

Safe & Just Michigan

Fall
2021



Left: Old and new friends got together at the Criminal Record Expo in Ypsilanti in August. From left - Walter Miller, Malachi Muhammad of the Youth Justice Fund, formerly incarcerated entrepreneur LaWanda Hollister, Herb Allen-Bey of Friends of Returning Citizens-Detroit and Danny Jones of the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration; Right: Safe & Just Michigan Community Engagement Specialist Rick Speck talks about expungement reforms at the Ypsilanti Criminal Record Expo.

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I wish, prior to my release, I had more tools to help me deal with family integration. — Rick Speck, page 7



Newly hired Safe & Just Michigan Community Engagement Specialist Ronnie Waters, right, talks with Tony Gant of Nation Outside at an event about expungements and career opportunities in Jackson.

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9 a.m.-5 p.m.

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Stay Connected After Your Parole

We are always delighted when any incarcerated member is paroled. If you would like to stay in touch, please call or write us with your new information.

Take Action

Encourage your friends, family and networks to tell their legislators, pastors and leaders of organizations about Safe & Just Michigan, our latest reports and the need for sensible justice reforms that will make our communities safe.

From the director's corner

In August, Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer** signed SJM-supported legislation making 1st-offense drunk driving convictions eligible for expungement for the first time in Michigan history. This is good news.

Drunk driving is one of the most common convictions in Michigan. More than 30,000 people are convicted of driving drunk each year in our state, and those convictions have brought lifelong consequences. Up to now, those convictions have stayed on a person's public record for life, forever hampering a person's ability to land a good-paying job, secure safe and affordable housing for their family, or even to get into job training or college. That will begin to change on Feb. 19, 2022, when people will be able to apply for a first-offense DUI expungement.

Helping people seal old drunk driving convictions will have positive outcomes for society. When more people are able to enter good careers and provide for

their families, we all win.

Safe & Just Michigan is thankful to the bill sponsors, committee chairs and legislative leadership who oversaw a thorough legislative process with broad bipartisan support, and to high-profile supporters of the effort, including Attorney General **Dana Nessel** and Sen. **Ed McBroom** (R-Waucedah Township).

Coming on top of Clean Slate legislation that went into effect in April this year — and automatic expungement that will begin next year — the ability of Michiganders to clear old criminal records is becoming much easier.

Thanks,

John S. Cooper
Executive Director



*Executive Director
John S. Cooper*

SJM welcomes 2 development fellows

Safe & Just Michigan has welcomed two development fellows onto our staff. Tamir Bell and Justin Counts will work with Development Director Amy Smitter to learn about fundraising and grant writing.

Tamir and Justin have firsthand experience with the justice system. Tamir returned home last year after 13 years of incarceration. He wants to use fundraising skills to start a Detroit community center that will help youth with counseling, academics and sports.

Justin Counts came home to Jackson after 2½ years of

incarceration realized how having a record complicates getting a job or a home. He works with a nonprofit combatting homelessness, and he'd like to use fundraising skills to start a program that teaches financial literacy to youth.

Amy said the fellows program is one way SJM empowers justice-impacted people to become effective advocates for change.

"So many justice-impacted individuals want to help reform the system, and fundraising is an often overlooked way to have a big impact on criminal justice reform," she said.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Get a sneak peek at upcoming research reports

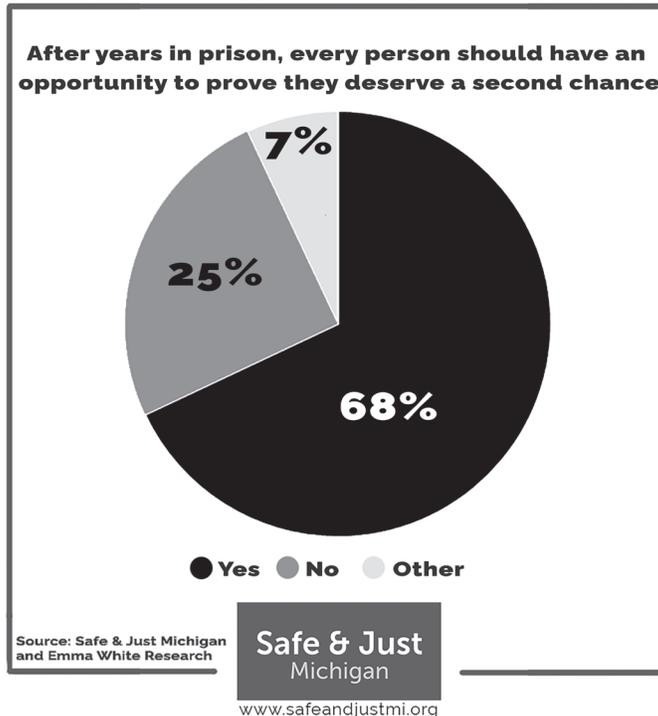
Research Specialist Dr. Anne Mahar has spearheaded several research efforts in the past year that will culminate in the publication of a series of research reports over the coming months. Here's a quick preview of what we'll soon be releasing:

Change the Narrative

Between late 2019 and early 2020, Safe & Just Michigan hired Emma White Research of Ann Arbor to conduct focus groups and polling of more than 1,000 Michiganders on topics such as Truth in Sentencing laws, "Good Time" or earned time credits, "Second Look" sentencing reviews and more. The results overwhelmingly show that Michigan is open to change and ready for substantial criminal justice reform. For instance, more than two-thirds of people surveyed supported the idea of giving incarcerated people a chance to show they deserve consideration for parole after being in prison for many years. This polling could provide the foundation of support for Second Look legislation in the coming months and years.

Community Reinvestment

Over the past two decades, the state of Michigan has seen its prison population fall by more than 30 percent and closed several of its prisons. However, the size of Michigan's corrections budget has not fallen in tandem, and instead has held fairly steady. As a result, we're spending millions of dollars on ineffective prison programs instead of investing those dollars in community-based programs. Research shows that community-led and community-based organizations that are sustainably funded are far more effective at improving public safety. Legislators need this information to make better decisions on how to spend taxpayer dollars.



Sentencing Guidelines

The forthcoming Sentencing Guidelines Report focuses on the four most common life maximum sentences: second-degree murder, assault with intent to murder, first-degree criminal sexual conduct and armed robbery. Michigan's implementation of legislative sentencing guidelines in 1998 was intended to normalize sentencing in felony cases. However, our research comparing sentence lengths in 13 Michigan counties before and after the implementation of legislative guidelines suggests it's not that clear cut.

Nation Outside publishes issue report on jailhouse voting

Nation Outside, an organization led by formerly incarcerated people and fiscally sponsored by Safe & Just Michigan, has issued its first issue report.

"Ensuring the Right to Vote: How to Expand Voting Access in Michigan Jails" co-authored with the Voting Access for All Coalition, focuses on the ability of jailed people awaiting trial to exercise their right to vote. The organizations sent survey questions to all of Michigan's 83 counties, and the results found that there is much work to be done:

- Of the 83 counties, only 26 do some form of voter education.
- Only 18 counties did any sort of voter registration for people inside jail.
- 27 counties provide support for absentee voting.
- Only one county jail, Genesee, allowed for Election Day voting.

POLICY UPDATE

Michigan passes DUI expungement law

1st offense not resulting in death, serious harm eligible to be expunged

In August, Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer** signed two bills into law that will allow for the expungement of a first-time DUI conviction that didn't result in a significant injury or fatality. The signing followed a resoundingly bipartisan vote of 92-16 in the Michigan House of Representatives as the chamber voted to concur with changes the Senate made to House Bills 4219-20.

"These bills represent a long-awaited chance for a fresh start for tens of thousands of Michiganders whose opportunities have been limited by a single old DUI conviction," Safe & Just Michigan Executive Director **John S. Cooper** said. "Drunk driving is a serious problem in Michigan, but permanently limiting a person's ability to work and drive based on a one-time, decades-old mistake does not make sense. People who can show that their DUI conviction was a one-time mistake should have an opportunity to make a fresh start."

Under terms of the bill, a person's first DUI becomes eligible five years after their sentence ends. The incident cannot have caused another person's death or a significant injury. The expungement is not guaranteed — a judge will have the power to grant or deny an expungement application.

People will be able to apply for DUI expungements starting Feb. 19, 2022.

These bills represent the first time that a DUI conviction will be expungeable in Michigan. They will open opportunities to tens of thousands of Michiganders who have a DUI conviction that has held them back from getting good jobs, a safe home or a good education.

"It's critically important — and telling — that bills like these have overwhelming bipartisan support," Cooper said. "We're especially thankful to the bill sponsors, Reps. **Joseph Bellino** (R-Monroe) and **Tenisha Yancey** (D-Detroit), and to other legislative leaders on this issue, such as Sen. **Ed McBroom** (R-Waucedah Township) and **Graham**

Filler (R-DeWitt), who were instrumental in moving these bills (and companion bill SB 400) through the Legislature. They understand that they are working on behalf of all the people of Michigan, and it's the people of the state who will benefit from these reforms."

The Legislature made a similar effort to roll out a DUI expungement plan last year. The bills last year were both sponsored by Republican lawmakers, though they found broad bipartisan support. This year, a pair of legislators — one Republican and one Democrat — sponsored the bills. That may have made the difference in securing the governor's support.

Michigan Attorney General **Dana Nessel** also threw her support behind the effort to pass the DUI expungement legislation. She testified in favor of the legislation before the House Judiciary Committee.

The DUI expungement bills come on top of last year's seven-bill Clean Slate legislation package. Those bills greatly expanded access to expungements by increasing the kinds of offenses eligible for expungement and increasing the number of convictions an individual can expunge. The wait times between the end of a sentence and the ability of someone to apply for an expungement were also reduced.



Michigan House Speaker Pro Tempore **Pamela Hornberger** (R-Chesterfield Township), top, announces that the DUI expungement bills successfully completed the legislative process on Aug. 17, 2021.

MEDIA MENTIONS

Expungement, DUI bills, other reforms grab headlines

Safe & Just Michigan staff have been talking with the media lately. Here are some of the highlights:

East Lansing showing how some with criminal records can move on in Michigan - *WILX Channel 10 Lansing, June 2*: One district court showed people how they can get rid of certain criminal records with the click of a mouse. ... “What is an expungement? In Michigan, expungement is called a ‘set aside’ which means the records still exist and can be used by law enforcement but aren’t available to the general public,” said SJM Policy Analyst Joshua Hoe.

#KeepThemHome trends on Twitter as activists urge Biden to let prisoners stay at home - *wionews.com, July 25*: Thousands of low-level criminals in the US were sent back to their houses when the coronavirus pandemic hit the world.

Former juvenile lifer goes to work for prosecutor's office

(Safe & Just Michigan first interviewed former juvenile lifer Edward Sanders in July 2018, after he had been home from prison for about a year. Since then, he has contacted us periodically to keep us up-to-date on what his life has been like since then.)

At 17, Edward Sanders was sentenced to life in prison for a murder. More than 40 years later, he earned his way home thanks to a series of US Supreme Court rulings that rethought the validity of automatic life without parole sentences for juveniles.

Anyone could forgive Sanders if he never wanted another thing to do with the justice system after that. Instead, he’s running toward it as fast as he can.

Sanders, who received a master’s degree in social work from the University of Michigan earlier this year, has been working with the Washtenaw County Conviction Integrity & Expungement Unit in late June.

“I wake up early in the morning and I need something to do,” Sanders said. “What I want to do is bring about more transformational reform and work towards abolition.”

Sander’s won’t be involved in prosecutions. Instead, he’ll help investigate possible wrongful convictions with the aim of releasing people who are currently incarcerated.

“It feels very exciting,” Sanders said. “I’m very excited for this county, and excited to be working with so

... They are now being called back to the prison to finish their time. “NOTHING is better for public safety than supporting people who have navigated the system, come home, and succeeded - that is the best possible outcome,” Hoe tweeted. “4,000 people have been home for 16 months successfully and could be sent back.”

Prisons are high risk settings for COVID, but Michigan isn’t tracking how many guards get vaccinated - *Michigan Radio, Aug. 15*: Though prisons are high risk areas for coronavirus transmission, it’s unclear how many corrections staff in Michigan have gotten the vaccine. ... “You can’t socially distance ... I’m formerly incarcerated, and where I was incarcerated, we were in 160-person pole barns,” Hoe said.

many dynamic people. (Assistant Prosecuting Attorney) Victoria Burton Harris is someone I have so much



Ed Sanders' first day on the new job.

respect for, and (Washtenaw County Prosecutor) Eli Savit clerked with a Supreme Court justice.”

Sanders doesn’t see his job as an end goal. He envisions a future where innocent people aren’t incarcerated in the first place.

“I would like to help advocate for policy change,” Sanders said. “This is about being responsible and having policies to prevent wrongful convictions in the future.”

People whose cases were tried in Washtenaw County and who have a **claim of innocence only** can seek relief through the county’s Conviction Integrity & Expungement Unity by contacting them at:

Washtenaw County Conviction Integrity & Expungement Unit
Washtenaw Co. Prosecutor’s Office
200 North Main – 3rd Floor
Ann Arbor 48104

OUTREACH UPDATE

Meet SJM's new community engagement specialist

Former juvenile lifer Ronnie Waters seeks to make political impact

Ronnie Waters was 17 years old when a judge told him he would stay in prison until the day he died. The sentence was meant to sound final, but Ronnie knew he would find a way home — and he was right. Thanks to a series of US Supreme Court rulings, Ronnie is now Safe & Just Michigan's newest community engagement specialist, and he hopes to empower others who are coming home from prison.



Ronnie Waters

When he came home in 2020, Ronnie had a long to-do list: renew vows with his wife, spend time with his mother and get political. He had no time to waste feeling bitter about the time spent in prison.

"I'm finally getting my second chance at life," he said. "However, I left a lot of good people behind. We have to bring them home too."

That's what he hopes to do with his new job as a community engagement specialist at Safe & Just Michigan. Working with the rest of the SJM team, he will organize events, help other formerly incarcerated people become politically engaged and support SJM's legislative goals, among other activities.

For Ronnie, the job description sounds tailor-made. In his ideal future, people who made bad choices and harmed others would be able to show they learned from their mistakes and get a second chance. There would be more opportunities and mentoring for people in resource-challenged communities — things often missing from his own childhood.

Ronnie's hardworking mother set a good example, but he fell in with group of youths who didn't. One of them gave him a gun to hold on to, and tragically, Ronnie didn't fully understand its easy destructive power. The misunderstanding had fatal consequences.

When it came time for his sentencing, Ronnie struggled to make sense of what life in prison meant. "When you're sent to prison at the age of 17, life to you

is 17 years," Ronnie explained.

Ronnie credits the loyalty of his mother and his childhood sweetheart, Felecia — whom he married while incarcerated — for helping him make it through is time in prison.

He believed he would go home someday; he just didn't know how. He worked with the ACLU's juvenile justice program. and celebrated the 2012 Supreme Court ruling ending the routine life sentencing of juveniles. It took eight more years to get home because Oakland County's prosecutor at the time didn't favor resentencing for juvenile lifers.

Looking back over his life, Ronnie wonders how it may have unfolded differently if he hadn't fired a gun when he was 17. "I would have gone to college and been productive. I love politics. Maybe I would have run for office."

Then, he smiled.

"I would help people and impact lives," he said — which is exactly what he plans to do at Safe & Just Michigan.



Ronnie Waters, wearing a Safe & Just Michigan t-shirt, waits to enter the Backwoods and Bonfires music festival held in Detroit in July. Ronnie passed out information on expungements at the festival.

SJM returns to in-person events

With COVID-19 vaccines now widely available and the number of COVID cases falling during the summer, Safe & Just Michigan returned to offering and participating in in-person events this summer. In addition, we've joined online panel discussions and co-sponsored online screenings of new documentaries. Here's a roundup of some of the events and projects we've been a part of lately:

July 31: Backwoods and Bonfires - Community Engagement Specialists **Ronnie Waters** and **Rick Speck** talked with people about expungement opportunities at a music festival in Detroit.

Aug. 21: Criminal Record Expo - Rick Speck was joined by **Aaron Kinzel** of the Youth Justice Fund, **Danny Jones** of the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration, Washtenaw County Prosecutor **Eli Savit** and others to let people know about the new Clean Slate laws and free and low-cost expungement assistance.

Sept. 20: "Racially Charged: America's Misdemeanor Problem" - Safe & Just Michigan was proud to co-sponsor a screening of this new documentary from Brave New Films on the prevalence of misdemeanor prosecutions in the US. The film looks at ways a conviction for even a minor offense can upend a person's life, and how these

misdemeanors disproportionately affect Black and Brown communities. Afterward, a panel talk featuring Ingham County Prosecutor **Carol Siemon** and Washtenaw County Prosecutor **Eli Savit** took place.

Sept. 21: "What You Don't Know" - Research Specialist Dr. **Anne Mahar** joined a panel discussion sponsored by the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration. The purpose of the discussion was to raise awareness of life and long sentences among members of the public who haven't been closely following the topic.

Sept. 25: Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** joined a Pull Over Prevention Clinic in Adrian, where volunteers made minor car repairs to prevent traffic stops. Ronnie provided information on expungements to people there.

Sept. 26: Policy Analyst **Josh Hoe** participated on a panel talk on the federal First Step Act, which resulted in 17,000 people coming home from prison so far because of its passage.



Policy Analyst Josh Hoe (right) joined Louis L. Reed (left), the senior director of membership and partnerships of the REFORM Alliance, for a panel talk following a screening of "The First Step" documentary at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Three things I wish I knew

Life after release

Name: Rick Speck

Title: Community Engagement Specialist, Safe & Just Michigan



City: Metro Detroit

Years since release: 7

Other Activities: Co-founder, LUCK Inc.; painting contractor employing formerly incarcerated people

Advice to others looking forward to release:

1 I wish, prior to my release, I had more tools to help me deal with family integration. My kids grew up while I was inside, so it was a long process to earn their trust, and it was very frustrating.

2 I wish I understood personal and small business finance better — paying taxes, bills, property taxes, insurance, etc. It would have helped when it came to making major purchases.

3 I wish I had understood the importance technology plays in everyday life, and I had embraced the challenge and worked through it. I feel I would have been further ahead in a shorter time span.

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Connect with Safe & Just Michigan

You are at the heart of all we do. Here are two ways
you and your family can connect with us in the coming months:

Annual Meeting - Oct. 14, 6 p.m. Lansing Radisson Hotel & Online

Invite friends and family to join us in person or the
online broadcast of our 2021 Annual
meeting. Highlights include state Supreme
Court Chief Justice **Bridget Mary McCormack**,
recipient of the Gov. William G. Milliken
Award, and featured speaker **Jeffrey Korzenik**,
author of "Untapped Talent: How Second Chance Hiring

Works for Your Business
and the Community."

Tickets: bit.ly/2021SJM

Ask about comp tickets:

info@safeandjustmi.org

We'll post a video of the
meeting to YouTube in
the days following the event.



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this one, fund research and provide
outreach to the community.
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everyone and reform life and long
sentences.

We appreciate you for your
support!