For Immediate Release

Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office and WMU-Cooley Law School Innocence Project Announce DOJ Grant Award

The Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office and the Western Michigan University Cooley Law School Innocence Project are pleased to announce that the Department of Justice is awarding a $451,238 grant to collaborate on a case review and a DNA testing project. The collaboration is the first of its kind in the state.

Funding from the Justice Department grant will defray the costs associated with case review, evidence location and DNA testing where the results may show innocence of those convicted of felonies. The grant also supports additional personnel for both offices.

The WCPO Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU) and the WMU-Cooley Law School Innocence Project will work jointly to screen cases to determine whether DNA testing might produce new evidence determinative of guilt. Forensic science has undergone tremendous changes over the years and offers the ability to both exonerate and convict. This grant will allow the two entities to work together to ensure that justice has been served through the testing or retesting of forensic evidence that was integral to a conviction. The project will also provide training to grant personnel to help keep them abreast of the changes in forensic science.

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The Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office Conviction Integrity Unit became operational in January 2018 and has received over 500 requests for investigation. Of the 500 referrals, 250 involve forensic evidence.  https://www.waynecounty.com/elected/prosecutor/conviction-integrity-unit.aspx The WMU-Cooley Innocence Project currently has 135 Wayne County cases under review.  https://www.cooley.edu/academics/experiential-learning/innocence-project

The goal of this project is to review and work to conclusion 300 cases involving claims of innocence in violent felony cases. Having access to prosecution records will greatly aid the traditional process, which requires attorneys to file motions to access evidence and obtain testing. Additionally, there will be no need to involve the courts with respect to the testing of evidence, since the parties will jointly decide whether testing may bear upon the reliability of the verdict.

This project will stand as a model for future conviction integrity units, and allow for a speedier, just resolution to claims of innocence where forensic science can often provide a definitive answer.

WMU-Cooley Innocence Project Director Marla Mitchell-Cichon is thrilled with the award. “The Department of Justice funds will allow our office to continue to provide high-quality legal services to prisoners whose innocence may be proven through DNA testing. We look forward to collaborating with a prosecutor’s office that is committed to rectifying wrongful convictions and improving the criminal justice system,” Mitchell-Cichon said.

Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said, “We want to restore faith in the criminal justice system. This grant will allow us to continue to try new and innovative programs to ensure that justice is done.”

Valerie Newman, Director of the Conviction Integrity Unit, said, “The Conviction Integrity Unit’s work will certainly be enhanced by this grant. I look forward to working with Cooley’s innocence project, continuing the work of improving the criminal justice system and investigating innocence claims.”

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