

# Safe & Just Michigan

## Testimony of Safe & Just Michigan in Support of Senate Bills 119-123

Senate Civil Rights, Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, April 20, 2023; Noon  
Room 1200, Binsfield Office Building  
201 Townsend St., Lansing MI 48933

My name is Leon Douglas. I am a man with integrity and empathy, but most of all humility. Being a juvenile lifer without parole (JLWOP) took a toll on me and I had lost all hope. Every ounce of goodness was gone from me until my wife woke me from my madness. With her faith in God and her support, I was able to make a change! I am remorseful for what I did, and I blame no one for what I did but myself.

I'm here today because the United States Supreme Court recognized a decade ago that we aren't supposed to sentence children to die in prison. But that's what happened to me after I took a life when I was 18 years old.

At that age, I didn't realize that human life was the most important thing in the world. **I do now.** Like many young people, I was angry and reckless. As an adult, I understand people must be held accountable for what they do.

However, giving a juvenile a life sentence without parole isn't the answer. It only reinforces what they already know: that the world is a dangerous place and that they can trust no one.

I experienced trauma which caused me to act out against people with authority while in prison during my early years. Adjusting became hard because I didn't care about nothing or no one! It still hadn't registered to me that I was serving a death sentence.

If we're being honest, telling a child that they deserve to die in prison is also a trauma.

It doesn't take 30, 40 or even 50 years to get a person to understand the value of a human life. It took me about 22 years to understand all the harm I had caused others, but I eventually did. I was kept incarcerated for almost 30 years more beyond that.

**I am so grateful that I got my chance to go home on Aug. 11, 2022.**

I'm living with my wife, who was brave and dedicated enough to stay with me throughout my incarceration. I have a good job with a manufacturer in Oakland County, and I'm grateful for it. But even though I left prison, prison never left me. I can't sleep with the lights out because the lights were always on in prison. I have trouble sleeping on a comfortable bed, so sometimes I sleep in a chair. When I hear footsteps, I'm thinking the guard is coming to take count. And taking my wife through these things has taken a toll on my marriage.

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It's hard not to look back on my life and think about how things could have gone better. Rather than locking people up after harm occurs, we should do more to prevent it from ever happening in the first place. Young angry kids don't want to hear from well-meaning people with college degrees who have never lived lives like theirs. But people who have been where they've are can reach them.

I want to spend the rest of my life helping young people. I want that more than anything in the world. I'm 68 now, and realistically, how many people can I reach? How many more could I have reached if I hadn't been in prison for the past 10, 20 or 30 years? I don't just think of the years lost, but the opportunities to reach young people who are like I was — lost and in need of a mentor. They don't need to lose decades in prison. They need someone who can reach them before they get there.

Juvenile life without parole doesn't solve any problem.

In closing, remember these words when the time comes to make your decision on passing or denying this bill: **“It's not about being right, it's about doing right.”**

Thank you, and I appreciate your time.

Leon Douglas  
Pontiac