

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, May 18, 2022

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Safe & Just
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‘From the Numbers’ storytelling project gives voice to formerly incarcerated Michiganders

Nine people share their stories of recovery and transformation

LANSING — From the Numbers, a storytelling project featuring nine formerly incarcerated people who share their life stories, has launched on the website bit.ly/MI-FTN. The project gives voice to people who have a criminal record and have spent years in prison — some as long as 25 years or more — before returning home. Taken together, the stories paint a portrait of people who acknowledge their mistakes and bad choices, have held themselves accountable and are now striving to be fully contributing members of their community.

From the Numbers takes its name from the numerical ID the Michigan Department of Corrections uses to identify people incarcerated in Michigan prisons. The project is a joint effort of Lansing-based Safe & Just Michigan, an organization working on state-level criminal justice reform policy, and Muskegon-based Fresh Coast Alliance, an organization that helps people re-enter the community after coming home from prison.

“One in 3 American adults has some form of criminal record, but the stigma surrounding it often keeps people from talking about what that means to their lives,” said Fresh Coast Alliance Cofounder **Nathan Johnson**, who also contributed to the project. “The participants in From the Numbers bravely shared their life stories so that others could get a better understanding of what led them to prison, and the transformations that took place that led them to a better place.”

Each story in From the Numbers is unique, but common themes run through many of them. Several participants related stories of childhood traumas such as abuse or sexual assault or growing up in families where crime was accepted as an everyday fact of life. **LaWanda Hollister** talks about her desperate need to be loved as a teenager led her to take a life in a jealous panic — and how she used her time in prison to better understand herself and her history of trauma so that she could make

better choices in life. **Michael Duthler** talks about the Zulu philosophical principle of Ubuntu — “I am because we are” — and how that belief made him see the humanity in everyone he met in prison and steered him toward helping others after release. **E.B. Jordan** talks about learning the hard truth that employers and landlords often refuse to hire or rent to formerly incarcerated people and related how her innate determination to succeed kept her from giving up.

Along with the life stories are facts about incarceration and re-entry in the United States, such as:

- Formerly incarcerated people have an unemployment rate of about [27 percent](#), about 5 times higher than the overall unemployment rate.
- According to [the U.S. Department of Justice](#), poverty and lack of housing is the largest indicator that a person will recidivate — making finding good jobs and safe housing imperative for formerly incarcerated people.
- About [1 in 4 Michiganders](#) is a crime survivor, and by a margin of 8 to 1, crime survivors want to invest more in job training and workforce development than prisons and jails.

“From the Numbers tells the story of nine Michigan residents who have come home from prison and found their way to flourish,” Johnson said. “Each person who worked on this project represents millions of people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. I’m so proud to know them, to share my story with them and to be a part of this project with them. These are my brothers and sisters of the numbers, but they are also our neighbors, our coworkers and our friends. I encourage everyone to listen to their stories and to put a human face on the topic of criminal justice reform.”

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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.