

Safe & Just Michigan

Fall
2023



Clockwise from upper right: SJM Director of Outreach & Community Partnerships **Kenneth Nixon** (from left), Detroit Council Member **Fred Durhal III** and Nation Outside Regional Coordinator **Marvin Cotton Jr.** at a Detroit event to end gun violence on June 5; Nixon (left) and MI-CEMI Program Director **Cozine Welch** drum up enthusiasm for Second Look legislation at a rally on July 22; Clean Slate Program Manager **Kamau Sandiford** (left) and former SJM Summer Fellow **Felecia Tyson-Waters** help staff an expungement fair Aug. 13 in Detroit; Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** talks about bills to end juvenile life without parole at an advocacy day in Detroit Aug. 19.

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Let your transformation inspire others and prove that everyone deserves a second chance.

— Tony Gant, page 7



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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

As the summer winds down, we are preparing for lawmakers to return to Lansing for their fall legislative session. Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer** is expected to give an agenda-setting speech on Aug. 30, and the fall session will begin the week after Labor Day on Sept. 5.

Criminal justice reform wasn't a priority for lawmakers in the first half of the year. While we and other advocates spent the summer working to position our priorities to move in the fall, we still have work to do. Many Democrats — including committee chairs and members of legislative leadership — support our priorities and would like to see them move. However, not all members agree, and with one-vote majorities in both chambers, unanimity is needed to pass legislation without Republican votes. Further, it is our understanding that Democrats would prefer to move criminal justice reform legislation in a bipartisan way with at least a few Republican votes, and securing Republican votes for reform

packages has been challenging.

Our ask continues to be contacting your lawmakers to ask them to work on criminal justice reform. It would be helpful for them to understand that: (1) criminal justice reform is an urgent priority; (2) it's good for public safety, our communities and our workforce; and (3) it is a powerful way for them to show that they care about their constituents, and that their constituents will respond to that.

We will also be sponsoring or co-sponsoring a number of legislative advocacy days in Lansing, and we urge you to invite your friends and family to join us. The first will be on Oct. 3 to support the campaign to end juvenile life without parole (JLWOP) sentences in Michigan. See page 5 for more information. We hope to see them there!



*Executive Director
John S. Cooper*

New policy advocacy manager joins SJM

Jazmine Wells has joined Safe & Just Michigan as our new policy advocacy manager.

Wells earned a bachelor's in sociology with a minor in psychology from the University of Michigan, following that up with a master's in social work in 2020. Following her studies, she worked at the State Appellate Defender's Office (SADO) as a mitigation specialist on the juvenile lifer unit.

At Safe & Just Michigan, Wells will take an active role in forming the proposals that SJM supports and in shepherding them through the legislative process. In

particular, she is eager to continue her work with people sentenced to life without parole as juveniles by helping Safe & Just Michigan end the practice in Michigan.

"We actually need to do something to help people rehabilitate and help people get better and help people heal. And then, we need to get them back out to where they're supposed to be," Wells said. "I really think that needs to happen."



Jasmine Wells

Hear more from Michigan's 'Inside Voices'

No need to fear a Second Look

Nearly 37 years ago, I murdered my co-defendant's husband. I regret my violent behavior every day as I am reminded through the violence in my prison environment. Prison violence began my rehabilitation when it caused me to empathically place myself in my victim's place. No amount of years can lessen the damage I've done, but Second Look may grant me a chance to contribute to my community by helping, if just one person, to not commit crime.

After coming to prison, I remained self-centered because I focused on my pain rather than empathizing and being ashamed for the pain I caused. My rehabilitation strengthened when I realized the pain and loss I caused my victim's family was similar to the pain and loss I felt as a teenager when my own father was violently murdered by my alcoholic mother. Guilt motivated me to set a goal to maximize my education through college programs and to participate in all departmental programs.

Evidence of my change is shown by having more than 10 years free of prison misconducts and the respect and trust of prison staff and peers.

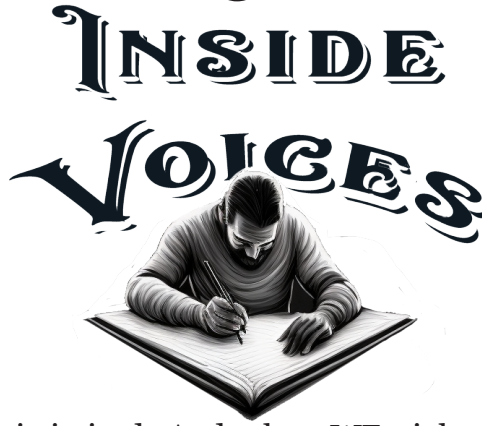
Second Look legislation won't open prison doors, but it will open a fair review for men and women who've served decades in prison and who have the skills and mindset to be a contributing citizen. The public need not fear an old lifer looking to be helpful.

~ John Halcomb

Ionia Correctional Facility

Good Time leads to rehabilitation

Our criminal justice system stresses the notion that there are consequences to be paid for unacceptable behavior. We have the right to live without being



victimised. And when WE violate the rights of others, consequences and punishment are appropriate.

Since Truth In Sentencing legislation was enacted, Michigan has missed a counterbalance. In addition to punishment, there are two other components to discipline: guidance and teaching. Punishment alone doesn't correct people—it only gets their attention. Guiding and teaching them how to live healthy, productive, law-abiding lives can achieve the goal of correction.

Prisoners in other states are motivated to better themselves and have it recognized through length of stay reductions, like Good Time. In Michigan, too many people "run their clocks out" and do the minimum amount of programming. They don't see an incentive to take the initiative to strive for more.

Those who succeed in the

community after release do so in spite of prison—not because of it. Allowing for Good Time and Productivity Credits to be earned—not given—would teach responsibility and accountability. These behavior modification tools would have a long-lasting positive impact on our community safety.

~ Leo Paul Carmona

Central Mich. Correctional Facility

Know us before judging us

People need real conversations about our judicial system and the people involved. Too many people jump to conclusions, get tunnel vision and make life-altering decisions without the full story.

In a letter to the judge in my case at my sentencing, my mother begged the judge to "just talk with (me) for five minutes." A person has the power to change someone's life, the life of that person's family, his friends and his community. Just give him five minutes.

We don't do that with each other. We judge them not knowing their full story.

A tragedy took place that got me in prison. This was not justice. If the truth will set us free, I feel people need to be willing to hear it.

~ Brian Peterson

R.A. Handlon Correctional Facility

How to submit letters to 'Inside Voices'

"Inside Voices" is a forum for readers of Safe & Just Michigan's printed newsletter. To submit letters, send your 150-300 word letter to **Inside Voices, c/o Safe & Just Michigan, 119 Pere Marquette Drive, Suite 2A, Lansing MI 48912**. If you have access to our Jpay account, you may also submit your thoughts that way with "Inside Voices" as the top line of the message.

Please specify if you'd like your name listed with your entry or if you want to remain anonymous.

Subjects can include legislation, sentencing, parole or other criminal justice reform topics such as prison programming.

We'll share as many letters as space allows. We will also share them in our electronic newsletter, sent to nearly 9,000 supporters each month, and on our website.

POLICY UPDATE

Shift in legislative power prompts several reform bills

Many proposals still awaiting action in House, Senate committees

This year began with a sea change in Lansing, with Democrats taking charge of both the House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in about 40 years.

Seizing on this opportunity, advocates for criminal justice reform introduced a raft of legislation that would accomplish a wide range of goals, from ending juvenile life without parole sentencing to creating a Second Look opportunity for sentencing reviews to reforming the cash bail system.

However, despite the change in leadership, these efforts have been met with mixed results so far. As Safe & Just Michigan Executive Director John S. Cooper explained in his letter on Page 2, some Democratic legislators don't prioritize these reform efforts, and others fear political blowback if they do.

As the Legislature prepares to head back for its fall session, we thought this would be a good time to take stock of where these various legislative efforts stand:

Sentencing Commission

(HBs 4173, 4384; Senate Bills 376-377)

These bills would create a sentencing commission (Criminal Justice Policy Commission) that would review and recommend legislative guidelines for criminal sentences in Michigan with the aim of more uniform and equitable sentencing statewide. Both the House and Senate versions of the bills have been passed by their respective chambers and are awaiting action on the opposite side of the Capitol building, which

could happen before the end of the year.

Vital Documents

(House Bills 4191-4194)

These bills would require the state to provide people leaving prison with vital state-issued documents, such as a driver's license and birth certificate. These documents are often required for tasks central to reestablishing life outside of prison, such as getting a job or setting up a bank account. These bills have cleared the House and are awaiting a hearing before the Senate Civil Rights, Judiciary and Public Safety Committee. That isn't expected to happen until later this year.

Ending Juvenile Life Without Parole

(HBs 4160-4164; SBs 119-123)

These bills would eliminate the possibility of sentencing a person under the age of 19 to life without parole in Michigan. Both sets of bills have had hearings before their respective committees (House Criminal Justice and Senate Civil Rights, Judiciary and Public Safety committees), but have yet to be voted out to their respective floors. Meanwhile, more states are joining the majority of states that have already banned the practice, with Illinois, Minnesota and New Mexico banning juvenile life without parole already in 2023.

Productivity Credits

(HBs 4450-4453)



Former juvenile lifers Leon Douglas (left) and SJM Community Engagement Specialist Ronnie Waters tell the House Criminal Justice Committee why the state should end juvenile life without parole.

These bills would establish a system that allows people who are incarcerated to earn credits toward earlier parole eligibility by completing educational or vocational programs or meeting other goals. These bills have had a hearing before the House Criminal Justice Committee but have not yet been voted out to the House Floor.

Second Look

(HBs 4556-4560; SBs 321-25)

These "Second Look" bills would create an opportunity for people who have served at least 10 years to petition the court for a sentence modification to shorten the original sentence and allow for an earlier release (note: this plan doesn't guarantee an early release). These bills have not yet had a hearing before the House Criminal Justice Committee.

Bail Reform

(HBs 4655-62)

This bail reform package was introduced on May 24 and hasn't yet had a hearing before the House Criminal Justice Committee.

Inside the push to end JLWOP in Michigan

Safe & Just Michigan is helping lead the effort to end juvenile life without parole in Michigan. On October 3, we'll host an advocacy day at the state Capitol to give former juvenile lifers, their families and criminal justice reform advocates

an opportunity to share their stories with elected lawmakers and explain why this harsh sentence needs to end. Some of these stories are also shared in our 'Life Beyond Life' story telling project. Here is one of them:

Jose Burgos: From juvenile lifer to reentry specialist

Jose Burgos' childhood was idyllic: he loved exploring nature in the backyards of Detroit and going to school. But everything changed when his mother passed away when he was just 13 years old. Suddenly, Jose — who never knew his father — couldn't concentrate at school and lost interest in the things that used to fascinate him. He dropped out of school in the 7th grade, and looking for a place to fit in, he turned to gangs.

Instead of learning about insects and reading books in libraries, he now learned about violence in the street.



Jose Burgos

Jose was 16 years old when he attempted to swindle twin brothers in a drug deal by filling a bag with rags instead of marijuana. He was in the back seat of the men's car when one suggested they check what was inside of the bag. He saw one moving around in the seat in front of him and thought they may be reaching for a weapon. Jose panicked and shot both men, killing one and leaving the other

paralyzed from the neck down.

Jose was just 17 when he was sentenced to life in prison. He said it took years for him to understand the gravity of the harm he had caused, but once he did, it transformed him. He wanted to spend the rest of his life to make amends for his crime, even though he had been told he would never come home from prison, and that meant he had no room for despair.

"I always wanted to keep my mind healthy," he said. "For me, keeping my mind healthy was always having some type of hope."

Following a 2016 Supreme Court ruling that ordered juvenile life sentences to be reviewed, Jose was released in 2018 after serving 27 years.

Today, he works for the Michigan State Appellate Defender Office (SADO) where he prepares incarcerated people for reentry back into society.

"If they need help, I don't know where I'm going to find it, but I am going to find it for them," Jose said.

The guilt from his actions at 16 will never go away. However, Jose uses his past as motivation to help others today.

"It never goes away, but it's something that, for me, is something that drives me," he said. "I wanted something good to come out of such a bad situation."

Advocacy Day to end JLWOP

Ask your family, friends to join us

On Oct. 3, 2023, Safe & Just Michigan will host an advocacy day at the state Capitol to end juvenile life without parole sentencing in Michigan. This effort is in support of bills in the House (House Bills 4160-64) and Senate (Senate Bills 119-123) that have been heard by their respective committees, but have yet to be brought to the floor of either chamber.

The day will begin at 9 a.m. with a welcoming presentation and information on how to most effectively hold discussions with elected officials. There will be meetings with state representatives and senators throughout the day, and a free lunch will be offered.

This is a free event, but since space is limited, registration is required. We urge you to share this information with your friends and family so they can make plans to join us in Lansing on Oct. 3.

To register for the Advocacy Day to End JLWOP in Lansing, please go to bit.ly/michildren.

OUTREACH UPDATE

A quiet summer in the Capitol – but busy everywhere else

This summer has been quiet in and around the state Capitol. While that means the bills we are working on have seen little activity, it has freed up a lot of time for our team to be active in events around the state. Here are some of the places we've been seen:

Expungement Fairs

- An expungement fair was held in Pontiac on June 3 attended by Clean Slate Project Manager **Kamau Sandiford**, Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters**, his wife **Felecia Tyson-Waters** and Senior Research Specialist **Cassie Larrieux**.
- On June 10, **Kamau Sandiford** helped staff an expungement fair in Muskegon. Between the Pontiac and Muskegon expungement fairs, we reached 385 people.

Gaining Skills and Training

- At a Media Access Day held at WJBKChannel 2 Detroit on Aug. 12, Senior Communications Specialist **Barbara Wieland**, Policy Advocacy Manager **Jazmine Wells**, Communications Specialist **Zack Whaley** and Director of Outreach and Community Partnerships **Kenneth Nixon** heard from reporters about how to best approach them with story ideas in order to see our issues in print and on TV. Several reporters there showed an interest in covering JLWOP and pretrial justice stories.

Juneteenth Celebrations

- In West Bloomfield, where

Ronnie Waters helped organize his community's Juneteenth celebration, Grants Manager



SJM Communications Specialist Zack Whaley (right) with Dr. Julia Kapilango, Director of Operations & Communications at H2BE.

Ashley Bellant represented our organization.

- At Homage 2 Black Excellence (H2BE) in Dearborn, Zack Whaley got the word out about Clean Slate

and current legislative efforts.

Promoting Policy Proposals

- Kenneth Nixon joined National Lifers of America for a Citizens for Second Look Legislation rally on July 22 in Detroit.
- The Nazarene Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit hosted an advocacy day Aug. 19 focusing on the effort to end juvenile life without parole. Safe & Just Michigan co-sponsored, and several team members attended. Other co-sponsors included ACLU of Michigan, SADO and the Michigan Poor People's Campaign.

Networking Opportunities

- On July 8, Ronnie Waters represented SJM at the American Friends Service Committee MI Criminal Justice Program mixer.



Ronnie Waters (left)

This was an opportunity to build relationships between policy makers and formerly incarcerated to bring us one step closer to passing important reforms like Second Look.

- On June 5, Kenneth Nixon joined Detroit city officials, faith leaders and community organizers at a press conference to curb gun violence in Detroit.
- SJM Executive Director **John S. Cooper** was reunited with former Senior Policy Specialist **Josh Hoe** at the 2nd Annual Convening of the Clean Slate Initiative in Oklahoma City on June 8-9. It was a moment to celebrate the access to expungements Michiganders have gained through Clean Slate and automatic expungement and to help advocates from other states strategize how to do the same in their communities.

Awards and Honors

- On June 25, Kenneth Nixon received the Great Expectation



From left: Kenneth Nixon, state Sen. Stephanie Chang (D-Detroit) and state Supreme Court Justice Kyra Harris Bolden.

Award for his work as the president of the Organization of Exonerees at the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP's annual Freedom Fund Dinner.

He shared the podium with headliners like U.S. Sen. **Raphael Warnock** (D-Georgia) and former U.N. Ambassador **Andrew Young**.

MEDIA MENTIONS

Reform efforts grab headlines

Here are some recent news stories that Safe & Just Michigan has contributed to:

- **They thought they'd die in prison. Now they're juvenile justice advocates on a mission** - *Detroit Free Press, May 23*: "Life without parole, man, it's ridiculous, 'cause there's so many transformed human beings in there," said SJM Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters**. "If you look at the record then you've got to come with a different argument than we are ... going to reoffend and we're going to be a detriment to society. Because, almost to the letter, each one person out here is out here doing something to make this world better."
- **A statewide law could make it easier for people with criminal records to find a place to live** - *WMUK Public Radio 102.1 Kalamazoo, July 10*: State Rep. **Abraham Aiyash** (D-Hamtramck) introduced a (fair housing) bill last month that ... requires landlords to consider applications from prospective tenants before they do a criminal background check. **Tenee Gildea** is with the Kalamazoo chapter of the nonprofit group Nation Outside. "I think that's why the housing bill is so important, is because it doesn't allow them the opportunity to see it (the criminal background) before they say yes or no. They say yes or no, tentatively, before they check it." (Note: Safe &

Just Michigan is the Nation Outside's fiscal sponsor.)

- **Traffic, theft, drug crimes top Michigan automatic expungements** - *Bridge Michigan, July 13*: Traffic misdemeanors, theft charges and drug possession or use made up the vast majority of the nearly 1.2 million Michigan criminal convictions dropped from residents' records in the first two weeks of automatic expungement, state police records show. ... "We hope to see some type of portal developed at some point that will allow people to readily access their records to determine what offenses have and will be automatically expunged," SJM Clean Slate Program Manager **Kamau Sandiford** said.
- **Tight labor market helps Michigan's ex-prisoners find jobs** - *Bridge Michigan, July 14*: Thanks to a pandemic-induced tight labor market, Michiganders returning to their communities from prison are finding it easier to get back into the workforce. ... SJM Director of Outreach & Community Partnerships **Kenneth Nixon** ... says criminal justice reform organizations are another set of employers leading the charge on hiring the formerly incarcerated. "Having lived experience is something that has become an invaluable resource for a lot of the organizations that are doing the work and really impactful change," he told Bridge.

Three things I wish I knew *Life after release*

Name: Tony Gant

Title: Nation Outside Director of Policy & Program Operations



City: Jackson

Years since release: 8

Advice to others looking forward to release:

1 Embrace the transformative power of education: As someone who has emerged from the depths of incarceration and rebuilt my life, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of education in shaping one's future. Education not only expands your horizons but also equips you with the tools needed to break free from the cycle of incarceration and create a successful life upon release.

2 Never let your past define you: Incarceration often carries a heavy stigma, particularly for individuals of African-American descent. However, it does not determine your worth or your potential. Let your transformation inspire others and prove that everyone deserves a second chance.

3 Find your purpose: One of the most important steps in rebuilding your life after prison is discovering your purpose. Take the time to reflect on what truly ignites your passion and brings you joy.

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Please note: this newsletter was printed and distributed
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Tell your family ... Tell your friends!

Safe & Just
Michigan

Safe & Just Michigan will hold its
2023 Celebration of Healing from
5-9 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 18 at the Crowne
Plaza Hotel in Lansing. Invite your friends and
family to join us at this free event for dinner,
awards and a special presentation from Crime
Survivors for Safety and Justice National Director
and Highland Park native Aswad Thomas. We
hope to see them there, and we will tell you all
about it in our next newsletter!

Register now at bit.ly/2023SJM



Aswad Thomas grew up in Highland Park and was weeks away from starting a professional basketball career in Europe when two bullets fired outside a convenience store shattered his dreams and set him on a new path. Today, he uses his voice to advocate for policies that prevent crime and break cycles of violence as the national director of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice and vice president of the Alliance for Safety and Justice.