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Contact: Kate McCracken
Phone: 517.225.3186
Email: kate@safeandjustmi.org

Safe & Just
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Changing Minds on Criminal Justice Begins with Changing the Narrative

Experts say that key to reform is moving hearts, not reciting statistics

LANSING — Convincing critics to get on board with criminal justice reform requires strategies intended to move the heart as well as reason with the mind, said experts who led a discussion in Lansing Thursday night. The talk entitled “Moving hearts and minds toward reform” was part of Safe & Just Michigan’s Annual Membership Meeting and featured The MADE Institute’s Founder and Executive Director **Leon El-Alamin** of Flint and The Opportunity Agenda’s Vice President of Strategy and Program Impact **Ellen Buchman** from New York.

"Changing the narrative comes from connecting people to the values that we all share, such as the guarantee of dignity, fairness and equal justice," Buchman said. "Too often though, we throw facts and figures at people and hope they will stick in their minds. When it comes to the big issues of the day, people change their minds after they have had a change of heart — when we help them see that we share common values — and take action together."

Criminal justice reform is one of few issues enjoying bipartisan support in Michigan during a time when few topics have managed to find common ground. In the past year alone, Michigan has seen important criminal justice reforms, such as the passage of an objective parole law, the establishment of a “ban the box” policy on state jobs and state professional license applications and the creation of medical probation for people in poor health confined to county jails. But with over-incarceration still a major concern, and the state corrections budget still occupying \$2 billion of the state budget annually, there are still many reforms needed.

“Michigan has made some important changes to its criminal justice system, but there is much more work to be done,” **John Cooper**, Safe & Just Michigan’s associate director of policy and research said. “For example, Michigan’s average minimum prison sentence is among the longest in the nation, in spite of the evidence that increasing sentence length does

little to advance public safety. Michigan's highly punitive approach to sentencing has come at an incredible cost to taxpayers and communities across the state without the returns sufficient to justify it. We need a new approach that is based on the evidence of what makes communities safer. But narrative change is needed to develop the necessary political will."

One of the communities hardest hit by over-incarceration is Flint, where El-Alamin re-integrates formerly incarcerated people into the community. The MADE Institute mentors at-risk youth and teaches and employs people in building trades. These jobs are crucially needed opportunity for formerly incarcerated people, who often run into roadblocks when trying to find an employer willing to hire them.

"A lot of what people think they know about the criminal justice system is outdated or just misguided, and that harms formerly incarcerated people who are trying so hard to turn their lives around," El-Alamin said. "Prejudice against formerly incarcerated people makes it nearly impossible for them to get a job or rent an apartment. There's dignity in being able to work and put food on the table, and when you take that away from someone, you're telling them that they'll never be forgiven or get a second chance."

Buchman and El-Alamin discussed ways to effectively reach people skeptical about criminal justice reform and convince them to see the issue in another light. While many statistics prove the point that justice reform is needed, Buchman said mythbusting can often be counterproductive because people often choose to believe only the facts they want to believe.

"If you share stories that are built around core values that we all share — such as everyone deserves a second chance — people are much more likely to listen to what you are saying," Buchman said. "These stories create a personal connection to issues in a way that statistics never can."

Also during the event, Safe & Just Michigan presented state Rep. **David Pagel** with the William G. Milliken Award for his work on criminal justice reform. Pagel chairs the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the corrections budget, and authored important reforms, including laws ending the ability of successor judges to veto parole decisions for parolable lifers and allowing the Department of Corrections to hire formerly incarcerated people. He also led a bipartisan effort to establish a special parole for medically frail prisoners.

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Safe & Just Michigan (www.safeandjustmi.org) works to advance policies that end Michigan's over-use of incarceration and promote community safety and healing. We partner with Michigan organizations and leaders from across the political spectrum, including business and community leaders, faith communities, crime survivor organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals, prisoners and their families, as well as Michigan taxpayers statewide.