Safe & Just Michigan

Fall 2026







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> Social media has grown in leaps and bounds in that time and the learning curve can be daunting.
>
> — Michael Taylor II (Mike X), page 7

*Clockwise from upper left: SJM Director of Outreach & Community Partnerships **Ken Nixon** (left) with former A Brighter Way Exectuive Director **Adam Grant** at the Reentry United conference in Grand Rapids; The Mackinac Center's **Jarret Skorrup** (left) and SJM Director of Policy **Tony Gant** take part in a panel talk on career opportunities after prison; The SJM team meets for a strategy discussion, from left, Nixon, Senior Policy & Research Specialist **Cassie Larrieux** and Senior Communications Specialist **Barbara Wieland**; Nixon is invited to WILX-TV 10 Lansing to talk about making health care careers available to formerly incarcerated Michiganders.*



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Stay Connected After Your Parole
We are always delighted when any incarcerated member is paroled. If you would like to stay in touch, please call or write us with your new information.

Take Action
Encourage your friends, family and networks to tell their legislators, pastors and leaders of organizations about Safe & Just Michigan, our latest reports and the need for sensible justice reforms that will make our communities safe.

From the director's corner

Hello friends:

This has been a challenging year with remarkably little legislative activity. Few bills of interest to SJM had passed even one chamber. We felt more hopeful leading into 2026, as we had positive conversations with key lawmakers and committee chairs on several of our priorities. However, Michigan continued to experience challenging political dynamics into 2026 that made it a struggle to get any legislation introduced.

Just recently, we had another contentious budget season and are now experiencing a quiet period because lawmakers are focused on campaigning in the lead-up to this year's election. This election is important as every seat in the Legislature is on the ballot, along with the statewide offices of governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, and secretary of state.

While the legislative process is stagnant, the Michigan Supreme Court is making important decisions with significant im-pact, including the recent *People v. Eads* decision which demonstrates how the Court continues to recognize that children are fundamentally different from adults. Even more recently, the state Supreme Court issued a decision holding that SORA 2021 constitutes punishment and cannot be applied retroactively to anyone whose registrable offense preceded the 2011 amendments to the statute.



Executive Director Kate McCracken

We remain motivated and dedicated — just like the Michigan Supreme Court — to follow the evidence and research to create policy reforms that reduce the impact of the criminal legal system on incarcerated Michiganders and their families.

Best,

Kate McCracken
Executive Director

Proposed legislation would strengthen Corrections Ombudsman's role

On Aug. 25, the Michigan House of Representatives passed House Bills 5920-21. These bills would provide expanded accountability for state-run prisons through the office of the Legislative Corrections Ombudsman. Safe & Just Michigan, along with several of our organizational partners, support these bills, which now await action in the Senate.

The bills would make these changes:

- Allow complaints to be submitted to the ombudsman by family members as well as individuals or organizations that advocate on behalf of incarcerated people or parolees.
- Require the ombudsman to create and make available a standardized complaint form.
- Require the ombudsman to inform a complainant that their complaint was received.
- Specifically allow the ombudsman to use qualified experts for assistance in its work.
- Provide time frames for making certain statements and notifications.
- Require that certain information be included in the ombudsman's annual report.
- Require the ombudsman to post monthly reports about complaints it has received.
- Prohibit MDOC from penalizing incarcerated advocates and family members who file a complaint with the ombudsman.

At a hearing before the House Judiciary Committee, Michigan Department of Corrections Spokesman **Kyle Kaminski** said the MDOC is neutral on the bills, while the Legislative Corrections Ombudsman **Keith Barber** said he was in favor.

The bills cleared the House Floor Aug. 25. They now await a hearing before the Senate Committee on Oversight.

Inside Voices from Around Michigan

Don't take away our music, photos

I pray that Safe & Just will look into this matter of concern about our JPay tablets. JPay is supposed to be gone in 30 days (as of July 28, 2026). And we are supposed to receive some new tablets. It is said that we will have to give up our old tablets. I purchased this tablet with my own funds, and I have over 2,000 songs on my tablet. My music is what gives me peace of mind. Plus, the music and family pictures can't be transferred onto this new tablet. I pray that someone will represent us in this matter before the 30 days are up. I thank you for your time to read this letter give us some help in this matter.

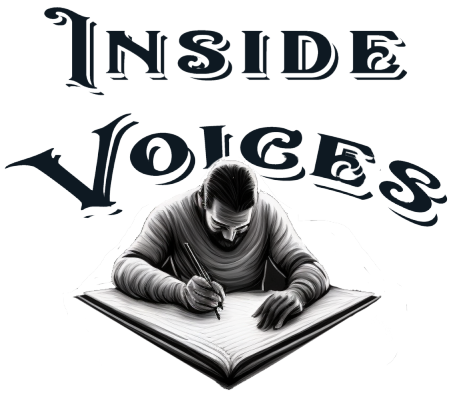
PS — I spent a lot of money buying all the songs and they were not free at $1.99 per song.

— Ghalib Muntaqim-Bey
Lakeland Correctional Facility

Thoughts on habitual status, procedure

My fight is to expose the entire system — judicial and prison system. Issue 1) The Habitual offense. The Black Law Dictionary defines a habitual as someone who commits the same act or crime repeatedly. Not two different acts or crimes and then trying to define that as a habitual offender. My opinion: Habituals should be abolished. Issue 2) Defective jury verdict forms. The forms would not have been defective if it had included a box through which the jury could have found the defendant "not guilty of murder in the first degree," "not guilty of second-degree" and "not guilty of involuntary manslaughter" and a box to convict on a lesser-included offense. Despite the trial, where efforts to clarify the verdict form with its instructions, because of the way the verdict form was set up, the jury was not given the opportunity to find the defendant either generally not guilty or not guilty of the lesser-included offenses, such that this constitutional right to trial by jury was and is being violated. The state needs the Legislature to make a non-governmental organization of judges and lawyers like the American Law Institute in Pennsylvania, created to reexamining a person's sentence after 15 years of being incarcerated no matter the crime or conviction or how long the original sentence. The governor signed legislation that established a Criminal Justice Policy Commission that was abandoned in 2019. Also, the right to probable cause conference: from Jan. 1, 1971, through Jan. 1, 2015. Defendants who never received a probable cause conference should be sent back to court and be freed from the courtroom. All prisoners, regardless of their innocence or guilt, are worthy of dignity and support, but history has shown us that we will never win our liberation through legislation, through a judicial enslaved system.

— Howard Smith
Baraga Correctional Facility



How to submit your letter to 'Inside Voices'

"Inside Voices" is a forum for readers of Safe & Just Michigan's printed newsletter. Send your 150-300 word letter to **Inside Voices, c/o Safe & Just Michigan, 119 Pere Marquette Drive, Suite 2A, Lansing, MI 48912**. If you have access to our JPay account, you may also submit your thoughts that way with "**Inside Voices**" as the top line of the message. Specify if you want to have your name listed with your entry, or if you want to remain anonymous.

Subjects can include legislation, sentencing, parole, other criminal justice reform topics such as prison programming or topics of your choice. Please refrain from letters specific only to your own case. Please note we are unable to print letters that solely pertain to your own case. We share as many letters to Inside Voice as room allows. Some may be edited for space.



*Former SJM Fund Development Fellow **Tamir Bell** listens to The Clean Slate Initiative CEO **Sheena Meade** at our 2026 Signature Event. Bell is currently Nation Outside's Assistant Director of Southeast Michigan. Read and see more about the event on Page 7.*

POLICY UPDATE

Sentencing Commission appointment draws objection from SJM

After years of advocacy, the Michigan Legislature established a state Sentencing Commission last year. But as the body prepared for its first meeting this past May, several people were surprised by one of the appointments to the commission. The seat on the body that is designated to go to a formerly incarcerated person was given to former Eaton County Sheriff and state legislator **Rick Jones**, who spent one night in jail after being arrested for DUI.

Safe & Just Michigan fought hard to create the commission, and we take appointments to the board seriously.

While we see the formation of the Sentencing Commission as a positive move for our state. The body was designed to include viewpoints from several stakeholders, including legislators, prosecutors, judges and advocates. The seat set aside for someone who has been incarcerated in Michigan was given to Jones, who has spent one day in jail. Several people feel that seat should be given to someone who has more lived experience inside the system to draw from.

Safe & Just Michigan Director of Policy **Tony Gant** addressed the controversy at the most recent meeting. He said, in part, that, "This Commission includes judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, legislators and other professionals who bring important expertise to the table. But there is another form of expertise that is equally valuable: the expertise that comes from living through the consequences of sentencing decisions.

"People who have spent years or decades incarcerated understand firsthand how sentencing policies affect rehabilitation, prison conditions, family connections, reentry outcomes, employment opportunities, housing stability, and public safety. Their experiences provide insights that cannot be learned from reports, courtrooms, or legislative hearings alone."

About half of all states have a commission like this that reviews sentencing standards and strives to make sentencing more uniform across a state. Michigan had been without such a body for several years after the Criminal Justice Policy Commission was disbanded in 2019.

Newly introduced bills create health care job opportunities after prison

Newly introduced House Bills 6399-6402 would make it possible for thousands of formerly incarcerated Michiganders to seek employment in the health care industry. The bills are introduced as Michigan faces a crisis in health care staffing. The 2025 Michigan Healthcare Workforce Index forecasts a shortfall over the coming decade of more than 171,372 home health and personal care aides, 60,444 nursing assistants and 24,321 medical assistants, among dozens of health care job categories.

Safe & Just Michigan worked with state Rep. **Sarah Lightner** (R-Springport) to introduce the plan. It addresses current rules and laws that prevent people with many kinds of misdemeanors and felonies from working in the health care sector for up to 15 years after their sentence ends. The rules also prevent people with low-level offenses like shoplifting from working in places like hospitals.

It's estimated current laws lock out 500,000 Michiganders from health care employment.

"No one knows better who is fit to care for and serve patients than the people who hire nurses, doctors, technicians and assistants for hospitals, nursing homes and other settings in the health care sector," said **Ken Nixon**, SJM Director of Outreach & Community Partnerships. "These common-sense bills get the government out of the way and let medical hiring professionals do what they do best: put the most skilled and talented people to work."

The bills reduce waiting periods for felonies to 10 from 15 years, and for misdemeanors from 10 to 5 years. Some convictions, like homicide, assault and home invasion, will still prevent people from working in health care. However, it reduces the barriers for people who were convicted of lower-level offenses.

"We know stable employment is an important factor in successful reentry," said **Sheryl Kubiak**, PhD, Founding Director of the Center for Behavioral Health and Justice at Wayne State University. "When restrictions continue long after someone has completed their sentence, they can make it more difficult for people to establish that stability. Reexamining unnecessary barriers to health care employment, while maintaining appropriate safeguards, benefits both people returning to their communities and a health care system in need of workers."

The bills have been referred to the House Health Policy committee and are awaiting a hearing.

"Too many qualified candidates are shut out of health care careers because of old convictions that have no bearing on their ability to do the job, nor do these convictions pose any safety risks," said **Simone Price**, director of advocacy and organizing for the Center for Employment Opportunities. "Stigma's grip on the workforce harms applicants, employers and communities as a whole. A stronger workforce requires employers to prioritize each applicant's skills, experience and current qualifications.

Michigan Survivors Justice Act would pave way to resentencing for survivors of violence and abuse

Too often, the harms of abuse and the actions a survivor took to stay alive or escape go overlooked during the criminal legal process. A bill under development would create a pathway for courts to review and reduce some of these lengthy sentences and give these survivors a chance to come home.

The proposed Michigan Survivors Justice Act (MSJA) would ensure fairness and context factor into sentencing. Rather than creating blanket leniency, balances accountability with evidence of abuse and trauma, giving judges more room to consider whether being a survivor of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse or human trafficking played a role in a person's actions. SJM is part of the coalition supporting the measure. Similar laws exist in states like Georgia and Oklahoma.

"Our understanding of domestic violence has evolved tremendously over time," said **Heath B. Lowery**, staff attorney-policy specialist for Michigan Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence. "We now know that survivors' actions cannot be separated from the years of coercion, fear, and trauma they endured. The MSJA is critical because it recognizes that reality and ensures the legal system has the tools to meaningfully consider abuse when sentencing and resentencing survivors by centering justice, accountability, and healing rather than perpetuating harm."

Survivors of violent crimes can face long sentences for actions they took to protect themselves or to survive the situations in which they were placed. The MSJA would help make sure no survivor endures decades in prison for trying to stay alive.

Survivors justice acts contain four core components:

1. **Proof requirement** demonstrating a specified connection between their history of abuse and the offense.
2. **Fair and proportional sentencing** that reflects the full context of a person's experiences while maintaining accountability.
3. **Judicial review** of past sentences where abuse was not adequately considered.
4. **Survivor-responsive evidentiary standards** to account for the reality that abuse is often underreported or not formally documented.

The MSJA is nearing introduction to the state Legislature, backed by a coalition of justice reform advocacy organizations, such as the American Friends Service Committee-Michigan Justice Program, the Vera Institute of Justice, the Michigan Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence, MI-CEMI and SJM.

"Many women enter the criminal legal system after years of violence, coercion, poverty and survival," said **Natalie Holbrook-Combs**, director of the American Friends Service Committee-Michigan Justice Program. "These realities are routinely ignored in courtrooms, policy decisions, and systems that claim to deliver justice. Now is the time to begin to right these failures of our justice system. A MSJA will move Michigan forward and create avenues to liberation and healing for women who have long been overlooked and further harmed by the punishment of isolation and the abusive nature of imprisonment."

Michigan legislature finalizes state budget for fiscal year 2027

Final budget fails to include funding for sentencing commission

On July 2, a compromise spending plan was announced. The total budget for FY 2027 is estimated to be $84 billion. This is below the executive and Senate versions of the budget, which totaled $88.1 billion, but was above the House version of the budget, which totaled $75.8 billion.

Early in the budget process, we and other advocates in the criminal legal reform space galvanized to ensure that our priorities would be reflected in the upcoming budget. We knew that this was going to be a challenging fiscal advocacy year for us because: 1) criminal legal reform was not mentioned as one of the governor's budget priorities in February, and; 2) the House leadership's open hostility to transformative criminal legal reform.

We were largely successful, but some of our issues were reduced or cut from the upcoming state budget. Funding for community corrections, offender success (OS) programming, parole and probation services, the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission, and specialty courts (like drug, veterans', and mental health courts) were preserved at the level asked for in the executive version of the budget. Higher education in prison, OS programming, and the young adult lifer re-sentencing initiative were funded at levels slightly above what was asked for. OS services, legal services for incarcerated people, and parole board operations were included in the budget, but at reduced levels. It's important to note that funding for the sentencing commission and Michigan Legal Help was eliminated from the budget entirely.

It's alarming that funding for the Sentencing Commission was cut after we worked so many years to create the body. The commission has already met three times, and there are no plans to disband it. We are hopeful funding can be revisited in any upcoming supplemental budget bill.

Safe & Just Michigan issue briefs look into Habitual Sentencing and the new Medically Frail Parole law

Michigan is known for having the longest average prison sentences in the nation. There are several factors that place Michigan at the top, and one of the key ones is the state's Habitual Sentencing laws.

SJM's issue brief, "Creating Good Habits: Fixing Michigan's habitual offender laws," was released in October.

Michigan created its Habitual Sentencing laws in the 1920s to ensure that people who repeatedly break the law receive harsher sentences. It's up to county prosecutors to determine whether a person will face Habitual Sentencing enhancements.

However, several concerns have emerged around Habitual Sentencing. As an optional sentencing enhancement, some counties use the measure frequently, while others don't use it at all. That results in people convicted of similar offenses receiving widely disparate sentences depending on which court convicted them.

Michigan Supreme Court rulings have expanded the scope of the law. It is now possible to be considered a "habitual offender" after being arrested just one time because of the 2008 *People v. Gardner* case. It found that every felony conviction counts individually for habitualization purposes, even if several convictions arose from the same incident.

Earlier this year, a "*Gardner* fix" was introduced to the state Legislature. Senate Bill 895 states that enhancement tiers should reflect the number of separate criminal incidents for which an individual was convicted, rather than the total number of individual conviction counts. It also limits the lookback period to 10 years.

While helpful, that proposal doesn't address the fact that Habitual Sentencing is applied unequally across the state. We're hopeful the introduced "Gardner fix" is just a first step toward addressing the inconsistencies of Habitual Sentencing.

Earlier in the summer, SJM released another report, this one taking a look at the effort to make the state's Medically Frail Parole law more workable.

Passed in 2019, Medically Frail Parole resulted in just one parole by 2025. The original law strictly limits where people can go after a Medically Frail Parole. It didn't allow home care and required applicants to be significantly unable to care for themselves before qualifying for release.

In 2024, the law was updated to address some concerns with Medically Frail Parole. It also allowed people to apply for Medically Frail Parole once they receive a terminal prognosis, and as a result, more people could go home rather than die in prison.

As a result, 18 people qualified for Medically Frail Parole under the new law.


Safe & Just Michigan

Oct. 15, 2026

Issue Brief

Creating Good Habits: Fixing Michigan's Habitual Offender Laws

Author:
Cassie Larrieux - *Senior Policy & Research Specialist*

Inside:
Taking harm seriously
A confusing current law
Standardizing sentencing
Making justice more just

Executive Summary

Judges and prosecutors may apply habitual offender status at their discretion. As a result, some courtrooms and counties apply the sentencing enhancer regularly, while others do it rarely, resulting in widely disparate sentences for similar convictions.

1 Senate Bill 895 of 2026

The cover of SJM's latest issue brief on Habitual Sentencing.


Safe & Just Michigan

July 30, 2026

Issue Brief:

Making the most of Michigan's Medically Frail law

Authors:
Cassie Larrieux - *Senior Policy & Research Specialist*
Tony Gant - *Director of Policy*
Barbara Wieland - *Senior Communications Specialist*

Inside:
An aging prison population
Prisons are not hospitals
Medically Frail laws help
We can do better

Caring for an aging prison population

Michigan's prison population is one of the oldest in the nation and getting older. Age-related concerns such as cancer, memory loss and disabilities are a growing concern for the Michigan Department of Corrections.

SJM's issue brief on Medically Frail Parole, released in July.

OUTREACH UPDATE

From Prison to Productivity

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free market and limited government think tank, hosted a learning session on post-prison employment. SJM's Director of Policy **Tony Gant** took part in the panel discussion during the event, titled "From Criminal Record to Career: Opening Doors to Work in Michigan." This event fostered a discussion about the interplay between employment, justice and government regulations over employment and occupational licenses. Reentry is a key area of concern for SJM, and we are fighting to ensure people have a promising future to look forward to when they come home.

Bringing the 'Alabama Solution' to Michigan

In August, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History hosted a screening of "The Alabama Solution," a 2025 Oscar-nominated HBO documentary. It highlighted the conditions inside an Alabama state prison from the perspective of the men who live there. Director of Outreach and Community Partnerships **Ken Nixon** participated in a panel discussion following the viewing on behalf of the Organization of Exonorees.

Gant speaks on lived experience

Director of Policy **Tony Gant** represented our organization at Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People and Families Movement's Regional Convening in Chicago. According to Gant, reentry matters because, "Lived experience is more than a personal story — it is expertise … When directly impacted people help shape policy, we create solutions that are more practical, more equitable, and more likely to improve public safety and strengthen communities."

Celebrating Five Years of Clean Slate

SJM and friends enjoy evening of awards, fellowship

Our annual Signature Event, held on Sept. 3, was an evening of friendship, fellowship and celebration. We heard from The Clean Slate Initiative CEO **Sheena Meade**, who congratulated our state on five years of fresh starts with Clean Slate legislation. We also handed out awards



*The Clean Slate Initiative CEO **Sheena Meade** was our featured speaker at the 2026 Signature Event.*

to some of our communities most dedicated advocates. The William G. Milliken Award was presented to state Rep. **Kara Hope** (D-Holt), while **Humanity for Prisoners** received the Justice Warrior Award and **Felecia Tyson-Waters** accepted the Lifetime of Service Award for her husband, **Ronnie Waters**.

We also want to thank the wonderful sponsors who made this evening possible: Premier Finishing, Attorney Deborah LaBelle, MI-CEMI, SJM Board Member **Carol Siemon**, Resch Strategies, Nation Outside, First National Bank of Michigan, Hope Network, Capitol Services, MCYJ, Main Street Legislative Consulting, SJM Board Member **Monica Jahner**, MI-CEMI Executive Director **Chuck Warpehoski**; BRD Printing, the Center for Behavioral Health and Justice at Wayne State University's School of Social Work, A.R.R.O., SJM Board Members on behalf of former Executive Director **John S. Cooper** and MSU Federal Credit Union.



*The 2026 William G. Milliken Award recipient state Rep. **Kara Hope** (D-Holt).*



*SJM Senior Policy & Research Specialist **Cassie Larrieux** presents the Justice Warrior Award to **Mark Hartman**, Executive Director of Humanity for Prisoners, on behalf of his organization.*



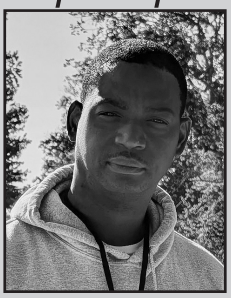
***Felecia Tyson-Waters** accept the Lifetime of Service Award on her late husband **Ronnie Waters**' behalf.*



*The Safe & Just Michigan team, from left: **Kate McCracken**, **Ken Nixon**, **Cassie Larrieux**, **Tony Gant**, **Barbara Wieland**, **Veronica French** & **Kamau Sandiford**..*

Three things I wish I knew

Life after release



Name: Michael Taylor II (Mike X)

Title: MI-CEMI Program Coordinator

In Addition: Host of the 17 Winters Podcast; author of "First 10 Moves to Forever Freedom"; Street Outreach and CVI Practitioner

City: Lansing

Years since release: 11

Advice to others looking forward to release:

1 **How to manage bill cycles**. Before going to prison I'd never paid bills, I'd lived in my mom's basement. I assumed everything had to be paid on the 1st of the month. When I was introduced to having bills due at different times of the month, I quickly lost track of what needed to be paid and when. I quickly accumulated debt I couldn't manage.

2 **How to use Google tools, including Drive and spreadsheets**. Calendars alone would've helped me organize my bill pay system! Spreadsheets, slideshows, and data collection are key skills needed to acquire funding for the work that we do. Most formerly incarcerated people who get involved in organizing and advocacy don't just struggle to find sources of funding, but they struggle to write grants in order to get funded.

3 **How to use social media — what platforms do, how they work and opportunities to practice**. When I was incarcerated, my baby sister created a Facebook page for me. We operated it through JPay messages, and she printed me pages so I could understand how social media was developing. Social media has grown in leaps and bounds in that time and the learning curve can be daunting.

Safe & Just
Michigan

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Your loved ones are invited!

Annual Virtual Membership Meeting

Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2026



Registration now open: bit.ly/SJM2026AMM