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Book Released Of Michigan Men Wrongly Convicted

Michigan Campaign For Justice Behind Book

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DETROIT -- A group seeking major changes in Michigan's court-appointed defense system released a book Wednesday profiling several men whose convictions were overturned based on evidence that wasn't discovered or pursued at trial.

The stories are proof of people who were sent to prison because of a failed public defense system, the Michigan Campaign for Justice said, noting that the quality of defense varies greatly from county to county depending on how money is allocated for attorneys and the skill of lawyers who get cases.

Criticism of how poor people get court-appointed attorneys in Michigan is not new. There's a lawsuit pending in Ingham County, and a recent report from a State Bar of Michigan task force highlighted the system's inadequacies.

The Campaign for Justice, which includes the American Civil Liberties Union, ethnic groups and many local bar associations, is trying to build support for legislation in the state Capitol that would create a commission to quickly study the issue and recommend changes.

The ultimate goal is a statewide system that provides money and standards for court-appointed lawyers. The book is being given to every member of the House and Senate.

"Michigan has abdicated its constitutional responsibilities," said Robin Dahlberg of the ACLU. "It delegates its public defense obligations to its counties but takes no steps to ensure that the counties meet these obligations."

The book profiles 13 men, including nine whose convictions were overturned. The others are awaiting court decisions or still fighting to prove their innocence.

"In almost every single case ... defense counsel did not have the time or resources to investigate charges against his or her client or to prepare adequately for trial," Dahlberg said.

Some of the former inmates attended the news conference, as did family members of some of the profiled men still in prison. Fred Mardlin, who spent three years in prison after being convicted of burning down his own home in St. Clair County, was paroled in 2010 but is trying to clear his name.

The appeals court reversed the conviction. The Michigan Supreme Court reinstated it but also ordered the appeals court to decide whether the 36-year-old Mardlin was improperly denied an expert witness, among other issues.

Appellate lawyer F. Martin Tieber has been working the case for four years, including two years for free after St. Clair County capped his fees.

"The system to me is a joke. ... What they're doing to people is wrong," Mardlin said.

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