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Press Release

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Role of the Public Defender Created 56 Years Ago Today in *Gideon v Wainwright*

This Monday, March 18, is the 56th anniversary of *Gideon v. Wainwright*—a landmark United States Supreme Court decision. This week, public defender offices around the country are celebrating this decision and the important role the public defender plays in the criminal justice system.

In *Gideon*, the Court held that the Sixth Amendment of the Constitution guaranteed individuals a right to an attorney when facing criminal prosecution. Public defenders exist to fulfill the guarantee of the Sixth Amendment, as realized in *Gideon*, and today is a day to recognize that right and their role in our criminal justice system.

Michigan's State Appellate Defender Office (SADO) is the oldest and largest public defender office in the state. Enacted by statute in 1979, SADO has been providing zealous representation to poor people appealing their felony convictions for four decades.

We assist individuals who appeal their convictions and sentences when there is a legal error. In 2017, our client Kimberly (Simmons) Woodson came home after almost thirty years in prison. As a child, she was involved with a group that committed a terrible crime and she received a mandatory life without parole sentence. When that sentence was found to violate the Constitution, Ms. Woodson received a second chance and is now the proud mother of a baby girl. A public defender in our office represented Ms. Woodson at her resentencing hearing. Last year, our client Darrell Siggers was exonerated and released from prison after 34 years because of inaccurate and unreliable firearms evidence from the now-closed Detroit Crime Lab. A public defender in our office represented Mr. Siggers in his post-conviction proceedings.

There are more individuals like Ms. Woodson and Mr. Siggers who obtain positive outcomes on appeal. But there are also many who do not. As appellate public defenders, our job is to identify legal errors, listen to our clients, and give them a voice in an effort to fix mistakes that perpetuate their convictions and the criminal justice system.

We hope that everybody takes a moment today to recognize the important right to counsel guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment. A fair system cannot exist without it.