

a blade of grass nurtures socially engaged art

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“These records hold us back, they hold us down. Like a tail they keep tripping us up; as we try to move our lives forward, they come back to haunt us.”

Karon, 28, community clinic participant

In the United States, there are more than 70 million people with criminal records (more than the entire population of France). The collateral consequences of these records create obstacles to employment, housing, education, healthcare, and social mobility, while stigmatizing and shackling people to their past.

Based in North Philadelphia, The People’s Paper Co-op (PPC) connects former prisoners, artists, civil rights lawyers, and many others to develop creative and community driven solutions to these systemic issues. With the support of A Blade of Grass, we can expand our work across the city to focus on three goals:

- 1) Eliminating barriers for thousands of Philadelphians by clearing criminal records and connecting participants to needed services.
- 2) Working to educate, empower, and activate former prisoners to vote in the 2016 election, fostering a largely unregistered and unacknowledged voting block.
- 3) Hosting a public performance at the Pennsylvania State Capitol where thousands of sheets of handmade paper, created from pulped criminal records, will be sewn together to span the entire length of the capitol rotunda.

Over the next year, we are partnering with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) and the Village of Arts and Humanities to organize a team of formerly incarcerated men and women to co-facilitate the project. These men and women will help design, plan, and organize free legal clinics that provide the urgently needed service of clearing participant’s criminal records, and use participatory art methods to foster a peer-led space for education, dialogue, and civic empowerment.

Using our mobile studio (built by ArtBuilt Mobile Studios), the PPC will facilitate thirty free legal clinics across Philadelphia. At each clinic, lawyers from PLSE will help hundreds of participants clear or clean up their criminal records. Participants will then print their records, tear them up, and put them in blenders to create new, blank sheets of handmade paper. The resulting sheets will be embedded with participant reflections and polaroid portraits.

Each clinic will include presentations and story circles led by former prisoners; workshops led by artists and social justice activists; voter registration drives; and guest speakers with information to help clinic participants access jobs, housing, day care, health care, educational opportunities, and other basic rights.

As elections draw near, we will head to the State Capitol in Harrisburg for a public action. The event will begin with a collective sewing circle in the capitol’s main rotunda, where each clinic participant’s new sheet of paper will be sewn together and their messages read aloud. The resulting paper quilt will span the entire length of the rotunda, becoming a public stage for additional events and actions to draw media attention, pressure politicians, and expand legislative advocacy around these urgent issues.

Merging art, community empowerment, and legal advocacy, the People’s Paper Co-op will impact change on personal and systemic levels.