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Introducing New Staff Working with Police Academies Statewide to Help Prevent Wrongful Convictions

Nearly 1,000 police recruits, in required sessions at seven of the state's eight training academies, have attended our Wrongful Conviction Awareness and Avoidance (WCAA) training since the statewide launch on March 31. The program introduces recruits to the factors that contribute to wrongful convictions with the goal of minimizing convicting individuals for crimes they did not commit.

This statewide expansion, as mandated by the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board, is a massive undertaking for IIP and now supported by two new staff members.

Directing the expansion is Marc Beach, a 27-year veteran of the Rantoul Police Department who has 20+ years of experience training recruits at the University of Illinois Police Training Institute and police officers nationwide. Tommie Redmond, who interned for IIP as a UIS undergraduate from 2017-2019, has returned as the program's administrative assistant.



Marc Beach, WCAA Director

Marc will be the first to admit he did not know wrongful conviction and imprisonment of innocent people was an issue. Then he attended one of our police training classes.

"As a police officer representing the criminal justice system for 27 years, I wanted to believe we always got it right," he says. "As I listened to the facts and evidence, I started to realize the number of people in prison who shouldn't be there. I learned even when police officers carry out their duties in the right way their actions can inadvertently lead to wrongful convictions."

The class convinced Marc to join IIP to direct the statewide expansion of WCAA, a program he believes can decrease the risk of wrongful convictions by educating the next generation of police officers.

"Police recruits, new in their careers, generally don't know what they can do to reduce the chance of a wrongful conviction," he says. "But officers out on patrol often have the first key interaction with a crime scene – they take the first call, speak to victims, process crime scenes, and conduct interrogations and lineups. There are so many things they can do right from the beginning that can decrease risk."

One is understanding common factors that lead to wrongful convictions, such as eyewitness misidentification and false confessions. Another is applying this knowledge in the field by, for example, stepping back and looking at the entire picture of a case, asking questions of fellow officers and investigators, and raising concerns if something they see or hear does not make sense.

Ultimately, Marc sees WCAA changing the culture of law enforcement and saving lives.

"I like to think I helped change culture in my agency but my time in the uniform is done," he says. "Now we're working with officers who will represent the culture of law enforcement and the criminal justice system for the next 20-30 years. We hope this training will help save them from making mistakes that can destroy someone else's life and their own lives. No one wants their actions to end up sending an innocent person to prison."

Marc holds a Master of Public Administration from the University of Illinois Springfield and a bachelor's degree in general studies from Eastern Illinois University.



Tommie Redmond, WCAA Administrative Assistant

When Tommie's internship with IIP ended in 2019, he was determined to return one day.

As a UIS undergraduate, Tommie had helped staff develop a reentry plan for innocent clients being released from prison. He conducted "social history" interviews with incarcerated clients, as part of that plan, to help us better understand their life stories. He also supported legal staff on active cases, visited clients in prison and evaluated new applications for assistance.

Now in his WCAA role, Tommie is the key point of contact for staff at the state's eight police academies to schedule and ensure the smooth implementation of all training sessions. He also oversees the travel and participation of the WCAA Exonerated Speakers Bureau members, two of whom speak at each training session.

Getting to know the speakers individually brings Tommie full circle in his work with IIP.

"I was humbled to get to know our clients years ago," he says. "Rejoining IIP now as a full-time staff member, getting to be part of an organization that educates and strives for reform, humbles me even more. I can't wait to see this program and our speakers open eyes and build an understanding of how we can keep wrongful convictions from happening."

Tommie holds a Master of Public Administration and a Bachelor of Social Work from UIS and completed a social work internship with IIP from 2017 to 2019.

Illinois is the only state in the nation to require wrongful conviction training for police recruits and cadets. The Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board mandated the Illinois Innocence Project's Wrongful Conviction Awareness and Avoidance police training program be part of required training at all police academies in the state.

DONATE

The Illinois Innocence Project is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping individuals who have been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for crimes they did not commit, reforming the criminal justice system and educating students, the public and law enforcement about wrongful convictions.

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