Transportation
 - Emotional support/advice/encouragement
- End with your belief that, despite their past illegal actions, they are ultimately a good person, someone who does not pose a risk to public safety, a person who has matured and now promotes peace, or whatever else you want to include to describe their current character.

Make sure you print your name, sign and date the letter, and include your phone number, email address, mailing address or some way for the interviewers to reach you. Some authors get their letters notarized, so you might want to do that if it is not too much of a burden for you.

The samples included in this guide are models of possible formats, not templates. It is not expected that you even follow either of their formats. There are nearly limitless ways you can express why you think someone ought to be granted parole, which is why there are two different samples provided. The samples are only to give you an idea of what your letter could potentially look like. Support Letters will be more persuasive if they are authentic to the writer. It is important to convey that the parole applicant has a support network outside of prison, as people with no one to turn to are more likely to recidivate.

Ultimately, the goal of a Support Letter is to describe how the person has changed and to reassure the Board that the person is unlikely to commit a crime again. Of course, different writers will be able to speak to this in different ways. A personal relation like a sibling or spouse may describe more personal changes, a clerical figure may describe spiritual changes, and a professional acquaintance may describe the applicant's new career avenue. All of these and many more are valid ways to demonstrate the essential point that the applicant is not at risk of reoffending.

Sample Letter of Support #1

Celia Jordan
9999 9th St
Philadelphia, PA 19991
444-444-4444

SCI Phoenix
1200 Mokychic Rd
Collegeville, PA 19426

RE: Letter of Support for Amir Jordan, IN# GG3456

Dear interviewers of the Board of Parole,

My name is Celia. I am writing you about my brother, Amir Jordan IN# GG3456, who is going up for parole on February 29, 2124. He has served twenty years of a fifteen-to-life sentence. This is his third time going up for parole. I work as a driver at Uber in the Philadelphia area, and have done so for the past 4 years.

When I first learned about my brother's crime, I was in shock that he would break the law. I thought I would never be able to forgive him for bringing disgrace to our family name. He is my brother, so I visited him about a year after he was sent to prison. I just wanted to see how he was doing, and was surprised at all the programs he had already completed. I kept coming back to see him, and over the course of two decades he has been able to express true remorse for what he had done, and actually take all the right steps to correct his life. He started attending church, and started mentoring people inside that wanted to change their lives as well.

If he is released, we have a spare bedroom he can stay in until he can save enough money to afford his own place. I also have a job lined up for him at my husband's barber shop, Clips 'R We. I have put my reputation on the line because he understands what he did was wrong, and is truly regretful for it. The shop he will be working at is less than a four-minute walk from our home. I know once you meet him you will see exactly what I am talking about. He will have the proper support system to ensure he will be a successful member of our community. Thank you so much for reading this, and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Celia Jordan

Sample Letter of Support #2

Wyatt Johnson
1234 5th St
Philadelphia, PA 19191
987-654-3210

SCI Chester
500 E 4th Street
Chester, PA 19013

RE: Letter of Support for Doug Caruso, IN# XY4567

Dear interviewers of the Board of Parole,

My name is Wyatt. I'm retired now, but I was a mailman in Philadelphia for 32 years. I am writing this letter of support on behalf of my grandson, Doug Caruso IN# XY4567. Doug has served three years of a two to eight year sentence and is going up for parole on October 8, 2031.

Doug was always a good kid. He would share snacks, toys, whatever he had with his siblings. He made a point of hanging out with unpopular kids who nobody else hung out with. Once there was a bird nest in the sidewalk tree outside his house and it had some little chicks in it. Doug had learned in school that touching those chicks would leave his smell on them and might make their mother reject them so they would starve. He told everyone who would listen not to touch them and why. He pretty much took it upon himself to be a little security guard for that nest.

But as Doug grew up, he got into drugs. During high school, his dad and brother died within a year of each other. He stopped going to class and started drinking a lot. I worried he was doing harder substances than alcohol. I tried to encourage him to go back to school, but he just stopped talking to me.

After he got arrested, I got more chances to talk to Doug. We have pretty much talked either on the phone or in person at least once a month for his entire time inside. At first, he was really angry. He blamed everyone but himself for being in prison, including me. But after a couple months of being clean, he started to change. I started seeing glimpses of the sweet kid I remembered. First, he started accepting responsibility for getting himself in prison. And he said he'd make sure that whenever he got out, he'd never go back in. He worked hard in prison and finished getting his GED.

After a couple years, one day, Doug said something that really hit me. Instead of just regretting his decision because it got him in prison, he said he sometimes dreams about the look on the face of one of the men he robbed. Doug knew that man thought he was going to die. Besides taking away someone's money, Doug realized that he took away that man's sense of security, which is pretty much how Doug felt when he no longer had his dad or big brother. For the first time, he didn't just regret getting himself in prison, he regretted causing that emotional harm to another person.

Doug's sister has four kids. She worries that they are going to go down the same path he did. He wants to make things right and be a good example for them.

Doug is a great candidate for parole because he's motivated to stay out of trouble once released. He understands that going back to his old ways will get him back in prison. But he also cares about others and he doesn't want to hurt anyone again.

Sincerely,

Wyatt Johnson