

# 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 Ronnie Waters, and I am the community engagement specialist for Safe & Just Michigan, a Lansing-based nonprofit working on criminal justice reform policy. I am offering testimony in partnership with my wife, Felecia Tyson-Waters, because our stories together paint a picture of the toll juvenile life without parole sentencing takes on both the people who are sentenced to it and those who are left behind.

To be honest, I wasn't supposed to be able to write this testimony as a free man. At the age of 17, a judge sentenced me to prison for the rest of my life without any chance of parole. Make no mistake — I had taken a life. However, I had never intended to. On the worst night of my life, I had been handed a weapon and told it had no more strength than a BB gun. I'd never held a gun before in my life, and I didn't understand that even a small handgun can easily take a life. I was horrified by what I had done, and I believed I should be held accountable. But I never believed what others were saying about me: that I was an irredeemable monster who should be locked up and thrown away forever.

At 17, I had no idea what “the rest of your life” could mean. I hadn't even lived 20 years, much less 40, 50 or 60. As other kids my age struggled to decide which colleges to attend or careers to pick, I struggled to come to terms with the fact that the state of Michigan had sent me to prison to die. Not to grow old, but to die.

That sentence told me I was beyond change. That I was incorrigible and irredeemable. The fact that I am sitting here before you today proves that was not correct. And if you take just a moment to reflect on who you were at the age of 16 or 17, I'm sure you'll recognize that the person you are today is in many ways vastly different from who you were then. You may look similar, sound similar and even see the world in a similar way, but I'm willing to bet that you interact with the world much differently now than you did then. You have the benefit of your experiences and the wisdom you have gained from them to inform you.

The same was true for me, and it's true of other juveniles who were sent to prison to die. In time, I came to understand the horrible truth of what I had done, even though I hadn't intended to take a life. The weight of that was heavier than any sentence handed by a judge, and in fact, it informs and motivates my work to this day. Because I realized the full extent of the harm I have caused, I am that much more committed to making Michigan safer and more equitable for everyone.

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Even though I was sent to prison for the rest of my life, I prepared for a life on the outside anyway. Hope is that strong. I completed my GED in prison and enrolled in college classes. I obtained an associate degree and came within a few credits of earning a bachelor's degree before the state ended the ability to do that affordably. Even then, I took vocational training and other classes to improve my education. I also came to terms with what led me to prison and what sort of person I wanted to be now that I was there. The state may have given up on me, but I never gave up on myself.

Every few years, I would meet with the parole board. They would often tell me that they wish they could do something for me. They saw value in me. But because of Michigan's harsh juvenile life without parole sentencing, their hands were tied. At the end of our meetings, I would be returned to serve out a seemingly unending sentence.

I don't want to give the impression I went through this alone. Unlike many people who were incarcerated, whose friends and families eventually abandon them, I was fortunate that mine stayed close with me. My mother insisted on sending me money to buy personal care items and snacks, and when I told her I had enough, she told me to share with others. And I had Felecia, my childhood sweetheart, who never wavered.

Many people have asked Felecia why she waited 40 years for me while I was incarcerated. The truth is, she didn't just pine away. She worked hard and got an associates degree, bachelor's degree and two master's degrees. She proudly served our country in the U.S. Air Force. She channeled all this knowledge and ability toward ending our state's juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) sentencing because she saw firsthand how cruel and destructive it is.

Felecia will tell you that she didn't abandon me because she saw the good in me, no matter what prosecutors and judges said in court. And she refused to desert someone she knew was good. That meant that when the Michigan Department of Corrections transferred me to Virginia because of overcrowding, she traveled to see me there. And when I was moved to a prison in the Upper Peninsula, she organized carpools with other people in the Detroit area with incarcerated loved ones in the U.P. and saw me there.

Along the way, she got to know these families and other people incarcerated on JLWOP sentences. She became a passionate supporter of ending JLWOP sentencing and worked with the ACLU on a nationwide campaign to bring us home. This campaign culminated in a series of U.S. Supreme Court ruling that decided mandatory juvenile life without parole sentencing is unconstitutional in 2012,

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and that this decision should be applied retroactively, giving people like me a chance for a resentencing, in 2016.

I finally got my chance at resentencing and was released in 2020. Since then, I've worked to register people to vote, inform them about new expungement opportunities under our new Clean Slate laws, get people engaged in Michigan's political process and more. Because I spent 40 years in prison and without a voice, I do not take my voice for granted now.

That doesn't make me any kind of exception. Many of us former juvenile lifers keep in touch with each other, and we're a special group of people. Among us are social workers, leaders of nonprofits, re-entry specialists and more.

Because we lost our freedom so young, we know what a remarkable second chance we have been given, and we don't take it for granted. The numbers show we do not. According to a study from [Montclair University](#), released juvenile lifers from Philadelphia had a recidivism rate of just 1 percent, compared to an estimated 30 percent recidivism rate for individuals convicted of homicide offenses within two years of release.

Releasing juvenile lifers that the Michigan parole board has interviewed, reviewed and determined to not be a risk to public safety is not a dangerous decision. We are asking you to speed up the review and potential release of all remaining Michigan juvenile lifers eligible for a Miller resentencing hearing under the 2016 U.S. Supreme Court ruling.

Beyond that, we are also asking you to take JLWOP sentencing off the table for good. That is not to say that young people shouldn't face the consequences for their actions. When anyone — including a young person — commits harm, they must be held accountable. But we are saying that it is wrong to decide that a youth is irredeemable and should be thrown away forever.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ronnie Waters and Felecia Tyson-Waters  
West Bloomfield