

Seek Justice

Illinois Innocence Project

APRIL 2023

IIP Kicks Off Historic Statewide Wrongful Conviction Training for All Illinois Police Recruits and Cadets

In a first for the American criminal legal system, last month the Illinois Innocence Project held the inaugural session of our mandated wrongful conviction training for new police recruits. Illinois is the only state in the nation to require, through the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board, all police academies in the state to offer IIP's course as part of their required training.

Statewide expansion of the Wrongful Conviction Awareness and Avoidance (WCAA) training program means IIP will reach every new police recruit and cadet in each of eight police academies across the state, introducing them to the factors that contribute to wrongful convictions with the goal to minimize convicting individuals for crimes they did not commit.

WCAA is based on a model IIP developed in collaboration with Mike Schlosser, director of the University of Illinois Police Training Institute (PTI). Since 2016, IIP staff and attorneys have delivered the training as an elective at PTI three to four times per year. The statewide mandate will increase the number of classes tenfold, to 25-30 per year. IIP recently hired Marc Beach, a 27-year veteran of the Rantoul Police Department who has worked and taught alongside Mike, to direct the expansion.



Dozens of U of I Police Training Institute police recruits gather with Illinois Innocence Project staff and exoneree speakers after the March 31 statewide wrongful conviction training kickoff. (photo by Fred Zwicky)

To help meet the demands of this expansion, 15 exonerees from across the nation attended the statewide kickoff as founding members of the WCAA Exoneree Speakers Bureau. Two exonerees will attend each WCAA class to present their personal stories of wrongful conviction. Countless of the nearly 1,000 recruits from departments throughout Illinois who have taken this course say the most powerful part is hearing the personal stories of innocent people who have suffered years of wrongful imprisonment.

Kristine Bunch, exonerated by the Center on Wrongful Convictions, leads the formation and management of the Speakers Bureau. She has been the program's most frequent speaker over the past seven years, sharing her ordeal of being wrongfully convicted of "arson murder" for the death of her three-year-old son. She spent 17 years wrongfully imprisoned until new fire science proved her innocence.



Exoneree Kristine Bunch, who is leading the police training program's Exoneree Speakers Bureau, shares her personal story of wrongful conviction and imprisonment with 90 police recruits as part of the inaugural statewide mandated class on March 31. (photo by Fred Zwicky)

"My experience taught me that I should distrust anyone involved with the justice system," she says. "To connect with these recruits and cadets through my painful story allows me to see them as human beings, not just police officers, and to understand that not all police officers are the same."

After the March 31 class, dozens of police recruits stayed to talk to Kristine and many of the other exonerees in attendance. Initial sessions have been scheduled at each of the eight police academies in Illinois.



Michigan Exoneree Kenneth Nixon engages police recruits in discussion after the WCAA class. (photo by Fred Zwicky)



Founding members of the WCAA Exoneree Speakers Bureau traveled to Urbana, IL, from across the nation to participate in a morning orientation about the police training program and observe the afternoon class for police recruits. Front to back, L to R: John Huffington (Maryland); Jason Strong (Tennessee); Ron Keine (Michigan); Michelle Murphy (Oklahoma); Kenneth Nixon (Michigan); Patrick Pursley (Illinois); Director of the U of IL Police Training Institute Mike Schlosser; Ron Wright (Florida); Ray Krone (Tennessee); Kristine Bunch (Indiana); Sabrina Butler Smith (Tennessee); Alan Beaman (Illinois); Antione Day (Illinois); Anna Vasquez (Texas); Obie Anthony (Missouri); Terrill Swift (California); James Kluppelberg (Indiana). (photo by Fred Zwicky)