

# Safe & Just Michigan

Summer  
2022

## Special Edition: Juvenile Life Without Parole



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**S**ometimes there aren't enough hours in the day. Mapping out time helps accommodate your needs and priorities. — Daniel Jones, page 7



*Clockwise from upper left: Safe & Just Michigan Community Engagement Specialist Ronnie Waters (left) learns some African dance moves during a Juneteenth festival; Erica Edwards (center) of Lansing works with a film crew to tell her expungement story; Waters (left) and his wife, SJM Summer Clean Slate Fellow Felecia Tyson-Waters, share their experiences at a panel talk on ending juvenile life without parole.*

# Safe & Just Michigan

521 Seymour Avenue  
Lansing, Michigan 48933

517.482.7753  
Monday-Friday  
9 a.m.-5 p.m.

**Ashley Bellant:**

Social Media Specialist

**Barbara Wieland:**

Senior Communications Specialist

**Cassie Larrieux**

Senior Research Specialist

**Cecilia Zavala**

Grants Manager

**Dena Anderson:**

Membership Services Specialist

**Jared Rodriguez:**

Calder Group

**John S. Cooper:**

Executive Director

**Josh Hoe:**

Senior Policy Analyst

**Kamau Sandiford:**

Clean Slate Program Manager

**Kate McCracken:**

Deputy Director

**Noah Smith:**

Capitol Services

**Ronnie Waters:**

Community Engagement Specialist

**Veronica French:**

Office Manager

**Keep in Contact:**

email: [info@safeandjustmi.org](mailto:info@safeandjustmi.org)

web: [www.safeandjustmi.org](http://www.safeandjustmi.org)



[www.facebook.com/safeandjustmi](http://www.facebook.com/safeandjustmi)



[twitter.com/safeandjustmi](https://twitter.com/safeandjustmi)

**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

Since our last newsletter, there has been a lot of positive news for the campaign to end juvenile life without parole sentences in Michigan. That includes several major decisions from the Michigan Supreme Court that extend the rationale of Miller v. Alabama to 18 year-olds and create sentencing standards that will make it much harder to justify both life without parole and parolable life sentences for juveniles.

However, on the legislative side, we have gotten some bad news about the fall session schedule: instead of the five weeks of session originally planned, the House of Representatives will have just two voting days in September and October. The Senate is likely to follow suit. While no official reason was given, the word around Lansing is that the change was made by Republicans so they can focus on their campaigns between now and the Nov. 8 election, in which they will be defending slim majorities in both chambers using maps that were recently redrawn

by a non-partisan commission.

These changes mean that our window of opportunity to pass legislation to end juvenile life without

parole this session has likely closed. Simply put, it appears there just isn't enough time left on the legislative calendar to get through the committee hearings, amendments, floor votes, and the like needed to send bills to the governor for signature.

That doesn't mean this is the end. We will continue to pursue all avenues to move these issues forward this session. If we can't pass our priorities this year, we expect to try again next session.

Thank you,

John S. Cooper  
Executive Director



*Executive Director  
John S. Cooper*

## Best wishes to Rick Speck



*Rick Speck*

JustLeadershipUSA.

Rick joined SJM in March 2020 the day before our office shut down for the COVID-19 epidemic. Despite the challenge of being tasked with community building at a time when

In May, we reluctantly said goodbye to Community Engagement Specialist Rick Speck, who took a position as program coordinator with

everyone was staying home, Rick quickly found new ways to get the word out about criminal justice reform and build partnerships with reform-minded organizations.

Perhaps Rick's greatest achievement at Safe & Just Michigan is the From the Numbers project, which gives voice to nine formerly incarcerated people in Michigan who shared how they started to change their lives while incarcerated. Rick was among the nine contributors himself.

We wish Rick the best in all his future endeavors!

# POLICY UPDATE

## Bill introduced to eliminate all phone fees

In July, a new state budget was signed that eliminated the “special equipment fund” associated with calls from Michigan prisons. That will put \$11 million back in the pocketbooks of the friends and families of people who are incarcerated. A new bill introduced by state Rep. **Tenisha Yancey** (D-Harper Woods) would go even further by fully eliminating all fees and charges associated with calls from prison or jail.

House Bill 6363 would also encourage families to stay engaged with loved ones who are in jail or prison, which is proven to correlate to a higher likelihood of success and a lower chance of recidivism when they come home.

“My bill would help update the prison system by eliminating Michigan Department of Corrections phone fees,” Rep. Yancey said. “Prison phone rates are astronomical, and it places a huge burden on families and friends trying to reach the people they care about. I introduced this bill so that families can connect with their loved ones who are in jail. Studies have shown that staying engaged with family members reduces the chance of recidivism once citizens return home. Plus, allowing families to connect is simply the humane thing to do.”

A 2019 study from the Prison Policy Initiative found that Michigan families have historically paid some of the highest phone costs in the nation. Jail phone fees vary by county, and in 2019, Roscommon County was the most expensive county in the state at \$22.56 for a 15-minute call. Only Arkansas had

a county with a higher phone call rate. Phone call rates in Michigan prisons are lower, but still high enough to tie Michigan as the 12th most-expensive in the nation along with Tennessee, Oregon and Georgia.

The new Michigan budget lowers the cost of calls from prison — but not from county jails.

Rep. Yancey’s bill would guarantee that people in Michigan jails, prisons or juvenile facilities could call friends or family at no charge to themselves or the person they call. It also ensures a certain number of phones are available per people or housing unit; guarantees use of a phone for two hours a day; and that access to calls won’t interfere with programming or regular facility operations.

“At a time of record inflation, the last thing Michigan families should have to cut from their budget is keeping in touch with mom or dad,” said Safe & Just Michigan Senior Policy Analyst **Josh Hoe**. “Studies show that people who keep close ties to their families are more likely to thrive when they come home from jail or prison — but staying close is hard to do when you can’t afford to talk with each other.”

Some studies showing the



*State Rep. Tenisha Yancey (D-Harper Woods), right, introduces a bill to eliminate phone fees from jail or prisons in Michigan.*

benefits of phone contact during incarceration include a 2014 study that found that incarcerated women who had any phone calls with family were “significantly less likely to be reincarcerated within five years post release than women who did not report family phone contact.” A 2020 study found that “among children who have contact with their parent via phone, those who do so on a weekly basis have better relationships with their parents, compared to those who contact their parents via phone less frequently.”

“Being smart on crime means remembering the goals of the corrections system — such as rehabilitation, reducing harm and reintegration — when setting corrections policy,” Hoe said. Encouraging families to remain connected to their loved ones during incarceration promotes these goals, making Michigan safer for all of us. Reducing phone fees is a wise investment in Michigan communities.”

# State Supreme Court issues five rulings limiting sentencing of juveniles to life without parole

The Michigan Supreme Court has recently issued six rulings that are expected to positively impact criminal justice reform and civil rights in Michigan. Five of those rulings involve life without parole sentencing, and one involves civil rights for LGBTQ people in our state.

“What the Michigan Supreme Court is doing will help people come back and make a positive impact in their communities after decades of incarceration,” said SJM Senior Policy Analyst **Josh Hoe**. “There really is no science behind juvenile life without parole sentences and no data-based reason to incarcerate someone for life. I have met too many people in my life who have turned their lives around and helped make their communities and the world a better place to just lock people away and throw away the key.”

These are complex issues and rulings, and it's impossible to comprehensively describe any of them in such a short space. However, Hoe provided a short overview of each:

- **People v. Parks:** The prohibition on mandatory life without parole for juveniles extends to people who are 18 years old.
- **People v. Taylor:** Prosecutors have a burden to show clear and convincing evidence that rebuts the presumption that life without parole is disproportionate. As a result, life without parole results at hearings will be far more difficult.
- **People v. Poole:** In this order, the court said that the case of John A. Poole, who was 18-years-old when the act he was convicted of occurred, should be returned to the Court of Appeals to determine whether he is entitled to relief under the above-mentioned *People v. Parks* ruling.
- **People v. Stovall:** The sentence of life with the possibility of parole for juveniles is deemed cruel and unusual punishment under Michigan's (note: not the U.S.)

Constitution.

- **People v. Boykin:** When a defendant is a juvenile, a court must take their youth into consideration as a mitigating factor during sentencing. Boykin's case was remanded to the Court of Appeals.

“The science backs up these decisions,” said SJM Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters**, who himself was sentenced to life without parole as a juvenile. “There is no difference between a 17-year-old's brain and that of an 18-year-old. Thank God that a majority of the Michigan Supreme Court believes in science.”

In addition, the court issued another ruling that has important implications for civil rights. In **Rouch World LLC v MI Dept. of Civil Rights**, the court ruled that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation necessarily constitutes discrimination because of sex. Members of the LGBTQ community — as well as members of the transgender community — are protected under Michigan's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act.

## Ask your friends and family to help end JLWOP sentencing in Michigan

In July, Safe & Just Michigan created a quick start guide for people who want to help us end juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) sentencing in Michigan. Here are some suggestions you and your loved ones can use to join the effort:

- Contact your representatives and ask them to support ending JLWOP in Michigan. If your friends don't know what to say, suggest they share their

personal story, or point them to the talking points on our website.

- Read the book “Sentencing Youth to Life in Prison: Justice Denied” to better inform yourself - or start a book club and share.
- Ask friends and family to create and share videos about JLWOP on social media that explain what it is and why it needs to go. Ask them to tag @

safeandjustmi and @theCFSY when they post them.

- Follow Safe & Just Michigan and the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth on social media for the latest updates and action alerts on the movement to end JLWOP in Michigan.
- Share pre-made graphics and infographics to help educate people on JLWOP. Every heart and mind changed counts.

## New grants manager, research specialist, fellow join our team

Safe & Just Michigan is proud to introduce you to our newest team members.



Cassie Larrieux

Senior Research Specialist **Cassie Larrieux** interprets and explains criminal justice system data. She has 19 years of experience in settings such as state government, local public health and health care. She holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry with a focus on molecular biology and a master's degree in public health from Florida A&M University.

"I see my work at SJM as an extension of my work in public health," she said. "Interaction with the criminal justice system is a social determinant of health. So much of what is necessary to live a healthy and productive life is adversely affected by an arrest or a conviction of someone in the household."

Grants Manager **Cecilia Zavala** spent most of her 25-year career in nonprofit leadership, primarily at Latino Family Services and the Detroit Hispanic Development Corp. A native of southwest Detroit, she grew up in a family that valued public service. Cecilia became interested in working for criminal justice reform after witnessing the injustice and inhumanity of the justice system.



Cecilia Zavala

"There's a lot of injustice in the holding cell, but this one thing in particular sticks out," she said. "That experience set a fire in my gut, and that's what brought me to really want to do this work."

Summer Clean Slate Fellow **Felecia Tyson-Waters** helps people get expungements. She holds degrees from Oakland Community College, Wayne State University and Central Michigan University. She worked as a school teacher and insurance analyst while seeking freedom for her husband, Ronnie Waters, who was incarcerated at 17.



Felecia Tyson-Waters

"A crime is not who someone is — that's something that happened in their lives," Felecia said. "It doesn't define an individual. I've learned not to be so judgmental."

## MEDIA MENTIONS

Here are some of the media stories that Safe & Just Michigan has contributed to in recent months:

- **Michigan prison recidivism declines as vocational skills rise:** *Adrian Daily Telegram, April 3:* The state's recidivism levels among inmates who've been out of prison for less than three years have been on the decline since 2016, and they continue to drop. ... **Jennifer Cobbina-Dungy**, an associate professor at Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice and SJM board member, said recidivism is a limited measure of success. "If I'm struggling to find a good-paying job, if I'm homeless, if I have horrible health and mental health issues ... that's not someone who's successfully integrated back into the community."
- **Erasing thousands more criminal records could boost Michigan's economy:** *MLive, May 1:* At least 4 million people have an arrest or criminal record, but some might not have a conviction, federal data shows. About 1 million people were made eligible for expungement when Michigan's Clean Slate laws went into effect in April 2021. Since then, more than 10,000 applied for expungement, and 8,229 records were cleared. Before Clean Slate, only about 2,500 Michiganders applied each year. "The more people that get expunged, the better," said **John Cooper**, executive director of Safe & Just Michigan. "But it's a drop in the bucket when you talk about a couple million people having criminal records in Michigan."
- **Ex-felon inspires Lansing charter amendment vote in General Election:** *Lansing City Pulse, June 23:* When Mayor **Andy Schor** sought to nominate a local businessman to the city's Economic Development Corp., he made an interesting discovery: He couldn't. A prohibition in the City Charter bans anyone convicted of a felony in the last 20 years from serving on boards and commissions. That is something the mayor wants voters to change. As a result, an amendment to overturn the ban will appear on the General Election ballot in Lansing in November. ... Safe & Just Michigan, an advocacy organization for criminal justice reform in Lansing, reports that 67% of paroled Michigan felons are unemployed, despite a worker shortage and a 4.3% state unemployment rate in May.

# Using their voices to speak their truth:

## *People once sentenced to juvenile life without parole use their voices to end that sentence in Michigan*

Safe & Just Michigan's communications team is working with people who were formerly sentenced as juveniles to live out their lives in prison in order to build support for pending legislation to end juvenile life without parole sentencing in Michigan.

Social Media Specialist Ashley Bellant and Senior Communications Specialist Barbara Wieland spent two days in Detroit filming interviews with 14 men and women who had been sentenced to life without parole as juveniles and have since come home, thanks to U.S. Supreme Court rulings. The interviews form the heart of the new project, which will include videos, written stories, photographs, statistics, information about the legislation and suggestions on how to support their passage.

Both Ashley and Barbara said working on the project was a privilege.

"Working on the juvenile life

without parole project made me feel for our youth with such limited choices and marvel at the ability of people to find their humanity through reflection, connection, and faith," Ashley said. "Our storytellers shared personal and often painful memories with us and it was an experience I'll never forget. We understand the importance of treating those stories with the care and respect they deserve."

Our storytellers were astonishingly brave, speaking on topics like domestic violence in their youth, sexual violence, losing family members to drug use and having incarcerated parents. Many shared how they found inspiration to endure decades of incarceration with no end point in sight. Several said



*JLWOP storytelling project participant Jamil Allen-Bey shares a laugh after his interview.*

they always believed they would come home.

One goal of the project is to show both lawmakers and the general public that people who were once sentenced to JLWOP and have come home are very unlikely to pose a threat to public safety.

"Many people who were sentenced to JLWOP and have come home have since gone on to graduate from college, start businesses or join apprenticeship programs or start careers," Barbara said. "There's one thing that they haven't done: return to prison. Of the more than 160 people in Michigan who had been sentenced to JLWOP and come home, none to date have returned to prison."

Safe & Just Michigan plans to have this project online and available for viewing later this fall. We hope to have the website for you to share with your friends and family in our next newsletter.

### **'Inside Voices': SJM column featuring you to kick off next year**

Starting next year, each issue of the Safe & Just Michigan newsletter will feature a new column written by you – or perhaps someone you know.

"Inside Voices" will highlight the reflections of one person currently incarcerated in a Michigan prison. We will encourage people to share their thoughts on good time or other pending legislation, re-entry,

the need for second chances and any issues related to criminal justice reform. While we are not yet ready to accept submissions, we are excited about starting this column and curious to hear what you have to say.

Please look in an upcoming newsletter for more information about the column, such as a suggested word count and where to send your submissions.

# OUTREACH UPDATE

## SJM active around the state this summer

Members of the Safe & Just Michigan team enjoy getting out and meeting people around the state as we spread the word about Clean Slate, prepare to pass legislation ending juvenile life without parole and more.

Here are some of the things we've been up to lately:

### Celebrating Juneteenth

Not only did Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** attend the Juneteenth celebration in West Bloomfield, he helped organize it, too.

Ronnie clearly took pride in joining his neighbors to celebrate freedom with an event featuring dance, drumming, choirs, food and storytelling. Many community organizations and nonprofits were there to share information. SJM's table was staffed by Social Media Specialist **Ashley Bellant** and Senior Communications Specialist **Barbara Wieland** so that Ronnie could focus on the festival.

That didn't stop Ronnie from taking the time to learn some African dance — we have the photo to prove it!

### Sharing their experiences

On July 12, Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** and Summer Clean Slate Fellow **Felecia Tyson-Waters**

— who are married — were both panelists at “Abolishing Life Without Parole for Children in Michigan,” an event hosted by the Calvin University Prison Initiative in Grand Rapids. Also on the panel were Calvin Prison Initiative Director Dr. **Todd Cioffi** and Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth Senior Advocate **Eric Alexander**.

### The numbers are in

At Safe & Just Michigan, we've been keeping count of the number of people we've helped in our Clean Slate information and outreach campaign. Here are some statistics

you may find interesting:

- In just June and July 2022, we participated in expungement events assisting nearly 1,250 people seeking free or low-cost help to clear their record.
- This summer, we participated in expungement fairs as far north as Houghton in the Upper Peninsula and as far south as Inkster.
- We have been promoting Clean Slate through video

campaigns platforms like Facebook. Two of those videos have been viewed by more than 99,000 people each. Another pair of videos has reached more than 45,000 people combined.



*A traditional African dancer (foreground) teaches Ronnie Waters (background) some moves at a Juneteenth festival.*

## Three things I wish I knew *Life after release*

**Daniel Jones**

**Title:** Program Director, American Friends Service Committee

**City:** Detroit



**Years since release:** 3

**Other activities:** Chair of Voting Access for All Coalition; board member of Nation Outside; member of LWOP Leadership council

*Advice to others looking forward to release:*

1 I wish I would've known to start documenting everything I do. I could've created a toolkit to help bring awareness to the struggles people face when coming home after long periods of incarceration. I could've offered this as a resource to view and learn what has helped with the reentry process.

2 I wish I would've known how to better manage my credit. My first credit score was 640. It has since declined, and I do not know how to get it above 700! I understand the importance of good credit, and still need to learn how to navigate this process.

3 I wish I'd understood how healthy structured living can be! Knowing you have an agenda for the next day is a great way to prepare! Sometimes there aren't enough hours in the day. Mapping out time helps accommodate your needs and priorities.

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521 Seymour Avenue  
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**Ask your friends and family to join us at our upcoming annual events:**

Safe & Just Michigan's annual:

## Membership Meeting

Join us online for organizational updates,  
a forecast for 2023 and board elections.

**Thursday, Oct. 20, 6:30-7:30 p.m.**  
**Free to participate**  
**Register now to get the link**

New this year, Safe & Just Michigan will  
hold its annual membership meeting  
online only. Get the latest on our  
legislative efforts, participate in board  
elections and more — all without  
leaving your home.

**This event is free, but registration required. Sign up now at:**  
[bit.ly/SJM2022](https://bit.ly/SJM2022)

Safe & Just Michigan's inaugural:

## Celebration of Growth

An annual celebration of progress toward reducing the  
harm caused by both crime and over-reliance on  
incarceration in our Michigan communities.

**Tuesday, Nov. 1, 5-9 p.m.**  
**Crowne Plaza Lansing West**  
**925 S. Creyts Road in Lansing**

Lester Young, CEO of Path2Redemption and  
author of "The Five Stages of Growth,"  
speaks on healing, finding your voice,  
and giving power and purpose to  
your life. Enjoy an evening of dinner  
and networking.

**Attendance is free but registration required, space is limited:**  
[bit.ly/SJMCELEBRATE22](https://bit.ly/SJMCELEBRATE22)

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