

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, March 25, 2020

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

Safe & Just
Michigan

Criminal Justice Reform Advocates Join Together for Virtual Day of Empathy

Participants include Sen. Geiss and state Supreme Court Chief Justice

LANSING — Advocates for criminal justice reform in Michigan — ranging from people who have personally been involved in the justice system and their families to advocates for crime survivors and leading elected officials in the state — joined together Wednesday to voice support for proposals and pending legislation that would expand access to expungements and automate the process, reform inhumane practices for incarcerated pregnant people and transform Michigan’s system of county jails. The Michigan Day of Empathy, part of a National Day of Empathy sponsored by #Cut50, calls attention to urgent need to reform criminal justice laws that are impacting millions of people around the country, even decades after they have “done their time.”

The event took place across four video conferences held via Zoom and Facebook Live, through which at least 548 people tuned in. The topics of the conferences were Clean Slate legislation, Pregnancy in Prison – Standards of Care, a conversation with Aswad Thomas of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, and the Michigan Joint Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration.

The Clean Slate legislation — a set of seven bills to improve access to criminal record expungements and automate the process of obtaining them in many cases — sailed through the Michigan House of Representatives with bipartisan support in November. They now await a hearing before the Senate Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, which was likely to have happened late this month, but was sidelined because of the COVID-19 crisis.

“We’ve been talking to senators the last couple months about why it’s not likely to cost a lot of money and why the benefits will far outweigh the costs,” said Safe & Just Michigan Executive Director John Cooper.

A study from University of Michigan researchers shows that once people receive an expungement, their wages raise an average of 25 percent within two years. That enables people to provide for their families, contribute to their communities and avoid recidivating back into prison.

With the legislation on hold because of the pandemic, JustLeadershipUSA Michigan Organizer Hakim Crampton said people should engage with both lawmakers and people in their community about the need for the legislation.

“It’s important for us to begin engaging with people so that we can begin to move forward — not just in a meaningful way, but in a healing way,” he said. “If we don’t get these barriers removed, it compounds the trauma (of incarceration.)”

The second panel focused on Senate Bills 830-831, sponsored by Sen. Erika Geiss (D-Taylor), to reform policies regarding incarcerated people who are pregnant by preventing their shackling during, allowing them to remain with their child for the first 72 hours of life, codifying a robust breastfeeding program and creating an advisory board to oversee conditions of confinement for all women at Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility.

Detroit resident Siwatu-Salama Ra encountered those conditions firsthand when she was incarcerated in her third trimester. She has since been released and has made it her priority to see that no one else has to go through what she did.

“If America found out that we were shackling a pregnant dog, then everyone would be in an uproar. Yet we shackle pregnant people and put chains around their bellies after having a C-section and dehumanize them beyond what you can imagine,” she said.

Stories like Ra’s motivated Geiss to introduce her legislation, which is now before the Senate Judiciary and Public Safety Committee.

“As a mom, when I hear about the practices that occur for pregnant, in-delivery and post-partum mothers, I’m just floored because I know what it’s like to go through it. ... I know that is just flat out wrong and we need to stop it. I’m very glad we were able to get these bills to a space where they could be introduced and go to an actual committee and not to a committee where bills go to die. I’m very hopeful we will see progress made.”

The third video conference was a personal talk with Aswad Thomas, who grew up in Highland Park and was less than a month from beginning a professional basketball career

when he became a victim of a gun-related crime that ended his dreams. Rather than make him bitter, the experience led him to understand the links between unaddressed trauma and crime.

“It’s not rare for families to have a loved one who is a victim, and another loved one who is currently incarcerated,” Thomas said. “A lot of times, people who are incarcerated are also victims of a crime. A lot of times, that crime never went addressed. We need to elevate those stories of unaddressed trauma to see who these people are and why it’s so important to address it.”

The final panel took a look at the Michigan Joint Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration and its 18 recommendations to improve county jails and other components of the justice system such as bail, probation and sentencing. Panelists on the discussion included Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack. She spoke about how the proposals would improve the way county jails work with people who have mental health challenges — a problem brought up by several county sheriffs and community members during the task force’s investigation.

“Nobody believes that jail is a good place to treat mental illness, but it happens to be the main place we treat mental illness in our communities right now,” Justice McCormack said.

The task force recommendations are intended to be turned into legislation before the Legislature’s summer break, but McCormack said she realized that may be delayed because of the COVID-19 crisis. However, she pointed out the crisis also demonstrates the need for reform, as densely packed jails and prisons present urgent challenges in preventing the spread of the virus.

It’s a concern that also worries Jason Smith, director of Youth Justice Policy for Michigan Center for Youth Justice.

“Facilities like jail and prison have canceled family visits, and that can be extremely traumatic for kids,” he said. “There are a lot of young people in juvenile facilities who are diagnosed with mental health disorders, and isolating kids from families ... it can have disastrous consequences. We’re hoping every youth in confinement can be evaluated ... and unless there is some substantial or immediate risk to others, that they can be provided treatment in the community.”

###

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.