



Celebrating 25 Years of Freedom and Reform

April 2026

Staff attend 2026 Innocence Network Conference



Earlier this month IIP staff joined over 1,000 other innocence organization staff, advocates and members of the freed/exonerated community nationwide at the 2026 Innocence Network Conference in Chicago. Numerous members of our freed/exonerated community also attended. The conference is the largest opportunity for hundreds of individuals who have walked the same journey of wrongful conviction and imprisonment to connect, attend sessions and exchange support, encouragement and resources.

We had a large presence at the conference with staff presenting in and conducting four educational sessions.

"When One is Taken, All Are Impacted: Families and Communities Confront Wrongful Convictions"

In this panel, Legal Director Lauren Kaeseberg brought together voices most directly impacted by wrongful conviction: Denice Bronis, a mother fighting for her innocent son, who is an IIP client still behind bars; and IIP exonerees Brian Beals and Marilyn Mulero, both of whom are community activists on the front lines of the innocence movement.



From left, Denice Bronis, mother of a current IIP client, IIP exonerees Brian Beals and Marilyn Mulero and IIP Legal Director Lauren Kaeseberg

The conversation quickly moved from the profound social impacts of wrongful conviction on families, children and communities to the panelists' deeply personal experiences. Marilyn spoke about the lasting effect on her children of her absence during their upbringing and even now, as her own deeply traumatizing experiences during 28 years in prison (five on death row) have prevented her from being fully available to them.

Denice, whose son has been wrongfully imprisoned for 24 years, described moving through an emotional collapse

to an epiphany: she could channel her grief into purpose. She started organizing and now brings together other mothers whose children are wrongfully imprisoned and advocates publicly for her son's release, visibly applying pressure through billboards and demonstrations.

"Opening Hearts and Changing Minds: Law Enforcement Reflections on Wrongful Conviction Training"



From left, Stephanie Kamel, Kristine Bunch, Cecily Santana, Marc Beach, Josh Friedman, Cenika Roderick

For the third consecutive year, WCAA Director Marc Beach presented on IIP's nationally recognized Wrongful Conviction Awareness and Avoidance (WCAA) police training program. The panel featured law enforcement officers Cenika Roderick, a 30-year veteran of the Fort Worth, TX, U.S. Marshals Service and Cecily Santana, a 5-year veteran of the Mansfield Police Department in Texas, along with WCAA Exoneree Speakers Bureau Coordinator Kristine Bunch, IIP Law Enforcement Training Specialist Josh Friedman and IIP Director Stephanie Kamel.

Cenika and Cecily attended our police training at the Women of Law Enforcement 12th annual national conference in Fort Worth last September. They shared how the WCAA course continues to impact them and their colleagues' perspectives and professional practices, including increasing their awareness of bias, working to develop enhanced investigative techniques and implementing procedural reforms and best practices.

The inclusion of active-duty officers is an evolution in our conference presentations. In 2024 we introduced the training program and in 2025 we featured a panel of exoneree speakers, who shared their experiences telling their stories to rooms full of representatives of the very system that wrongfully convicted and imprisoned them.

"Discovery to Doorknocking: Investigations in Turbulent Times"



Uncovering evidence of innocence in decades-old cases is one of the most challenging aspects of actual innocence law. Witnesses are long gone, deceased or just can't remember. Physical evidence is missing, degraded or even worse, destroyed or tossed out.

In this panel, Senior Staff Investigator Lynn Bagley joined Network colleagues Amy Carr, senior staff investigator at the Innocence Project of Florida and Patti Fayed, an investigator with the Exoneration Project, to discuss postconviction investigation skills and foundations of good defense investigation. They focused on the importance of thorough discovery review and proper preparation prior to field work, and the challenges the current political climate poses to successful defense investigation.

April In IIP History

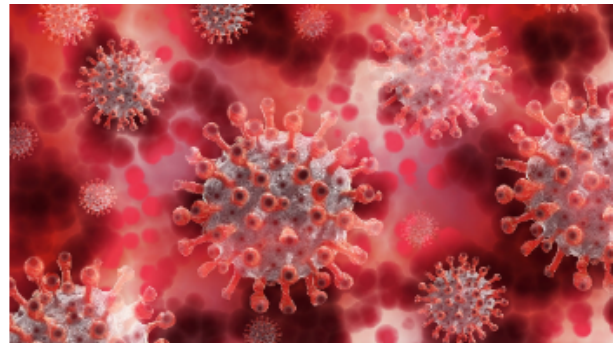


2017 – Bill Amor Conviction Vacated

In April 2017, a DuPage County judge vacated the 1997 arson murder conviction of our client, Bill Amor, and ordered a new trial. Bill's case was believed to be the first in Illinois in which a court found that advancements in fire science constitute newly discovered evidence of actual innocence.

Lauren Kaeseberg, now IIP legal director, said at the time: "It is undisputed by the experts that fire science has evolved to such an extent that the original findings in this case are unreliable. The evidence points to an accidental fire. Bill did not murder anyone and the science finally supports that which he has claimed for 22 years – he is innocent."

Bill was released two months later and fully exonerated the next year. Sadly, he lived less than six years in freedom before his death in January 2023.



2020 – Urgent Mission for Medically Vulnerable Clients

Covid-19 heightened the urgency of our work. From our remote offices throughout the state, we tirelessly advocated for the release of our medically vulnerable clients, who were in grave danger as the coronavirus began its assault inside Illinois prisons.

Staff communicated round-the-clock with family members, volunteer medical professionals, attorneys, Illinois prisoner advocate groups and prison officials, attempting to monitor the health status of our clients and request proper care for those who had health concerns. We submitted petitions requesting Gov. JB Pritzker grant the emergency release of our medically vulnerable clients for whom there was compelling evidence of their actual innocence. From April through June, IIP secured the release of five clients.

April In IIP History



2021 – Juvenile Deception Bill

Police can legally lie to suspects during interrogation to elicit “confessions.” Because young people are particularly at risk of falsely confessing, IIP, in partnership with the Innocence Project and the Center on Wrongful Convictions, introduced a bill to ban the use of deception in juvenile interrogations.

SB 2122 sought to prohibit investigators from knowingly communicating false facts about evidence and making unauthorized statements regarding leniency when interrogating youth in custody. The Illinois Senate passed the bill 47-1, with overwhelming bipartisan support and two months later the House passed the bill 114-0, making Illinois the first state in the nation to ban police from lying to youth during interrogations.

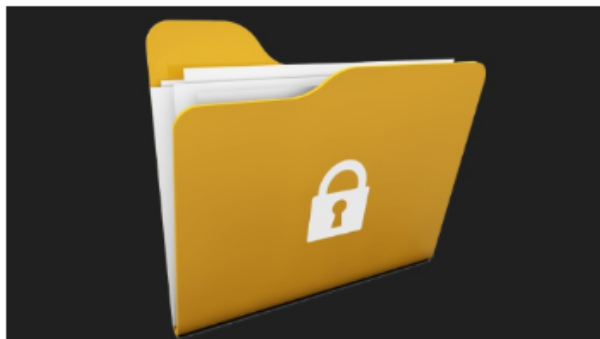


2021 – Justice for Charles Palmer

The Illinois Supreme Court reversed an Appellate Court decision that had denied our client Charles Palmer a Certificate of Innocence (COI). This Certificate was the Court’s “official” declaration of his innocence of the crime and the subsequent wrongful conviction that sent him to prison for 18 years.

Charles was convicted of a 1998 murder based on the testimony of an incentivized witness and questionable DNA analysis. IIP achieved his exoneration and release in 2016 after DNA testing on previously untested evidence proved his innocence. We then submitted a COI petition on behalf of Charles, after which Loevy and Loevy, a civil rights law firm, took over litigation and won the case in the Illinois Supreme Court.

April In IIP History



2022 – Access to IDOC Master Files

An Illinois Department of Corrections “master file” contains information about an incarcerated individual’s history and background, including work and disciplinary records. This data is critical to our advocacy efforts. For example, it enables us to demonstrate the character of our clients, who nearly always have stellar prison records, or help our clients obtain “earned good time credits” to which they are entitled.

Access to master files required a court subpoena or order, which caused delays and made proving our clients’ innocence even harder. So, we applauded the Illinois General Assembly’s unanimous passage of HB 4559, requiring IDOC to provide master files to incarcerated individuals and summaries to their attorneys within 15 days of a request.



2025 – Angel and Nick Visit Students

IIP exoneree Angel Gonzalez (back, second from left) and client Nick Colon (second from right) often travel together. Last year, they joined our end-of-year student celebration as the semester wound down and some prepared to graduate. They take the time to drive from Chicago because they are committed to helping students understand that their work with IIP matters. They tell students every word they read in someone’s case could lead to finding and freeing an innocent person.

Angel and Nick met inside the walls of prison. After Angel’s release, he referred Nick’s case to IIP. Nick was released in 2021, after spending 24 years wrongfully imprisoned. Our fight to achieve his full exoneration continues.



The Illinois Innocence Project is a not-for-profit organization. Our threefold mission drives everything we do. We **Advocate** for individuals who have been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for crimes they did not commit. We **Educate** students, the public and law enforcement about wrongful convictions, and partner with policymakers and other stakeholders to **Reform** the criminal legal system.

Illinois Innocence Project
University of Illinois Springfield
One University Plaza, Springfield, Illinois 62703-5407
tele: 217-206-6569
iip@uis.edu

