

Safe & Just Michigan

Winter
2023



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I wish I realized sooner how vital it is to connect with supportive networks. — Erica Cederberg, page 7

Upper left: SJM Executive Director **John S. Cooper** (left) and former SJM team member **Josh Hoe** prepare to meet with lawmakers at the JLWOP Legislative Advocacy Day on Oct. 3; Lower left: Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** speaks at a Lunch and Learn event at the Michigan House Office Building in September; Center top: attorney **Pete Martel** accepts the Justice Warrior Award for an Individual at the Celebration of Healing; Center bottom: Fund Development Fellow **Erica Cederberg** shows off SJM swag at a Detroit expungement fair in September; Right top: **Aswad Thomas**, national director of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, was the featured speaker at our Celebration of Healing; Center Bottom: State Rep. **Amos O'Neal** talks about a bill he sponsors to end juvenile life without parole at the advocacy day Oct. 3.



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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

In a long-expected move, the Michigan Legislature adjourned on Nov. 14. The adjournment was sine die — meaning it did not specify a return date — but is expected to last at least into January 2024.

The primary reason for adjournment was to allow certain time-sensitive pieces of legislation to go into effect, including moving the Democratic presidential primary to Feb. 27, 2024. But another factor was House Democrats losing their working majority due to two members winning mayoral races and resigning their seats following the Nov. 7 election. This reduced a two-seat majority from 56-54 to an evenly split 54-54.

The speakership will not be affected by the change, but it does deprive House Democrats of a working majority until the seats can be filled by a special election, which is expected to be held on April 16, 2024. However, we have been told that committee meetings will continue before that election.

None of this is positive for the

prospects of our legislative priorities: we are losing weeks of session days and the lack of a working majority means there are unlikely to be many floor votes before the special election is held.

We are hoping to move priorities through the committee process early next year so we are set up for floor votes when they resume, but we do not yet know how soon the Legislature will return and resume scheduling committee hearings.

We are continuing to advocate for our priorities with lawmakers during the adjournment and are hoping they will promptly return to work in January.

With thanks,

John S. Cooper
Executive Director



*Executive Director
John S. Cooper*

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 want to have your name listed with your entry, or whether you want to remain

anonymous.

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

We’ll share as many of your letters to Inside Voices as we can in our newsletter, and some may be edited for space. In addition, we will share them in our electronic newsletter, which is sent to nearly 9,000 supporters each month, and on our website.

INSIDE VOICES

Offer mental health support

More than 50 percent of all people will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime, statistics say. These statistics are exacerbated when we consider many won't be diagnosed. Without proper diagnosis, we begin to normalize behaviors derived from our illnesses.

Mental fortitude is necessary for surviving physical confinement. In possessing mental fortitude, our mental health must be in good condition, requiring regular check-ins with self, or simply creating space to release daily stressors. The conditions we're exposed to aren't conducive to a healthy mental self.

As we prepare to return to society, our communities and our families, we must be whole or at least working on it. Statistics say 1 in 5 Americans will experience mental illness in a given year. Poverty, homelessness, incarceration and substance abuse relate to a higher

risk for poor mental health. We need to be more responsible for our mental well-being, while ensuring that upon release, all of us are capable of contributing not only to society but advocating for those of us still incarcerated.

~ **Gregory Tyrone Alexander**
Brooks Correctional Facility

We need a Second Look

A quote from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Kennedy: "One day in prison is longer than almost any day I have had to endure." He told the nation's lawyers, "When the door is locked against the prisoner, we do not think about what is behind it. To be sure, the prisoner must be punished to vindicate the law, to acknowledge the suffering of the victim, and to deter from future crime. Still the prisoner is part of the family of humankind."

To me, this quote speaks to why we need the Second Look bill. It would allow older prisoners who

are no longer a threat to anyone to re-enter society.

I shot and killed my wife in a drunken rage while she was with her lover. I haven't touched alcohol since that night. I was offered a plea bargain, but my state of mind wouldn't allow me to accept my guilt. I took all the classes the MDOC offers on violence prevention to understand why my crime happened and how it affected my victims and the community. I entered prison when I was 29. I'm 74 years old now and recently survived treatment for prostate cancer.

This bill would allow a judge from my county to decide whether to allow me a second chance. It won't flood the state with dangerous criminals. It just allows the state an option to release older prisoners who are no longer a threat to society.

~ **Richard Dykhouse**
Ionia Correctional Facility

Meet the new fellows and intern at Safe & Just Michigan

Safe & Just Michigan is excited to introduce you to our new intern, fund development fellow and community engagement fellows who are working with us for the coming months.

Sonnet Yancey, a senior in Michigan State University's social work program, joined us as an intern for the 2023-24 school year. Yancey, who uses she/they pronouns and is working under the guidance of Chief Operating Officer Kate McCracken, has long-term career goals that include operating in nonprofit leadership roles and developing alternatives to overpolicing. They are scheduled

to graduate in spring 2024 with minors in human behavior & social services and leadership of integrated learning, and a certificate in nonprofit leadership from the National Association of Social Workers.

Erica Cederberg became our Fund Development Fellow in September. Cederberg was motivated to become a fellow because she wants to bring reentry services to her home community of Saginaw. You can learn more about her in her responses to the '3 Things' column on Page 7.

Ceci Bordayo and **Nealmetria Loper** are our Community

Engagement Fellows and are focusing their work on lowering barriers to health care jobs for people with a criminal record.

Bordayo, from Lansing, transformed her experience as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse into becoming an advocate for other survivors. Her work is rooted in her faith and her belief in second chances.

Loper, who lives in Detroit, became a community advocate because she wants a better future for her children. She has previously been active in issues such as education, childhood nutrition and reducing childhood poverty.

POLICY UPDATE

JLWOP Legislative Advocacy Day a success

Advocates hear from former juvenile lifers, meet with lawmakers

On Oct. 3, dozens of criminal justice reform advocates, joined Safe & Just Michigan for a Juvenile Life Without Parole (JLWOP) Legislative Advocacy Day at the state Capitol.

The day kicked off with a special presentation featuring state Sen. **Jeff Irwin** (D-Ann Arbor) and state Rep. **Amos O'Neal** (D-Saginaw), who are sponsoring bills to end the possibility of JLWOP sentencing in Michigan. That was followed with a panel discussion with former juvenile lifers and attorneys who have represented them at trial and resentencing. Advocates then met in small groups with lawmakers to explain why Michigan needs to end its status as one of the few remaining places on earth where children can be sentenced to prison

for the rest of their lives without any chance of ever coming home again.

Two sets of bills, House Bills 4160-4164 and Senate Bills 119-123, would remove the possibility of sentencing children to life without parole in Michigan. Both sets of bills have had committee hearings, but neither has progressed to a vote before their respective chambers.

As we mentioned in the Executive Director's column on page 2, legislative

work has already wrapped up for the year, and any further action on these bills will have to come in 2024. This interlude will give advocates an opportunity to determine targeted strategies to help advance the proposed bills.



Former juvenile lifers answer questions from criminal justice reform advocates before heading out to meet with lawmakers on Oct. 3, 2023.

SJM team members active at events throughout Michigan

Members of the Safe & Just Michigan team have been participating in resource and expungement fairs, educational events and advocacy activities around the state in recent months. Here are just a sample of the things we've been up to:

- **Recover Out Loud in Jackson, Sept. 9:** Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** and volunteer **Felecia Tyson-Waters** represented SJM at an event showing people can recover from substance use disorders, and honored and celebrated that journey.
- **Kalamazoo Wellness and Recovery Festival, Sept.**

16: Director of Outreach and Community Partnerships **Kenneth Nixon** and Communications Specialist **Zack Whaley** were at the festival to let people know about expungement opportunities and our ongoing legislative efforts.

- **Legislative Issues Lunch & Learn - Sept. 28:** Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** was a featured presenter at an event that took place across from the state Capitol. He spoke on the ongoing campaign to end juvenile life without parole in Michigan. Other criminal justice reform advocates spoke on other campaigns, such as the ones

to create a second look policy or to establish a sentencing commission.

- **Second Look Legislative Advocacy Day, Oct. 19:** A coalition of criminal justice reform advocates gathered at the Capitol to talk with legislators about pending Second Look legislation. SJM team members who participated included Executive Director **John S. Cooper**, Director of Outreach and Community Partnerships **Ken Nixon**, Community Engagement Specialist **Ronnie Waters** and Membership Services Specialist **Dena Anderson**.

OUTREACH UPDATE

Formerly incarcerated board members elected at meeting

Safe & Just Michigan expanded its board of directors during its annual membership meeting on Oct. 12, including adding people who were formerly incarcerated to the board. We believe that including the voices, perspectives and leadership of people who have been directly impacted by the legal system is crucial to our success in transforming Michigan's criminal legal system from one that is broken to one that centers rehabilitation and restoration.

The event also provided supporters with updates on our legislative work, offered a legislative forecast for 2024 and shared some of our narrative building work.

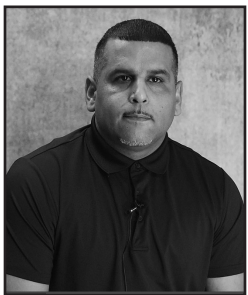
Here are some of the highlights:

New board members elected

The following board members were elected to join Safe & Just Michigan's board of directors for a three-year term:

Tracey Weaver Brame: Associate Dean of Experiential and Practice Preparation at Western Michigan University's Cooley Law School and director of WMU's Cooley Innocence Project.

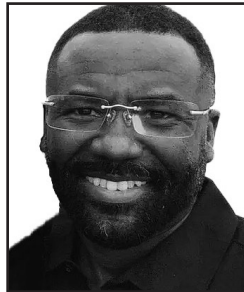
Jose Burgos: Michigan Campaign Coordinator at the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing for Youth and a former juvenile lifer who participated in our Life Beyond Life storytelling project. Jose is also a former reentry specialist at SADO.



Jose Burgos

Judith Gracey, Esq.: Managing attorney and founder of The Gracey Law Firm, appointed to the Michigan Appellate Defender Commission in 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023, and the Indigent Defense Advisory Commission.

Anthony Legion: Lead appellate paralegal at Wolfe Law PLLC whose professional career began as he supported the appeal of his own wrongful conviction for a murder he did not commit. He was exonerated in 2020 after 19 years in prison.



Anthony Legion

Dr. Jeffrey Morenoff: Associate dean for research and policy engagement at the University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy who instructs criminology and criminal justice policy classes, among other courses. He regularly teaches with the Inside Out Exchange Program.

Also re-elected to three-year terms to our board were:

Eileen Hayes: The executive director of Michigan Faith in Action, she has served on our board since 2017.

Joe Haveman: A Republican member of the Michigan House of Representatives from 2009 to 2014, he is currently the director of government relations for the Hope Network and has served on our board since 2020.

Legislative Updates

Automatic Expungement: On

April 11, Clean Slate's automatic expungement became a reality in Michigan. Michigan wasn't the first state to automatically clear old convictions from criminal records, but it is the first state to include felonies. As a result, an astounding 4.5 million records have been cleared in the past half year.

Phone Fees: Over the past two years, Safe & Just Michigan has been working with lawmakers and the Michigan Department of Corrections to reduce or eliminate exploitive phone surcharges, the special equipment fund these surcharges flow into, and the phone fees charged to incarcerated people and their families. As a result, phone fees have been reduced 56 percent from 16 cents per minute to about 7 cents per minute. Annually, this saves justice-impacted families between \$5-\$6 million per year.

Sentencing Commission: The Legislature is close to passing a plan we support that would create a sentencing commission. In 1998, the Michigan legislature created sentencing guidelines as it also created a 100 percent truth-in-sentencing law. It then defunded the commission that created the guidelines, and there has been little oversight or accountability for sentencing outcomes in the 25 years since. We believe the reestablishment of a sentencing commission would not only provide oversight and transparency but also provide a set of concrete proposals to make sentencing more proportional and eliminate geographic and racial disparities.

A night of celebration and healing with SJM

Friends and supporters hear from national director of CSSJ

On Oct. 18, Safe & Just Michigan enjoyed a Celebration of Healing with friends and supporters from around the state. We are saddened that it's not possible for all of our supporters to join us, but we wanted to share some of what we heard and learned that evening.

We were especially excited to hear from our featured speaker, Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice National Director **Aswad Thomas**.

Thomas, who grew up in Highland Park, was weeks away from starting a professional basketball career in Europe when he was shot leaving a convenience store. The attack severely wounded him and dashed his career hopes.

Rather than getting bitter, however, Thomas wanted to understand what had caused the cycles of violence in his community and what he could do to interrupt them. That led to his involvement with CSSJ and the movement to support crime survivors.

Thomas pointed out that it's wrong to think of crime survivors and people who cause harm as two distinct communities of people. To illustrate the point, Thomas shared that the same doctor who saved his life had

previously saved the life of the man who shot him — he had been a victim, too.

We were pleased to present four awards: State Sen. **Stephanie Chang** (D-Detroit) received the William G. Milliken Award. Named for Michigan's longest-serving governor, this award goes to an elected official who demonstrates a commitment to reforming Michigan's criminal justice system. Sen. Chang sponsored bills in the Raise the Age and the



State Sen. Stephanie Chang (D-Detroit)

Jail and Pretrial Incarceration packages, and sponsored the bill that created the Michigan Department of Corrections Family Advisory Board. She's the lead Senate sponsor on Second Look legislation.

We presented the Lifetime of Service Award to **Deborah LaBelle**, who was lead attorney in the federal class action litigation on behalf of Michigan juvenile lifers, *Hill et al v*



Sheryl Kubiak accepts an award on behalf of friend Deborah LaBelle.

Miller factors into consideration at review for release. LaBelle has been a leading voice calling for an end to juvenile life without parole sentencing in Michigan and has represented several people who faced this harsh sentence.

Attorney **Pete Martel** received the Justice Warrior Award for an Individual. When he was offered a position as a clerk for a state supreme court justice, another justice objected to hiring someone with a criminal record to clerk at the Supreme Court. Martel



Pete Martel

stepped aside with grace, igniting a statewide discussion on crime, redemption and second chances that led the objecting justice to rethink his position.

The Justice Warrior Award for an Organization was given to the **Michigan Center for Youth Justice**. It has led on campaigns like Raise the Age and the bipartisan Juvenile Justice Reform Task Force, whose work resulted in several pieces of pending legislation.



SJM Director of Outreach and Community Partnerships Ken Nixon salutes the work of state Sen. Stephanie Chang.

MEDIA MENTIONS

- Detroit man wrongfully imprisoned for 16 years now helping others find their voice

- WXYZ Channel 7 Detroit, Sept. 27: In 2005, **Kenneth Nixon** was wrongfully sent to prison for 16 years for an arson that killed two young children in Detroit. Now, he's using his story to educate others as National Wrongful Conviction Day approaches on Oct. 2. ... Nixon never gave up on fighting for his freedom. He continuously reached out to innocence projects to help garner attention to his case. ... "Dying in prison was just not an option. It was just something I couldn't accept," said Nixon, who is now SJM's director of outreach and community partnerships.

Advocates push for ending life without parole for minors

- WILX Channel 10 Lansing, Oct. 3: At a rally in Lansing Tuesday, advocates were pushing for bills that would end "life without parole" for minors. ... "Kids can't vote, or join the military, or enter into contracts, yet we will charge them as adults and sentence them to die in prison without a second thought," said Safe and Just Michigan Executive Director **John S. Cooper**. ... "This is the case even for kids who do very bad things," said Cooper. "We don't know what a person's gonna be like 40-50 years from now, and we don't believe that a judge can make a judgment that a person is irredeemable when they're not even 18 years old."

The count: Add up these numbers

- Outlier Media, Oct. 6: Michigan has the largest juvenile lifer population in the nation. More than 300 young people under 18 have been sentenced to life in prison

without parole, and one in five of those inmates have been in prison for at least 25 years, according to Safe and Just Michigan.

Column: Give Michigan judges the opportunity to review long sentences

- Oakland Press, Oct. 12: Research shows that people age out of crime and that incarcerated people serving the longest sentences for serious past harms are the least likely to cause harm in our communities again. ... Second Look laws are already in effect in several states and have received strong support from both Republicans and Democrats. The American Bar Association expressed its support for Second Look legislation in a 2022 resolution. More than 70 respected organizations – from The United Church of Christ to Safe and Just Michigan – are members of Michigan's Second Look Coalition and support the proposed legislation.

Lack of data raises questions about quality and cost effectiveness of Michigan's prison health care

- Second Wave Michigan, Nov. 16: The Citizens Research Council of Michigan (CRC) recently reported that Michigan prisons spend approximately \$300 million per year to provide health care for more than 30,000 prisoners. ... "When you actually get health care, it's okay," said Ken Nixon, director of outreach and community partnerships for Safe & Just Michigan, "But the process is arduous and is meant to deter people from engaging not only in preventative care but in responsive care. The bedside manner is terrible. It trains you not to be a participant in your health."

Three things I wish I knew *Life after release*

Name: Erica Cederberg

Title: SJM Fund Development



Fellow,
Saginaw Valley State University student

City: Saginaw

Years since release: 3

Advice to others looking forward to release:

1 Navigating Limited Resources:

One revelation post-release was the scarcity of support systems in Saginaw County. Awareness of the hurdles related to housing, employment opportunities and basic necessities would allow people about to be released to strategize and seek out additional support networks.

2 Community is Key: I wish I realized sooner how vital it is to connect with supportive networks. Organizations like SJM, Michigan Liberation and Nation Outside have built a community that fosters encouragement and understanding as well as valuable resources, offering guidance on available assistance programs and opportunities.

3 Empowerment through Education: I wish I recognized earlier the power of continuous learning in shaping my reintegration. Education not only opens doors to opportunities but also empowers individuals to challenge stereotypes and contribute meaningfully to society.

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Please note this newsletter was printed and distributed
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As the year draws to a close, you and your friends and family may be considering where to make your generous donations through prisoner benefit funds and personal means.

Your gift of any size helps us publish and send newsletters like this one, fund research and provide outreach to the community. Your gift also helps us advocate for legislation and policies that remove barriers to employment, create safer communities for everyone and reform life and long sentences.

We appreciate you for your support!

