



Safe & Just Michigan Celebrates 20 Years of Criminal Justice Reform

Organization marks milestone at annual meeting with voting rights panel talk

LANSING — Safe & Just Michigan, a Lansing-based organization focused on criminal justice reform, is marking 20 years of working to end the over-reliance on incarceration and making Michigan communities centers for safety and healing. The nonprofit, which works to advance policies in the Legislature and other units of state and local government, brought together reform advocates from around the state and headline speakers from across the nation during its virtual annual meeting Thursday night. Throughout the evening, the group celebrated recent victories, previewed an ambitious plan to advance criminal justice reform, honored Lt. Gov. **Garlin Gilchrist II** for his reform work and held a panel discussion on voting rights for justice-involved people.

“Public attitudes about criminal justice and criminal justice policy have come a long way in 20 years, and the work of CAPPS and our founder **Barb Levine** — who was a consistent voice for reforms to life and long sentences in a challenging political environment — helped pave the way for many of the important reforms that have passed in recent years,” said Safe & Just Michigan Executive Director **John S. Cooper**.

During the meeting, Safe & Just Michigan hosted **Desmond Meade** and **Neil Volz**, the executive director and deputy director, respectively, of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition. That organization led the 2018 ballot effort to restore voting rights to people with felonies on their record in Florida. Though the measure handily won at the polls, the state Legislature effectively overruled voters by enacting a law requiring people with a record to pay back court-ordered fees and restitution before they could register to vote. The state is often unable to tell residents how much they owe in court-ordered fees and restitution, and registering to vote while owing these costs risks incurring another felony, putting Florida residents in a bind if they wish to exercise the voting rights that the 2018 ballot measure was meant to give them. The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition has been battling the barrier to voting in the courts.

“The work of Desmond Meade, Neil Volz, and the Florida Restoration of Rights Coalition is narrative-shifting,” Cooper said. “In addition to helping restore voting rights to hundreds of thousands of people, they have opened many Americans’ eyes to the permanent losses of rights and of opportunities in society that millions face because of old criminal records. This has helped build support for other path-breaking reforms, like the recently passed Michigan Clean Slate package.”

Also during the Safe & Just Michigan Annual Meeting, the organization presented Lt. Gov. **Garlin Gilchrist II** with the annual Gov. William G. Milliken Award. Gilchrist co-led the Michigan Joint Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration, which drafted 18 proposals to transform Michigan’s justice system. Most of those proposals have been transformed into legislation now working its way through the Capitol. Gilchrist is also on the state’s Michigan Coronavirus Task Force on Racial Disparities.

Safe & Just Michigan used its annual meeting to review a remarkable year for criminal justice reform in Michigan. Advances include:

- The passage of Clean Slate legislation, a package of seven bills that expand access to criminal record expungements and that automate the expungement process in many cases. The bills are awaiting the governor’s signature. (for more information, visit www.safeandjustmi.org/our-work/clean-slate-for-michigan/)
- The advancement of bills related to the jails task force, including House Bills 5844 and 5846-5857 and Senate Bills 1046-1051), which are in varying states of the legislative process.
- The advancement of bills to repeal the “good moral character” clause in state occupational and professional licensing laws, which had been used as a rationale to issue blanket denials of licensure to people with a criminal record (HBs 4488-4493, which have cleared the House, and SB 293, which passed the Senate).

“In spite of a global pandemic and an unrelenting news cycle, 2020 has been a historic year for criminal justice reform in Michigan, and we are excited to carry this momentum forward into 2021,” Cooper said.

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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.