

Ben Eikey:

Welcome to Oversight Matters, a podcast that gives you a behind-the-scenes look at legislative investigations and the people involved. This is Ben Eikey, and I am your host. This podcast is brought to you by the Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy in Detroit.

Welcome to a Levin Center Fast Class. A Fast Class is a quick and informative discussion with an expert on a specific topic. The goal of a Fast Class is to cover just enough information to serve as an introduction. Consider a Fast Class as an invitation to learn more on the topic through further interactions with the Levin Center.

For those listening for the first time, the Levin Center works to build capacity in legislative bodies at all levels in the pursuit of exposing public and private sector abuses, ensuring effective governance, and bringing critical facts to light for the benefit of all.

This Fast Class is part of the programming offered as part of the Levin Center's State Oversight Academy, a national organization building expertise on enhancing oversight in state legislatures. The Levin Center State Oversight Academy is headquartered in Detroit at Wayne State University of Law School.

On this Fast Class, I am interviewing State Representative, Jordan Harris, from Pennsylvania. Rep. Harris represents part of Philadelphia County and serves as the Democratic Appropriations Chair in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. One of his legislative priorities has been criminal justice reform, which is the topic of today's Fast Class. Join our conversation as we discuss criminal justice reform and the role of oversight in finding facts on where there are performance gaps in today's criminal justice system.

Please describe your interest in criminal justice reform and your efforts on the topic. This is a topic where legislators from diverse backgrounds come together in pursuit of a better system, so knowing more about your own approach would be great.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

So here's the thing for me. I grew up in a part of Philadelphia, in south Philly, called Point Breeze, and I lived on the same block literally my whole life. When I was born, I lived with my grandmother and my mother. At two years old, my mother bought a house literally directly across the street from my grandmother. So the block that I grew up on was my block up until I went to college. So I got to grow up with a community who knew me intimately. I went away to college and I came back, and my community protected me. The guys in the neighborhood, the sisters in the neighborhood, they protected me because they knew even if they weren't doing the right things, they knew that I was doing the right things, so they supported and protected.

And when I decided to run for office, what I kept hearing time and time again from folks that I went to school with, from folks that I grew up with, it was like, "Jordan, I turned my life around, but I can't get a job because of something I did five, 10, 15 years ago." I remember going into prisons and seeing people that I went to school with sitting in prison. I could tell you what changes your life, speaking in a prison and seeing your classmate as an inmate. It will change your life.

And so because I had all of these relationships and conversations with folks who looked like me, who walked the same streets I walked, who had changed their lives around and they didn't want to hand out, they just wanted a hand back into society, it made me take a deeper dive into the criminal justice system and what do we do when we release people? How do we help them be successful? How do we help them integrate back into our society? And what I felt is that there were many, many, many barriers post-incarceration, and not only post-incarceration but post-conviction, because there are tons of men and women who never do a day in prison but have felonies and other things on their record that

prohibit them from moving their life forward. So that made me really want to take a deep dive into the criminal justice system.

Ben Eikey:

Well thanks, Rep. Harrison. So thinking about that, especially the reentry piece and the certain barriers for being able to have somebody that's just trying to turn their lives around, trying to be able to do the right things and be able to be a valued part of their community, of their block, of their neighborhoods everywhere, and I think it's interesting to think about with the context of Pennsylvania being the first Clean Slate state. I didn't know that until you had mentioned that in the previous podcast I listened to do. Do you know if the State of Pennsylvania or if local communities, is there a recording of the performance of this reform? Is there anything out there looking at the number of people who have been able to take advantage of Clean Slate to be able to get themselves a fresh start?

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Wow, it seems like yesterday, but now I'm thinking about it, wow. We passed Clean Slate legislatively in 2018 in Pennsylvania, giving the court system a year to actually develop a computer program that could do what we asked it to do through the legislation. So it actually didn't take effect until 2019. At last I checked, we were above 50 million criminal records sealed in Pennsylvania last I checked, and I haven't checked in a while, but 50 million criminal records. It had affected over a million people.

Ben Eikey:

Wow.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

That's the effect of Clean Slate. We have had people that have come back and speak at press conferences about how a promotion that was out of their grasp because of a criminal record is now something that they've obtained, people getting licenses that they otherwise were barred from getting, different and adult stories. But the numbers are the numbers. We're above 50 million records sealed in Pennsylvania through Clean Slate.

And not only that, more than 10 other states in the union have passed Clean Slate laws, and more than half of the states in the union have introduced Clean Slate laws. And we have Clean Slate being introduced in the United States Congress. I'm literally traveling later on next month to Florida to speak at a conference that's bringing legislators together from across the country to talk about Clean Slate and its benefits to Pennsylvania and why other states should do it.

Ben Eikey:

And if you're equipped with the facts and the information, just showing the evidence of any sort of a policy reform, being able to get that reporting and have that information ready to go, just helps you to be able to defend ideas and different approaches that you're taking.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Look, data is extremely important in the work that we do. When I'm approaching legislators, some of my colleagues, about doing certain things, I want to be able to show them the numbers. We are poised this legislative session to go a step further in Clean Slate to include non-violent felonies here in Pennsylvania, which we believe will seal tens of millions of more records and help even more people. But I want to

show them the data about what we've done so far. And here's the thing, and this is the kicker, how it's not hindered public safety.

Ben Eikey:

Yep, yep.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

So that data's extremely important.

Ben Eikey:

So throughout our conversation, Rep. Harris was discussing personal stories, and together we discussed the importance of data. The challenge here is how can legislators combine experiences with statewide data? When approaching or defending any potential regulation or legislative action, legislatures can exercise their committee authority by requesting reports and requiring individuals to appear before standing committees and use the budget to obtain reporting on topics of interest.

Let's pick up where Rep. Harris and I were talking about budget hearings. He mentions he's looking forward to raising questions to several departments in the pursuit of facts. Do you know if there's been other notable reports on the performance of Pennsylvania's criminal justice system? Anything like vocational ed or alternative sentencing models or anything along those lines?

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Yeah, so here's a funny thing, and it's a humbling experience. When professors call you or students call you or organizations like yours call you and say, "Hey, we're doing a study on Clean Slate and the positive outcomes of Clean Slate, and we're looking at Pennsylvania and we're looking at the other states that have done it," it's a humbling experience. So there's work out there that's been done, and I know that there's work being done around it. Also, there's actually a nonprofit that was started post-passing of this legislation. It's called the Clean Slate Initiative. This nonprofit's whole job, whole goal, is to literally go around the country and get other states to do Clean Slate.

Ben Eikey:

So when thinking about, with your new position now, and congrats again on Appropriations Chair, do you think about ways in which you could leverage the power of your own office when looking at criminal justice reform? Are there any priorities you're hoping to seek out going into the session?

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Yeah, I'm grateful to my colleagues for their support in this position, and I think it helps take a deep dive into every department in Pennsylvania government and to ask the question, what are you doing for people who have criminal records? What are you doing to help them? What are you doing to support them? And here's the thing. This isn't just a conversation for the Department of Corrections. This is a conversation for the Department of Education. This is a conversation for Department of Health and Human Services.

Ben Eikey:

Especially.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

This is a conversation for a lot of our departments. Hey, this is a conversation for our state system of higher education. What are you doing to educate folks with criminal records? Do you have barriers for folks with criminal records? So we're going to utilize this position to also make sure that we're speaking up for those folks because here's the thing. It makes financial sense to keep people out of prison.

Ben Eikey:

Absolutely.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

We spend over a billion dollars because of recidivism. We cut that recidivism rate in half, we could invest hundreds of million dollars back into roads and bridges, into schools, into our communities, and a whole lot of other things, by not having people go back and forth to prison.

Ben Eikey:

Oh, one of the priorities that I would like to shamelessly plug, I'm very interested in access to health insurance, especially Medicaid, for people that have been released from prison. A lot of states across the country, there's a lot of approaches that are being made on just making sure that people are able to see a doctor once they're released, especially for those who were diagnosed with various mental illnesses while they were in prison and making sure they have a continuum of care once they're out, whichever entities would be responsible for making sure that that continues. That's a real challenge all across the country.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Well here's the thing. Pennsylvania has gotten better, but we could do even better. We could do even more, I should say, about making sure these things are on the moment people walk out the door. Really excited about these budget hearings...

Ben Eikey:

Good.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Because it'll give me the opportunity to put on the record these questions that I have to a lot of the different departments and request that they provide answers.

Ben Eikey:

We have lots of tutorials. So the Carl Levin Center was established after Senator Levin, after 36 years in the Senate, retired. And we have DC professional investigators, people that worked on these big Senate committees for 30 plus years. We have tutorials on our website on how to craft questions for a committee hearing to be able to get the information you need. We have lots of information on our website on that. I can share that with you and also of everyone else in Pennsylvania, as well.

Rep. Jordan Harris:

Great, please do.

This transcript was exported on May 15, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

Ben Eikey:

A tutorials and masterclass on asking great oversight questions and committee hearings is just one resource among many available at the Levin Center. Please contact us for more information. And thanks again, Rep. Harris, for an engaging conversation on corrections, appropriations, and legislative oversight. Best of luck with the rest of the session. Again, my name is Ben Eikey, and this has been a Levin Center Fast Class. I hope you enjoyed listening.