



# Michigan Public Defense Task Force

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**For Immediate Release**

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## **Conference Shines Public Spotlight on Failures in Michigan's Public Defense System**

*New report points to needed reforms*

LANSING --- The Michigan Public Defense Task Force will convene a statewide conference this Thursday, June 19, in Lansing to examine failures and discuss reforms of Michigan's public defense system. The conference comes on the heels of a highly critical examination of Michigan's system released on June 17 by the State Bar of Michigan and conducted by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association.

"Individuals who have first-hand experience of the damage done by our failing public defense system, know how urgently reform is needed," said Elizabeth Arnovits, chair of the Michigan Public Defense Task Force. "With the release of this detailed report, everyone can see the dire impact this has on the accused, our communities and Michigan taxpayers. The Task Force conference will provide an opportunity to discuss the systemic problems in our public defense delivery system and identify needed reforms."

The conference will feature the report author and national expert on public defense, David Carroll, director of research and evaluation for the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. At the request of the Michigan Legislature, Carroll recently completed an examination of public defense services provided by Michigan counties. His report, "Race to the Bottom," concluded:

"...the state of Michigan fails to provide competent representation to those who cannot afford counsel in its criminal courts. The state of Michigan's denial of its constitutional obligations has produced myriad public defense systems that vary greatly in defining who

qualifies for services and the competency of the services rendered. Though the level of services varies from county to county - giving credence to the proposition that the level of justice a poor person receives is dependent entirely on which side of a county line one's crime is alleged to have been committed instead of the factual merits of the case - NLADA finds that none of the public defender services in the sample counties are constitutionally adequate."

In addition to Carroll, conference speakers will include Montana Supreme Court Justice Karla Gray and Knox County (Tennessee) Public Defender Mark Stephens, who will discuss reform efforts in other states, and Laura Sager, director of the Michigan Campaign for Justice, who will lead a discussion on organizing for reform.

In addition to chronicling the real life experiences of Michigan defense attorneys, sessions at the conference will also feature an examination of how children are impacted in Michigan's public defense system and how community, treatment and faith-based organizations can participate in bringing about reform.

"Assisting the Legislature in addressing this issue requires the participation and expertise of a wide range of stakeholders," Arnovits said. "Now that we have a clear and eye-opening explanation of problem, this event will kick off a vigorous reform movement."

The conference is free and begins at 9 a.m., with keynote speaker, David Carroll. The event will take place at the Lansing Center, and is being made possible through an Access to Justice Grant from the Michigan State Bar Foundation.

To register or find out more information, visit:

[www.michigancampaignforjustice.org](http://www.michigancampaignforjustice.org).

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