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POLITICS

Report calls Michigan's public defender "abysmal"

By [Sarah Cwiek \(/people/sarah-cwiek\)](#)

Michigan's system of providing lawyers for indigent defendants is so bad it amounts to a "constitutional crisis."

The Michigan ACLU and the Michigan Campaign for Justice produced the report called "[Faces of Failing Public Defense Systems.](http://www.aclumich.org/sites/default/files/file/pdf/FacesofFailingPublicDefense.PDF)" (<http://www.aclumich.org/sites/default/files/file/pdf/FacesofFailingPublicDefense.PDF>)

It profiles 13 men who spent time in prison, even though there was evidence of their innocence.

One is Frederick Mardlin, who spent three years in prison for arson.

A Saint Clair County court would not provide Mardlin's public defender with resources to get an expert to testify the fire was likely caused by electrical problems.

"Pretty much everywhere I went in the legal system...it was a like a roadblock, or nobody cared, or we just want a conviction. The system to me is a joke."

The report says Michigan has abdicated its "constitutional responsibilities" by failing to ensure its counties supply, train and supervise public defenders.

Robin Dahlberg is with the ACLU. She says Michigan has neglected its public defender system so badly the courts "no longer produce reliable results:"

"It delegates its public defense obligations to its counties, but takes no steps to ensure its counties meet those obligations."

Michigan's public defender system was listed near the bottom [another recent national report](#) (http://www.mynlada.org/michigan/michigan_report.pdf). The state ranks 44th in terms of per capita spending on public defense.

Advocates will send the report to state legislators.

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