

CITIZENS FOR PRISON REFORM NEWSLETTER

January 2020

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Legislation - Michigan

Senate Bill 681. Currently, juvenile courts allow access to information from a youth's record that is not specifically protected. This bill, introduced by Sen. Jeff Irwin, would remove the age requirement, currently set at 18, for eligibility for a juvenile offender to apply for a "set-aside," a procedure that blocks access to a person's record in juvenile court. All offenses, except those transferred to the adult court for violent crimes, would be eligible.

Senate Bill 682. This bill, introduced by Sen. Peter Lucido, would make *all* juvenile records non-public; access would be limited to law enforcement, prosecutors, the courts and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Articles, news

False Witness. By Pamela Colloff. Paul Skalnik is a con artist with a long criminal record. He may also be one of the most prolific jail house informants in U.S. history. Skalnik spent many months over a period of years in the jail in Pinellas County, Florida, where he was kept in protective custody. He gained a reputation as a jailhouse snitch for his frequent court appearances to describe "imagined" conversations with fellow prisoners in which they recounted their crimes. Paul's testimony, prosecutor's demands for convictions, and their failure to check the facts led to the prisoners' convictions – and often to death sentences. Although Paul denied being offered reduced sentences, his sentences were often reduced *after he had testified*, or he was granted early parole. During the times when he was free, he married a number of women after posing as a professional and giving them expensive (and stolen) gifts. He divorced them all after cleaning out their bank accounts. After serving numerous other periods in jail for various crimes, Skalnik was finally released. Jail-house lawyers continue to play a role in U.S. courts. They were involved in cases that have led to 20 % of the DNA exonerations in the U.S. to date. However, their use has received little attention until recently; reformers hope that new legislation will discourage prosecutors from relying on them. (*The New York Times Magazine*, December 8, 2019)

The Interview. A group of volunteers is helping incarcerated people negotiate a parole system that is all but broken. By Jennifer Gonnerman. The Parole Preparation Project, or Parole Prep for short, is an organization staffed by volunteers who work only with "lifers" serving 20 years to life, most of whom have been convicted of murder or other acts of extreme violence, in New York State. The State's prisons currently house about 46,000 persons, almost 20 % of whom are "lifers." The

volunteers are required to make an 8- to 12-month commitment. They are assigned to a team of two or three persons who are then matched up with a lifer, whom the team helps prepare for his/her next interview with the parole board. In its evolution, the project has changed from an emphasis from legal issues to one on relating to the prisoners, encouraging them to speak honestly about their crimes, and obtaining court documents. Most of the volunteers live in New York City, but the prisoners served are housed as far away as in Auburn, 250 miles to the north-west -- a 10 to 12 hour round-trip drive upstate, requiring them to leave NYC at 4 a.m. by rental car. Therefore visits are infrequent, and mail is a necessity. Volunteers also work with prisoners at Otisville Correctional Facility in Orange County, in cooperation with a lifer's organization there. The Parole Board has been criticized for failure to release lifers even when their behavior has been excellent. Many prisoners have been denied parole after 10 or more hearings over many years. The Board consists of only 16 members, most of whom have backgrounds in law enforcement. They conduct some 12,000 interviews annually, with three members responsible for each interview, conducted by videoconference. Time is allowed for comments by both the victims and the lifers. Members of the Police Benevolent Association often accompany the family. Parole Board members have little time for thoughtful consideration of the information obtained. A former member found the schedule "insane." About 36 % of the lifers interviewed during the past 3 years have been paroled. Of those assisted by Parole Prep during the last 5 years, 149, or about 60 %, have been released. (*The New Yorker Magazine*, December 2, 2019)

Diversion program announced for youth in some criminal cases. Associated Press. The Wayne County Michigan prosecutor's office is partnering with the Wayne County Dispute Resolution Center in a juvenile diversion program to serve as an alternative to charging children and teenagers with minor offenses such as property damage and simple assault. Youthful offenders meet with authorities and victims of their crimes in a "Talk it Out" program to develop solutions short of formal charges. Juveniles will be accepted only once in the program, and only if just one victim is involved. The victim must agree to the referral and mediation, and parents or guardians must be willing to transport the offender to the meetings. (*Lansing State Journal*, December 17, 2019)

Rikers Island Barista Academy. By Amy Chozick. Can teaching prison inmates how to make lattes and macchiatos give them a shot at a better future? A class for women prisoners being held on short sentences was begun at Rikers Island Prison in New York City in 2017, with the purpose of teaching them how to prepare food in restaurants. Its success led to expansion to include 18- to 24-year-old men. Both groups are now termed batistas. The training program helps the prisoners learn how to interact in polite society and to restore their dignity. The prison system began to see the opportunity in coffee several years ago after Starbucks endorsed the "ban the box" movement to stop the use of a question on job applications regarding felony convictions. Nor does it run background checks on applicants until prior to making a conditional offer of employment. U.S. coffee shops employ 1.7 million people, providing many opportunities for batistas. However, much remains to be done before jobs will be found for the 1.5 million prisoners and 745,000 jail inmates in our penal institutions. (*New York Times* business section, December 29, 2019).

The State Appellate Defender Office (SADO) assists prisoners and their families in various ways. It maintains a web site (www.sado.org) with a list of upcoming events, top stories regarding corrections, feature articles, and a Project Reentry newsletter, "Drum," which features articles for former juvenile lifers returning to the community. It includes both their successes and struggles, and identifies a wide variety of resources, e.g., financial budgeting, and community tips. It can be accessed at <http://www.sado.org/Articles/Article/580>. SADO offices are located at 645 Griswold, Suite 3300, Detroit, MI 48226, 313-256-9833, and at 200 N. Washington Square, Capitol National Bank Bldg., Lansing, MI 48913, 517-334-6069.

Coming events

Thursday, January 9. 9:30 – 11:00 a.m. Meeting of Michigan Joint Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration. Final report and recommendations. Boji Tower, Michigan Senate Hearing Room, Ground Floor, 124 W. Allegan St., Lansing.

Saturday, January 18, 10:45 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Monthly meeting of Citizens for Prison Reform. Keith Barber, Legislative Corrections Ombudsman, will speak and answer questions on what their office does, where to find their reports and most recent findings, and how families of prisoners can best advocate for and assist their loved ones. Calvary Lutheran Church, 6301 West St. Joseph Hwy., Lansing, MI 48917.

Saturday, January 25, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. Locked Out: The Impact of Prison on Families, a documentary film showing how mass incarceration has impacted Michigan families and community members, with Q & A, featuring families of prisoners. Team Wellness [East], 6309 Mack Ave., Detroit, MI 48207.

Wednesday, January 29, 2:00 p.m. ADVOCACY 101 Webinar, covering how Michigan's government works -- key functions in government, the bill process and the legislative process. Presented by Renell Weathers, Community Director for the Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP), and sponsored by the Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration (MI-CEMI). Registration in advance at https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_FJFUOpO8Tny-0GzEj_c7dw. (After registering you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar.

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Citizens for Prison Reform (CPR). www.micpr.org; micpr.org@gmail.com. 269-339-0606. P.O. Box 80414, Lansing, MI 48908. Mora Wilkevicz, President. A grassroots family-run organization whose purpose is to educate, support and unify loved ones of prisoners within the state of Michigan. CPR works to inform legislators and create awareness as to the need for greater prison reforms. All content provided in this newsletter is for informational purposes only. The editor makes no representations as to the accuracy or completeness of any information on this site or found by following any link on it. The editor is not liable for any errors or omissions in this information or for the availability of it, and will not be liable for any losses, injuries, or damages from the display or use of this information.