

New Pa. lieutenant governor fires 2 employees touted as ‘success stories’

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As one of his first official acts, Pa. Lieutenant Governor Austin Davis fired two employees who had been touted as prime examples of successful second chances.

Davis, however, is refusing to take responsibility for the firings.

Davis fired George Trudel, 56, and Naomi Blount Wilson, 72, from their positions as commutations specialists on February 28. The action undid one of his predecessor's major legacies and raised concerns among advocates that he is not committed to clemency.

Both Trudel and Wilson received commutations from life sentences in 2019 after John Fetterman took office as lieutenant governor. Fetterman then hired the two to serve as liaisons between his office and the more than 5,000 people serving life without the possibility of parole in state prisons in Pennsylvania.

“This is the first time in the history of commutations in Pennsylvania, and possibly the nation, that former offenders will fill these roles,” Fetterman wrote in statement in 2019 announcing his hiring of Trudel and Wilson. “No one is more suitable for these positions than two people who have gone through the process and who have valuable institutional knowledge. We’re grateful to have them on the team.”

PennLive made numerous attempts to get comment from Davis about the firings but a spokesperson for his office refused to answer questions or acknowledge that Trudel and Wilson were fired by the lieutenant governor, saying that the office does not “comment on specific personnel decisions.”

She refused to even say who has authority to hire and fire employees of the board Davis chairs.

The separation letter Trudel received, however, was written on Davis's letterhead and signed by a representative of the lieutenant governor's office.

One of the few official duties of the lieutenant governor is to chair the board of pardons which hears applications for commutations. Commutations reduce the sentence for people convicted of crimes, and pardons completely eliminate convictions from people's records.

In a public statement released March 6, Trudel said the two were not warned or provided an explanation for why their positions were eliminated.

“Unfortunately, this administration has sent a very discouraging message by this move,” he wrote. “There were only two of us hired to help individuals like us in Pennsylvania and they let us go and dissolved our positions through no fault of our own. No one even said ‘Goodbye, it was a pleasure to work with you.’”



George Trudel

Trudel spent more than 30 years in prison after being convicted of felony murder in 1988. Trudel has maintained that he was only trying to break up a fight outside a bar in Philadelphia between his then-friend Robert Barrett and another man. During the fight, Barrett stabbed the man and killed him.

Prosecutors argued that Trudel and Barrett had robbed the man and Barrett was offered a plea deal to testify against Trudel. Barrett served less than 10 years in prison.

Wilson was convicted of murder in 1983 after she and a friend retaliated against a man who had previously stabbed her friend. Wilson has said she never meant to kill the man and forensic evidence ultimately revealed that her friend was the one who delivered the fatal blow.



Naomi Blount Wilson

The two were among the first people to receive a commutation from a life sentence after Fetterman took office as lieutenant governor.

“George and Naomi are also bringing something immeasurable to the lifer community: hope for a second chance at life,” Fetterman wrote in 2019. “If you haven’t taken a life, the commonwealth shouldn’t take yours through unending incarceration.”

Trudel said that he, Wilson and another employee reapplied for their jobs in January and were all offered to remain on in the new administration.

Employment records published by the state show that all three had their jobs reclassified that month as the Board of Pardons' budget was moved under the Department of Corrections. Control over the operation of the board remains within the office of the lieutenant governor.

They all worked for more than a month after Governor Josh Shapiro and Davis were inaugurated until Trudel and Wilson were fired on February 28. The third person, who is not formerly incarcerated, but who had also worked for Fetterman and was rehired with Trudel and Wilson in January, still works for the Board of Pardons.

During his four-year tenure, Fetterman touted Trudel and Wilson as prime examples of successful second chances. Fetterman is now serving as a U.S. Senator.

"This is truly a loss for the Board [of Pardons] as well as for all citizens of the Commonwealth," said Jill McCorkel, professor of sociology and criminology at Villanova University and executive director of the Philadelphia Justice Project for Women and Girls. "[They] are exemplars of the power and promise of second chances. Through their knowledge, expertise, and hard work, they forged a path toward justice reform that enhanced public safety and reduced the social and economic harms of punitive crime policies."

The firings come as Shapiro called for an additional \$434,000 for Davis's office - a more than 40 percent increase in funding compared to the current fiscal year. Shapiro also called for increasing the Board of Pardons budget by roughly 25 percent, with funding going to additional staff to help clear the backlog of clemency applications.

McCorkel said she was concerned that the firing of Trudel and Wilson signals that the Board of Pardons will revert back to the way it was before Fetterman took office, leaving little hope for the more than 5,000 people serving life in prison in the state.

Commutations from life sentences were commonplace up until the late 1960s and early 1970s, with nearly every person serving life in prison receiving a hearing on a commutation and most gaining release from prison after less than 20 years. Commutations at that time were largely considered something to which people serving life were entitled.

A notation from a district attorney in 1967 commutation application held at the Pennsylvania State Archives in a first-degree murder case states that the defendant is "entitled to clemency."

That slowed with the onset of the tough-on-crime era and came to an almost complete stop in the mid-1990s after a former lifer, Reginald McFadden, committed a number of heinous crimes, including murdering a woman, after he was released.

Only 11 people serving life without parole received a commutation over the ensuing 24 years, between 1995 and the beginning of 2019. Fetterman revitalized the board from its

decades-long stagnation and aided in nearly 50 commutations from life sentences over four years between 2019 and 2022.

Adding to the concerns about the directions of board under Davis and clemency in the state, Shapiro, who sat on the board as attorney general, [was seen by advocates as one of the largest impediments](#) to commutations and [frequently voted against recommending clemency](#) for lifers.

A person seeking a commutation from a life sentence has to receive a unanimous vote from the five-person board before going to the governor for final approval.

Trudel said he is currently looking for work and was hoping to continue assisting the men and women who, like himself, were looking for a second chance.