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Coalition calls for reforms in public defender system

Midday update

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Walter Swift sees himself as the face of a public defender system in tumult.

A 21-year-old Detroit man in 1982, Swift found himself arrested for a crime he didn't commit - the rape of a woman. He said his court-appointed lawyer expressed little interest in his case; work timecards proving his innocence went overlooked, as did semen evidence that could have exonerated him.

Swift, now 48, served 26 years before appeals led a judge to vacate his conviction and release him in May 2008.

"I'm not particularly angry about it," he said. "It wasn't the fault of one person. ... It was the fault of the system."

Today, the Campaign for Justice, a coalition of Michigan legal groups and human rights and faith organizations, launched an effort to reform Michigan's system to prevent further miscarriages of justice.

The effort builds on a report issued in June that found the state's system of providing court-appointed attorneys for indigent defendants, now funded through counties, is flawed and failing. The report, offered by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association and the State Bar of Michigan, found that defense attorneys had little time or resources to prepare their cases.

Forty-three states spend more per-capita on indigent defense than Michigan.

Based on this report, the coalition issued a "report card" today for Michigan's defense system that offered Ds and Fs in nearly every category.

"Our public defense system is failing the taxpayers and failing the accused," said Laura Sager, director of the Campaign for Justice.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Read Thursday's Lansing State Journal for more on this report.
