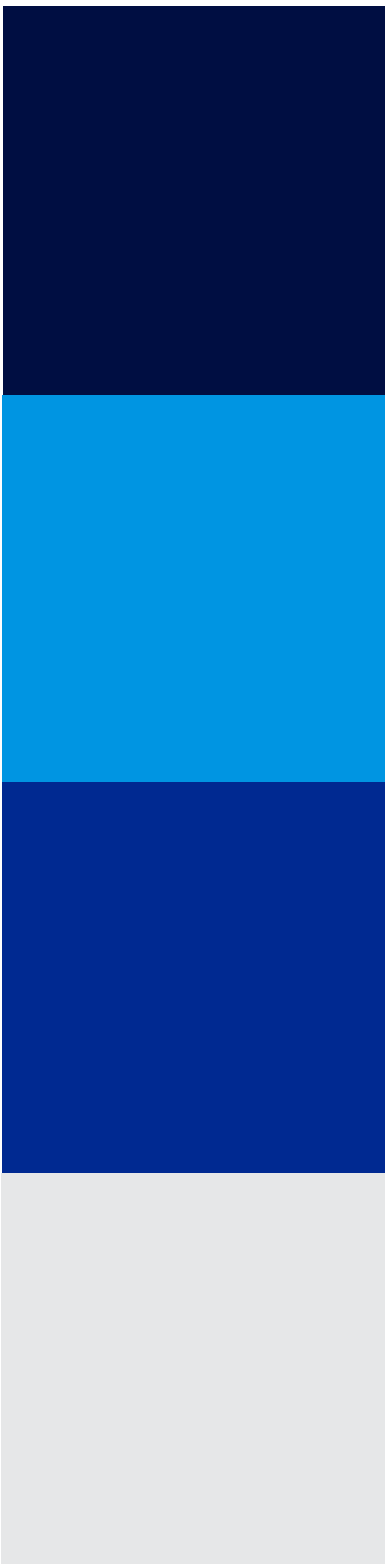




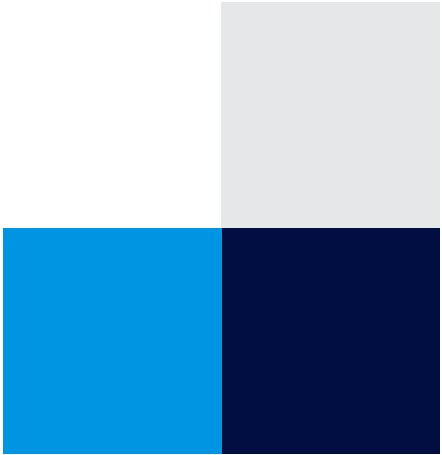
2025 Annual Report





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Where We've Been Where We're Going

2025 marked a transition year for SADO. Beginning in January, Acting Director Marilena David took over responsibility from former Director Jonathan Sacks who served SADO from 2018 to 2024. In May 2025, the Appellate Defender Commission selected Marilena David as SADO's fifth Director in the organization's 56-year history. In July 2025, Jessica Zimbelman became Deputy Director of SADO's Public Defender Division (supporting Direct Appeals, the Juvenile Lifer Unit, and Project Reentry).

In April 2025, SADO won cases in the Michigan Supreme Court for Mr. Czarnecki, Mr. Taylor, and Mr. Poole. Wins in these cases entitled an additional 582 people to resentencing. SADO began the coordination of counsel, launched statewide training, developed information guides, held information sessions in prison, and began representing hundreds of clients. MAACS roster attorneys, trial level public defenders, and other special counsel also began representing hundreds of clients entitled to resentencing.

The 2025 budget season leading into Fiscal Year 2026 was challenging. SADO narrowly avoided a full government shutdown due to the State's failure to sign a balanced budget before October 1. While SADO did see some growth in FY26 for juvenile lifer resentencings, it did not see any growth for direct appeals representation. The lack of funding for direct appeals exacerbated a growing capacity problem that has put our indigent appellate defense system in crisis. At the end of 2025, there were 188 people who were being denied their right to the appointment of appellate counsel due to a lack of available lawyers and system wide resources. That number rose from 96 people at the end of 2024. By the end of 2026, we could be looking at well over 500 people awaiting the appointment of counsel they are constitutionally entitled to. These numbers do not include the hundreds of people awaiting counsel for juvenile lifer resentencings.

With the ongoing growing need for representation, SADO recognized the need for data to accurately assess appropriate caseloads for both attorneys and mitigation specialists. The Appellate Defender Commission approved contracting with the National Center for State Courts to do a workload study, and that study is ongoing as of this writing.

Units

SADO staff serves approximately 3,000 clients through three primary units within the agency:

1 SADO's Private Counsel Division—the Michigan Appellate Assigned Counsel System

Administers and supports a roster of private attorneys who represent the largest portion of people in Michigan appealing their felony convictions, and children appealing delinquency proceedings.

2 SADO's Public Defender Division

The **Direct Appeals Unit** (DA) provides direct appellate representation to people appealing their felony convictions and delinquency outcomes.

The **Juvenile Lifer Unit** (JLU) provides direct representation to people challenging the imposition of life without parole sentences imposed against them as children and teens 20-years-of age and younger.

Project Reentry provides comprehensive reentry and parole services to Direct Appeal and Juvenile Lifer Unit clients.

3 SADO's Criminal Defense Resource Center (CDRC)

Provides high quality, complimentary training, resources, and 24/7 support to the criminal defense bar in Michigan.

Awards

Keeley Blanchard is the Deputy Director of SADO's Private Counsel Division and the MAAACS Administrator. Keeley received the 2025 Champion of Justice Award from the State Bar of Michigan. The award is given to attorneys "who have made a significant contribution to their community, state, or nation," in recognition of "extraordinary individual accomplishments or for devotion to a cause."

Jessica Zimbelman is the Deputy Director of SADO's Public Defender Division. Jessica received the 2025 Leo A. Farhart Outstanding Attorney Award from the Ingham County Bar Association. The award is given to an attorney who distinguishes themselves "by manifesting exemplary character, integrity, judgment and legal scholarship while adhering to and advancing the highest principles and traditions of the legal profession" and those "who have made an extraordinary commitment to bench and/or bar activities at the local, state, or national levels."



Keeley Blanchard received the 2025 SBM Champion of Justice Award



Jessica Zimbelman received the 2025 Leo A. Farhart Outstanding Attorney Award

The Appellate Defender Commission presented the following awards this year: Jessica Newton received the Norris J. Thomas Award for Excellence in Appellate Advocacy; Kristen Minear received the Amanda Smith Award for Staff Excellence; and Ian Kierpaul received the Barbara R. Levine Award for Excellence in Appellate Advocacy.

Jessica Newton is an Assistant Defender in the Juvenile Lifer Unit and has been with SADO since 2016. One of Jessica's colleagues described her as "a brilliant, passionate advocate who goes above and beyond in every case. She cares deeply about her clients and keeps them informed and involved at every step of the process." Jessica has litigated in courts throughout the state and has been instrumental in securing relief for dozens of people serving unconstitutional mandatory life without parole sentences for offenses committed as youth.

Kristen Minear is a Case Coordinator in the Administrative Office and has been with SADO since 2012. Kristen is not only willing to answer questions and work with people to produce excellent outcomes for our clients, but she is also excited to learn new things and stay up to date on court rules and court procedures. She is an expert in SADO's new case management system, and technology in general. As technology is rapidly changing for law offices across the country, Kristen helps keep us up-to-date and forward thinking.

Ian Kierpaul is a solo practitioner and MAACS roster attorney based in Eastpointe where he focuses on criminal defense at both the trial and appellate levels. Ian has a gift for earning trust from clients whom others might label "difficult." One MAACS client shared that Ian is the first lawyer he's ever felt truly confident in, the first who he believes is really fighting for him. Ian never shies away from a challenge, often helping MAACS by taking complicated cases in complicated counties. Ian brings a consistent mix of passion and persistence in his advocacy; he fights like every ruling is personal, because to his clients, it is.



Jessica Newton, Kristen Minear, and Ian Kierpaul received awards from the Appellate Defender Commission

Maya Menlo and Ali Wright were each awarded the Cooley Law Review 2025 Distinguished Brief Award, for briefs they wrote on behalf their clients, Mr. Poole and Mr. Martin.

SADO was awarded the Justice Warrior Award from Safe & Just Michigan. The Justice Warrior Award is given to a person or organization that exemplifies the work to reform Michigan’s criminal legal system. SADO was recognized for its work on behalf of people serving juvenile life without parole sentences in Michigan and its efforts to help people returning from prison to settle back into their communities.

Commissioner Darryl Woods, Sr. was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from Safe & Just Michigan. The award was given in recognition to his lifetime of service. Commissioner Woods received a commutation on a life without parole sentence in 2019 and came home to Detroit after nearly 30 years of incarceration. While in prison, Commissioner Woods became a minister and became active with several programs to reduce recidivism. He chaired the NAACP Detroit Branch Prison Program Committee and served on the board of Chance for Life. Since returning home, Mr. Woods has served on many community boards including the Appellate Defender Commission and the Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network’s Substance Use Disorder Board. He is an elder at Greater Grace Temple and the founder and CEO of Fighting the Good Fight LLC.



SADO staff accepted the Justice Warrior Award from Safe & Justice Michigan, along with Commissioner Darryl Woods, Sr., who was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award

Staff Growth and Change

Julianne Cuneo, SADO's Chief Investigator, retired in April 2025. Julianne had a legendary and storied career conducting fact and mitigation investigations spanning four decades. Prior to SADO, Julianne ran Sunshine Investigation (named after her beloved dog) for 30 years. Julianne was lead investigator in the 2020 SADO/Wayne County Conviction Integrity Unit exoneration of Anthony Legion, Michigan's summarily dismissed Hutaree militia trial in 2012, the exonerations of Detroit's Highers brothers in 2012, and the complete dismissal of death penalty charges against Detroit's Reginald Brown in 1992, as well as many other high-profile and consequential cases. She received the Michigan Council of Professional Investigators' 2012 Investigative Excellence Award for demonstrating "the highest levels of professionalism, ethical practice, integrity and tenacity." Aside from her sharp investigative skills, Julianne is known for her quick wit, incredible vocabulary, and her ability to put her team at ease—even in high pressure situations.

Before retiring, Julianne helped usher in the next generation of investigators and mitigation specialists at SADO. In April 2025, Mary Soo Anderson joined SADO as Investigation Supervisor, and Investigators Mark Cox, Trinitee Thornhill, and Tiffany Arebelo joined the team, alongside Angie Jackson who has been with SADO since 2021. Mitigation specialists Caroline Baron, Mary Cuddehe, and Tom Molina-Duarte also joined the team, alongside Monique Dake who has been with SADO since 2019.



Julianne is surrounded by the investigation and mitigation team at her retirement party

There were many other staff changes in 2025, across all units.

The Juvenile Lifer Unit expanded to support efforts to represent and resentence hundreds of new *Czarnecki/Taylor* clients. In January, Laila Krugman joined as the JLU's first ever Records Specialist and Amelia Crosby joined as a JLU paralegal. In July, Daisy Kielty and Carley Davidson, both former Mitigation Interns through a field placement partnership between SADO and the University of Michigan's School of Social Work, joined SADO as Mitigation Specialists. Sumaya Tabbah also joined SADO as a Mitigation Specialist. Attorney Nicole Duncan relocated to Michigan from Colorado to become an Assistant Defender in the JLU, and Kathryn Snediker, a former JLU intern, returned to the JLU as an Assistant Defender with trial level experience. To support the growing JLU staff, SADO added two additional supervisors: Beth Kuczma was promoted to Mitigation Supervisor and Jacqueline Ouvry was promoted to Managing Attorney.

The Direct Appeals Unit welcomed several new staff. Assistant Defenders who joined Direct Appeals included: Cody Bradford, Cait De Mott Grady, Ben Mordechai-Strongin, Melodie Floro, Natalie Rosenblatt, Jasmine Szabo, Emma Klug, and Aireanna Ball. Paralegals to join the team included Shelby Drouin and Connie Gong. Mitigation Specialists who joined the team included Caroline Baron, Mary Cuddehe, and Tom Molina-Duarte. Investigators who joined the team included Tiffany Arebelo, Mark Cox, and Trinitee Thornhill. Mary Soo Anderson joined as Investigation Supervisor.

Project Reentry expanded from three to four full-time staff, welcoming Alexis Smith as a Reentry Specialist in December. Alexis is a former juvenile lifer who served decades in prison before being welcomed home in 2023.

The Criminal Defense Resource Center expanded its staff with the addition of Research & Training Attorneys Jason Eggert, Steven Helton, Taylor Fellows, and Jackie McCann, who were previously Assistant Defenders in Direct Appeals. Angie Clayton, who was previously a Clerk, joined CDRC as a Services Coordinator. Heather Waara was promoted to Publications Coordinator.

Other internal changes included the promotion of Fernando Gaitan to Technology Director. Fernando celebrated his 25th anniversary with SADO in 2025. Terry Huhn moved from a Paralegal in Direct Appeals to a Case Coordinator in the Administrative Office. And SADO welcomed two new Clerks: Madison Summers and Ervin Jennings.

Another major accomplishment this year was the expansion of direct support services for roster attorneys. MAACS prepared for the addition of a Litigation Support Counsel position, significantly increasing the office's capacity to provide mentorship, strategic consultation, training, and case support to roster attorneys statewide.

Milestone Anniversaries

Several staff celebrated milestone anniversaries in 2025.

5 years

Lorenzo Harrell, Reentry Specialist
Patty Maceroni, MAACS Deputy Administrator
Chelsea Richardson, Mitigation Supervisor
Marcus Williams, Reentry Specialist

10 years

Cynthia Carter, Paralegal
Tonia Frazier-Akins, Paralegal
Sabrina Schneider, Roster Coordinator
Mike Waldo, Assistant Defender

20 years

Michael Mittlestat, Assistant Defender

25 years

Fernando Gaitan, Technology Director

30 years

MariaRosa Palmer, Office Manager and Assignment Manager



MariaRosa has been with MAACS for over 30 years. She is known for her patience, compassion, and knowledge as she helps people who are experiencing a large amount of stress understand and navigate a complex system. Her intellect, judgment, and flexibility have proven invaluable in implementing a smooth and successful top-to bottom reform of MAACS over the past decade. MAACS could not function as effectively without MariaRosa's contributions.

MariaRosa is the 2024 recipient of the Amanda Smith Award for Staff Excellence, awarded each year by the Appellate Defender Commission.

Our Mission

SADO's team members, across every unit, share one mission:

to fight injustice
through access,
advocacy compassion,
and education.

Our annual report is structured through the lens of that mission.

Access

MAACS is integral in ensuring that all individuals in the appellate system have access to counsel guaranteed to them by the constitution. In 2025, MAACS continued implementing major reforms designed to strengthen Michigan's appellate defense system, improve access to representation, and better support the attorneys serving indigent appellate clients across the state. These accomplishments reflected a continued focus on sustainability, quality representation, independence, collaboration, and long-term capacity building.

MAACS also took major steps toward improving the fairness, transparency, and efficiency of attorney compensation. In 2025, MAACS eliminated the presumptive maximum for appellate billing, recognizing that complex appellate representation often requires substantial attorney time and labor. Removing the cap improved MAACS's ability to recruit and retain appellate attorneys willing to accept demanding cases. Additionally, on October 1, 2025, rates increased to \$141 to \$154 per hour to remain competitive with MIDC rates.

MAACS additionally implemented a comprehensive new billing policy that established greater consistency and transparency in the voucher review process, including a formal appeal procedure for attorneys seeking review of voucher decisions.

Perhaps most significantly, MAACS completed the transition to an independent statewide voucher review system. Under the new structure, judges no longer have authority to review or deny appellate vouchers. Voucher review responsibilities now rest entirely with the MAACS Voucher Review Team, including the MAACS accountant and voucher review attorney. This reform strengthened compliance with the principles of independence required under the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission Act and removed the judiciary from direct control over appellate defense compensation.

To support timely compensation for roster attorneys, MAACS implemented statewide deadlines for county payments and reimbursement submissions through the new billing policy. Combined with improvements in administrative processes, these changes significantly sped up payment times for roster attorneys and improved predictability within the compensation system.

MAACS also continued modernizing and improving its operational infrastructure. Increased consistency was implemented within the statewide court assignment system, helping ensure more uniform handling of appellate appointments across jurisdictions. MAACS expanded data collection capabilities to better track assignments, billing, workload, and system performance. In addition, MAACS required district court registers of action to be uploaded into the MAACS system to improve compliance with court rules and help ensure appellate attorneys have access to transcripts and records from the full proceedings necessary to provide effective representation.

Access to clients also improved in 2025. MAACS increased capacity for video visits with appellate clients, allowing attorneys greater ability to communicate with and build relationships with incarcerated clients throughout the appellate process.

MAACS also continued investing in long-term system development and collaboration. The office increased mentoring and collaboration efforts related to youth defense work in partnership with the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission. MAACS additionally began planning stages for a pilot project involving a centralized administrative office that would provide paralegal and administrative support services to roster attorneys, with the goal of reducing administrative burdens and improving attorney efficiency.

Finally, MAACS expanded access to postconviction representation through grant funding and innovation. MAACS was awarded a grant from the Michigan Justice Fund and launched the 6.500 Freedom Project, a new initiative focused on expanding access to counsel and litigation support for people seeking postconviction relief under Michigan Court Rule 6.500. The project represents a significant investment in addressing longstanding gaps in postconviction representation throughout Michigan.

Capacity to Provide Representation

Access to appellate counsel remains one of the most urgent challenges facing Michigan's criminal legal system. SADO, through its Public Defender Division and Private Counsel Division (MAACS), continues to serve as the backbone of indigent appellate representation in Michigan, ensuring that thousands of people have access to counsel guaranteed by the constitution. In 2025, the MAACS roster represented clients in 88.83% of all new indigent appellate assignments statewide, while SADO's Public Defender Division represented clients in 11.17%. Of the 2,758 total new appellate assignments, MAACS received 2,450 assignments, while SADO received 308.

The continued reliance on MAACS roster attorneys reflects both the strength and vulnerability of Michigan's appellate defense system. While roster attorneys consistently step forward to represent clients in complex appeals, resentencings, postconviction proceedings, and youth

defense matters, the demand for appellate counsel continues to exceed available capacity. While 2,758 new appellate assignments were made, there were 188 people entitled to counsel, constitutionally and statutorily, for whom an attorney could not be assigned due to lack of capacity.

SADO and MAACS remain committed to expanding access to representation through recruitment, training, litigation support, mitigation services, and improved compensation structures for assigned counsel. At the same time, growing caseload pressures and increasing appointment demands continue to highlight the need for additional long-term investment in Michigan's appellate defense infrastructure.

In 2025, MAACS and SADO also continued to expand access to representation for youth involved in the appellate system following the implementation of statewide youth appellate defense reforms. MAACS handled 8 youth appellate assignments, while SADO handled 10. The development of the youth defense roster and specialized training efforts remain critical as the system adapts to a growing recognition that children require developmentally appropriate, client-centered appellate advocacy.

The need for appellate representation extended far beyond direct appeals. In 2025, MAACS and SADO collectively represented 156 juvenile lifer clients following the continued expansion of resentencing litigation under evolving constitutional law governing youthful offenders. Of those assignments, MAACS represented 56 people and SADO represented 100. These resentencings require intensive mitigation development, investigation, and client advocacy, underscoring the increasing complexity of appellate defense work across Michigan.

Even amid these challenges, MAACS and SADO continued working toward a more stable and sustainable appellate defense system. The transition to statewide hourly rates, ongoing reimbursement through the MAACS fund, expanded roster support, and increased collaboration between SADO and MAACS represent meaningful progress toward ensuring that appellate clients throughout Michigan receive high-quality representation regardless of geography or income.

Adjusted Caseload Distribution

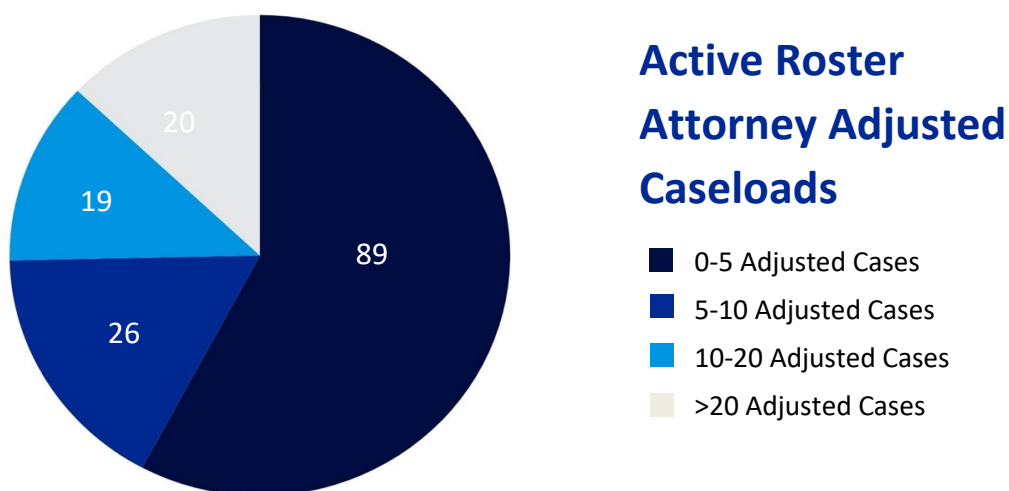
In 2025, a total of 154 MAACS roster attorneys accepted appellate assignments throughout the year. Adjusted workloads are calculated using a case-weighting system that assigns a value of 1.0 for trial appeals and lower weighted values for plea appeals and resentencing matters to more accurately reflect the differing complexity and time demands of appellate representation.

While many attorneys maintained manageable caseloads, the data reflects continuing concerns about the concentration of appellate work among a smaller number of highly active roster attorneys.

In 2025, 73% of the weighted cases handled by the MAACS roster were handled by only 40 roster attorneys. Conversely, 25 roster attorneys only accepted one case during the entire year, and 89 roster attorneys accepted five or less.

In 2025, 11 attorneys carried adjusted caseloads exceeding 30, or more than double the recommended caseload. Six exceeded 40, and three attorneys exceeded adjusted caseloads of 50. These extreme workloads raise ongoing concerns regarding attorney burnout, long-term sustainability, and the ability to consistently provide the high-quality, client-centered representation appellate advocacy requires.

Even with the significant improvements made by MAACS in the past year, the uneven distribution of appellate workloads remains a significant challenge for Michigan’s appellate defense system. Complex appeals, postconviction litigation, juvenile lifer resentencings, and youth defense matters require substantial attorney time for record review, client communication, investigation, briefing, and court appearances. MAACS continues working to recruit and retain additional qualified appellate attorneys while expanding structural supports intended to create a more sustainable and effective statewide appellate defense system.



MAACS Fund

The MAACS Fund was created by the State of Michigan to help ensure that indigent appellate representation is adequately funded and that MAACS roster attorneys are compensated at rates consistent with those established under the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission Act. Through the MAACS Fund, counties receive partial reimbursement for the appellate attorney fees and

expenses they pay to MAACS roster attorneys, creating a more stable, fair, and sustainable statewide appellate defense system. In 2025, the MAACS Fund reimbursed counties for 50% of approved appellate attorney fees and expenses.

In 2025, the MAACS Voucher Review Team processed a total of 3,761 vouchers, representing \$7,805,734.42 in attorney fees and expenses paid for appellate representation across Michigan. Of that amount, \$3,902,867.21 was reimbursed to counties through the MAACS Fund.

To strengthen the integrity, consistency, and efficiency of the reimbursement process, MAACS added a Voucher Review Attorney position in January 2025. The addition of this role significantly improved MAACS's ability to review the reasonableness of vouchers and apply billing policies consistently across cases. Working alongside the MAACS accountant, the Voucher Review Attorney helps ensure that voucher review is thorough, accurate, and independent, while also supporting timely payment to roster attorneys.

Youth Defense

During 2025, MAACS fielded 18 youth appellate assignments, 10 of which were assigned to SADO and 8 of which were assigned to MAACS youth roster attorneys. This represents a significant increase from 2024, when MAACS fielded only 6 youth requests for counsel.

The increase reflects the continued expansion of youth appellate representation in Michigan and the growing recognition that children in the appellate system require specialized, developmentally, appropriate advocacy. In response to this growth, MAACS continued expanding the youth defense roster while increasing mentoring, collaboration, and training opportunities for attorneys handling youth appeals.

MAACS Youth Defense Attorney Josh Pease also played a key role in training youth defense attorneys at both the trial and appellate levels. His contributions included presenting a Case Law and Court Rules Update for the Children's Law Section, delivering a presentation on Defending Against Waiver for the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission, and teaching a session on Youth Sentencing Issues at the Fall Appellate Defender Training.

Advocacy

Community and excellence, two of SADO's office values, were on full display throughout 2025, as the year brought many opportunities to come together to celebrate victories big and small, to grieve losses impacting our clients' rights and futures, and to fight for better laws.

This report contains a select sampling of significant outcomes in 2025.

Direct Appeals Unit

DA attorneys appear frequently in the Michigan Supreme Court and consistently achieve excellent results for their clients. In 2025, DA attorneys filed 135 pleadings and had 16 oral arguments in the Michigan Supreme Court. They filed 340 substantive pleadings and advocated at 113 oral arguments in the Court of Appeals. DA attorneys also filed 247 pleadings in the trial courts and advocated for our clients in the local trial courts, at 287 different hearings.

In 2025, Direct Appeal attorneys obtained 138 years of total sentence reductions for direct appeal clients. While the human cost is immeasurable, there was \$6.9 million in potential savings to the state from reduced incarceration costs from these sentence reductions (based on average incarceration costs of \$50,000 per year, per person).

New Trials

Angeles Meneses and Kierston Nunn: The Court vacated multiple convictions, including for second-degree murder, reckless driving causing death, and OWI causing death, and remanded for a new trial based on trial counsel's failure to ask for a manslaughter instruction. Client then entered into a plea agreement and was sentenced to a 16-year minimum, down from a 30-year minimum sentence.

Michael Mittlestat: In a published opinion, the Court of Appeals granted a new trial, reversing the trial court's denial of the motion for new trial. The Court of Appeals held that the prosecutor failed

to correct perjured testimony from a cooperating witness about the terms of his plea deal and violated *Brady* by failing to disclose an MRE 609 conviction.

Hank Schneider, Mike Waldo, Angie Jackson, Katherine Marcuz, and Lisa Lamarre: The Court of Appeals remanded for a new trial, citing cumulative errors regarding ineffective assistance of counsel and improper admission of prejudicial evidence. Bond had been revoked shortly before trial but was reinstated. Our client is now home.

Sentence Reductions

Jason Eggert, Imelme Umana, former SADOite Matt Monahan, and Monique Dake: The client was granted resentencing after a *Crosby* hearing. At resentencing, the client's minimum sentence was reduced from 20 years to 12 years, for an 8-year time cut.

Chloe Brueck, Monique Dake, Anna Kohn, Angie Jackson, Hank Schneider, Daniella Cohen, and Brett DeGroff: The client received an 11-month time cut from a 30-month minimum to a 19-month minimum.

Ali Wright and Monique Dake: The client was originally sentenced to 270 days in jail after he was discharged from his flat 2-year felony firearm prison sentence. The trial court suggested at sentencing it would waive that jail time if the client did well in prison. Ali filed a Motion for Jail Sentence Reduction and asked the trial court to follow through. The jail sentence was reduced to zero days, and the client was discharged and went home, free and clear of state supervision.

Exonerations

Emma Lawton, Melodie Floro, Dominica Convertino, and Julianne Cuneo: After Emma gave opening statements at a *Ginther* hearing, the prosecutor stipulated to a new trial based on newly discovered evidence. The case was subsequently dismissed and the client is now registered with the National Registry of Exonerations.

Juvenile Lifer Unit

In January of 2025, Assistant Defender Maya Menlo and Managing Attorney Tina Olson successfully argued the cases of Andrew Czarnecki and Montario Taylor in the Michigan Supreme Court. These cases established that mandatory life without parole sentences for anyone 19 and 20 years old is unconstitutional; this holding entitled approximately 582 additional people to resentencing. In 2025, the JLU's work expanded to represent this new group of people.

SADO's Deputy Director Jessica Zimbelman worked closely with JLU and MAACS leadership, including MariaRosa Palmer, to steward the appointment of counsel for hundreds of people in need of counsel. That work is ongoing.

In addition to its existing case load, the SADO's JLU was appointed to 87 cases, and appointments to more are ongoing as of this writing. The majority of these appointments were to represent clients affected by *Czarnecki/Taylor*, and others were to represent clients under *Eads*, *Miller*, *Stovall*, *Parks*, and *Poole*.

In 2025, the Juvenile Lifer Unit prevented approximately 290 years in unnecessary prison terms. While the human cost is immeasurable, this amounts to \$14.5 million in avoided incarceration costs from these sentence reductions (based on average incarceration costs of \$50,000 per year, per person).

Sentence Reductions

In calendar year 2025, the JLU staff successfully obtained resentencing to a term of years for 28 clients previously serving life without parole sentences.

Attorneys Erin Bartels and Jackie Ouvry and Mitigation Specialist Tomiko Gumbleton litigated a *Miller* hearing on behalf of client WD, for whom the prosecution was advocating for a continued sentence of life without parole. The team was successful, and WD has since been paroled and returned home after almost forty years of incarceration.

Attorneys Emily New and Tina Olson and Mitigation Specialist Beth Kuczma litigated a *Miller* hearing on behalf of client JT. The prosecution was advocating for a continued sentence of life without parole. The team presented evidence over three days, and as of now, the trial court has not yet issued a decision.

Project Reentry

Since coming home, Project Reentry continued to stand by me, offering guidance, resources, and encouragement as I adjust to life outside. Rebuilding hasn't been easy, but having that kind of consistent support has made a big difference and helped me stay focused on moving forward in a positive way.

As Project Reentry enters its tenth year, we continue impacting and building rapport among partners, clients, and SADO staff. Project Reentry's advocacy lightens the loads our clients navigate when they come home. Every day, our team is told what we do works. It matters. It opens doors.

In 2025, Project Reentry:

- Completed more than 75 Comprehensive Reentry Plans
- Assisted more than 30 former juvenile lifers with parole preparation, including in-person representation at parole hearings
- Provided complex and critical services for at least 25 juvenile lifers immediately upon release
- Worked with more than 20 direct appeals clients for parole preparation, pre-release case management, and post-release support
- Engaged with at least 100 non-clients to build community by hosting workshops, partnering with agencies that bring returning citizens together, and offering peer support.

Project Reentry has been vitally important to my homecoming. They help navigate the pitfalls that a lot of us run into, especially with family reintegration, and vital documents.

In 2025, our reputation and credibility continued to grow. PR has earned seats at the tables among MDOC and Offender Success decisionmakers. We are a critical stakeholder informing best practices. This includes:

- Improved coordination with MDOC to ensure more clients leave prison with essential identification documents, especially for those who max-out or discharge
- Advocating for pre-release services where MDOC can initiate Medicaid transfers for those who discharge, avoiding gaps in medical coverage
- Participating in public forums, particularly through MDOC's Resource Fairs and Offender Success' Reentry United Fairs as presenters, partners, and discussion leaders
- Sharing practical reentry guidance and real-world examples not only with clients, but with the broader MDOC population through creative and encouraging articles featured in SADO's monthly Criminal Defense Resource Center newsletter

Transitioning back into the community after decades of incarceration is so overwhelming, even if clients have a robust support system. Knowing that they can turn to the Reentry team makes all the difference.

PR remains committed to leading the way through identifying best practices, evidence-based strategies, and promoting meaningful advocacy that creates lasting opportunities for successful transitions home.

Project Reentry helped me find my support network, made sure I was set up for success, and even today, they have proven to be valuable friends that continue to support me and have been there for me every step of the way in my pursuit of becoming a productive member of society. I absolutely would not be where I am now if it were not for the persistent, diligent work that was done on my behalf by the very unique, special people at SADO, and the people involved with Project Reentry. The role they play is important and instrumental to the community both inside and outside prison.



The reentry community celebrated together at SADO's Detroit office this holiday season.

MAACS Roster Attorneys

New Trials

Susan Walsh: The Court vacated client's conviction based on prosecutorial misconduct, finding that "the prosecutor's line of questioning to the officers regarding the officers' prior contact with defendant served no other purpose than to suggest that the defendant was a bad actor." On remand, client was acquitted at his new trial. Susan also won new trials for two other clients based on confessions of error from the prosecutor. In the first case, the prosecutor confessed that the trial court's acceptance of her client's waiver of the right to counsel where the waiver was not

unequivocal was error. In the second, defense counsel's failure to request the self-defense instruction also resulted in a prosecutorial confession of error. Susan followed that case back into the trial court and conferred with the trial attorney about using MIDC funding to get an investigator, which resulted in a full dismissal of the case.

Bill Branch: The Court vacated client's conviction, finding that the evidence was not sufficient to convict him for aggravated stalking of his probation officer when his texts were about things like employment and housing updates, witnessing a crime, and his probation monitoring fee.

Sentence Reductions

Tameka Tucker: In a published decision, the Court held that *Eads* applies to her client, who was sentenced at 18 years old to 65 to 100 years in prison for 2nd degree murder, and remanded to the trial court for a resentencing.

Jonathan Simon: In a published decision, the Court held that the conviction for felony firearm was vacated because it was barred by the statute of limitations and remanded the case to apply jail credit. In total, this saved his client 4 years in prison. In another case, Jonathan convinced the prosecutor to concede that consecutive sentencing was not permitted, reducing the client's total sentence by 25 years.

Tracie Gittleman: At resentencing, OV11 was rescored to zero points, reducing the overall guidelines and resulting in a 33-month sentence reduction.

MAACS Mitigation

Since 2022, SADO has received Byrne JAG grant funding for mitigation specialists whose focus is to provide mitigation and reentry services to MAACS clients. In October 2024, the grant team changed from one mitigation specialist to two. In October 2025, the MAACS Mitigation team grew from two to three when temporary funding for representation of juvenile lifer clients was added to the SADO budget.

The number of MAACS attorneys utilizing mitigation also continues to grow. Since the program's inception in 2022, over 58 different MAACS roster attorneys have utilized mitigation support. MAACS Mitigation received 68 requests for mitigation services in 2024, which represents a 70% increase from the number of requests from the previous year (40). Every year, more and more MAACS roster attorneys submit their first request for mitigation support. Most attorneys who have worked with the MAACS mitigation team also request subsequent support for other clients.

MAACS Mitigation Specialist Emily Swanson delivered multiple presentations throughout the year to the MAACS roster at Orientation and other trainings, as well as to the Michigan State University College of Law Public Defense Clinic and attendees at the Fall Appellate Defender Training.

Sentence Reductions

The team of **Tim Doman and MAACS Mitigation Specialist Emily Swanson** won a 15-month time-cut at a resentencing for their client, N.T. Tim filed a sentencing memo along with Emily's mitigation. After a showdown in the courtroom over the rescoring of OV13 to zero points, Tim prevailed, leading to the time cut. The judge's decision to reduce N.T.'s sentence relied heavily on Tim and Emily's writing. Tim said this about the win:

The subject line of this email should be "Emily Swanson win"! Once the OV battle was over, the judge made clear that he was only reducing the client's sentence because of all the rehabilitative work the client had already done, which was extensively detailed in Emily's report. In other words, I couldn't have done it without her.

Working with roster attorney **Tracie Gittleman, MAACS Mitigation Specialist Emily Swanson** prepared a mitigation report for the resentencing of their client L.J. The court resentenced L.J. to concurrent sentences instead of consecutive, resulting in a time cut of 115 months and making him immediately eligible for parole.

Roster attorney **Ron Ambrose partnered with MAACS Mitigation Specialist Emily Swanson** in representing K.H. at a juvenile lifer resentencing hearing. During the hearing, the judge repeatedly referenced Emily's mitigation report, describing the details of K.H.'s life as "haunting" and "heart-wrenching." The court quoted directly from the report and stated that "the information that the Court has been provided from the mitigation expert does weigh heavy on my consideration when imposing this sentence." The judge ultimately imposed a 30-year sentence. The result came after years of litigation, including a prior resentencing in which K.H. was sentenced to life without parole and two trips to the Michigan Supreme Court.

Emily Swanson also provided a mitigation report and allocution preparation assistance on the defense team for M.A., working with his attorney Alona Sharon. At the initial sentencing for M.A., the judge exceeded the top of the guidelines by over 13 years. At the resentencing hearing, while still exceeding guidelines, the court reduced the minimum sentence from 20 years to 10 years, cutting it in half.

Compassion

The deeply meaningful work and impact of what we do at SADO is expressed best through our clients' words. At the Safe & Just Michigan annual meeting and award ceremony, one of the attendees shared a heartfelt story about the impact SADO had on her and her life, many decades ago. Director Marilena David shared this story with staff in an email:

At the end of the award ceremony, a person from the community who was in attendance asked if she could briefly speak. She told this story: she was convicted many years ago and sentenced to 72 months in prison. And she was pregnant. She did the math and realized this meant she wouldn't be reunited with her daughter until her daughter was 5 years old. But then SADO was appointed to her case and the attorney (Anne Yantus) found a clerical error and a box that was checked that wasn't supposed to be checked. Tenee's sentence was reduced, and because of that, Tenee was reunited with her daughter when her daughter was 3 years old! She was crying happy, grateful tears sharing that story, and so were we.

This was the ultimate testament of what we do here: We Free People, we reunite them with their families, we let nothing get past us, we hold people accountable, we don't take no for an answer, and we fight to bring people home from the hellhole that is prison. One person at a time.

Education

Criminal Defense Resource Center

In 2025, the CDRC continued to offer substantive trainings for one of its two main constituencies: the defense bar. These trainings were offered in-person, online, and in Michigan prisons. All the CDRC's training programs are complimentary for attendees, and recordings of online trainings, together with materials, are available to subscribers on our website. Additionally, the CDRC offered several trainings for – or participated in events that directly affect – its other main constituency: affected individuals.

Monthly online trainings for attorneys

The CDRC continued its popular and well-attended monthly online trainings for attorneys around the state. Many SADO staff participated as faculty, including: Julianne Cuneo, Jackie McCann, Steven Helton, Nicole Duncan, Jason Eggert, and Taylor Fellows. Each training was scheduled for 90 minutes, comprising a total of 16.5 hours of instruction. Sessions included:

February 18, 2025	District to Circuit Court Appeals 101
March 18, 2025	Cross-examination: Techniques and strategies
April 15, 2025	Defendants' constitutional right to present (otherwise) inadmissible evidence
May 20, 2025	Raising race in search and seizure litigation, Part I
May 30, 2025	Protecting privileged information at the border: What to know about border searches of electronic devices
June 3, 2025	The law and science of eyewitness identification
June 11, 2025	Litigating coerced confessions
June 17, 2025	#CantAdultYet: Applying psychological and neuroscience research to the sentencing of emerging adults
July 15, 2025	Youth defense and starting zealous advocacy where the school-to-prison pipeline begins

Monthly online trainings for defense investigators

In 2025, CDRC continued to offer online trainings for criminal defense investigators, partnering with the West Michigan Regional Investigators' Association. Each training was scheduled for 90 minutes, comprising a total of 10.5 hours of instruction. Sessions included:

February 6, 2025	Defending arson cases
March 6, 2025	Let's talk about subpoenas!
April 3, 2025	Is <i>Brady</i> still the G.O.A.T.?
May 1, 2025	Let's talk about evidence!
June 5, 2025	Report writing for investigators
August 7, 2025	Investigative photography techniques
September 4, 2025	Investigating CSC cases

Live in 2025!

On October 10, 2025, the CDRC hosted an all-day, in-person training event for Michigan investigators: *Live in 2025!* This event was open to any investigator working in indigent defense, and drew over 50 attendees from around the state. Sessions included:

Getting your team to work as a team
Report writing
What's discoverable? What's work product?
MIDC, county, and institutional resources to help your case
Testifying for investigators
Client interviewing

Litigating after *Poole*, *Czarnecki*, and *Taylor*: Emerging issues & practical solutions

To help orient the large number of attorneys and team members who are handling youth and emerging adult life-without-parole cases, made possible by the Michigan Supreme Court's recent landmark opinions, the CDRC hosted a half-day workshop at the SADO office in Detroit. SADO staff participated as faculty, including: Erin Bartels, Jackie Ouvry, Tomiko Gumbleton, Claire Ward, Tina Olson, Ashley Craythorne, Beth Kuczma, Kate Woznicki, and Jessica Newton. Over 60 participants attended this training; sessions included:

Litigating juvenile lifer cases post- <i>Black</i>
Don't be scared, they work for us: Preparing your client for a psychological evaluation
Panel: Strategies for working with clients who challenge us
Deeper MDOC record analysis

On-site trainings for Michigan prisoners

Working with SADO Paralegal Frank Rodriguez – author of SADO’s *Guide to Michigan’s Commutation Process Manual* (2024) – the CDRC team offered a series of well-received trainings in several of Michigan’s prisons. The focus of each session was commutations, but CDRC staff fielded questions from attendees on a variety of other topics.

February 12, 2025	Muskegon Correctional Facility
May 21, 2025	Saginaw Correctional Facility
July 21-22, 2025	Carson City Correctional Facility
July 26, 2025	Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility



Frank Rodriguez talked to people inside of various Michigan’s prions about commutations

Carson City Resource Fair

On October 8, 2025, CDRC staff – together with Reentry and Juvenile Lifer Unit team members – participated in a resource fair at Carson City Correctional Facility. Together, this group spoke to attendees about juvenile lifer cases, reentry, commutation, and CDRC’s offerings.

MDOC Librarians Annual Conference

On September 25, 2025, CDRC staff spoke by invitation to the MDOC librarians at their annual meeting in Whitmore Lake. Attendance at the conference allowed CDRC staff to speak with librarians one-on-one about how the CDRC can better support Michigan's prisoners.

Publications

The CDRC continued to produce various publications for the defense bar, publishing 11 monthly issues of the Criminal Defense Newsletter and the following books and manuals:

- Defender Sentencing Guidelines Manual Annotated
- Compilation of Michigan's Juvenile Delinquency, Traditional Waiver, and Designation Statutes and Court Rules Book
- Defender Evidence Book

Annual Appellate Defender Fall Training

SADO conducted an Annual Appellate Defender Fall Training for appellate defenders, offering a total of 13 hours of instruction. Fall Training was planned by Keeley Blanchard with support from the MAACS, CDRC, and Direct Appeals Teams. Several SADO staff participated as faculty, including: Jessica Zimbelman, Emily Swanson, Ali Wright, Mary Soo Anderson, Angie Jackson, Stephanie Farkas, Keeley Blanchard, Josh Pease, Maya Menlo, and other MAACS staff. Sessions included:

November 12, 2025	Demystification of Motions for Relief from Judgment
November 13, 2025	Michigan caselaw update
	Working with a Mitigation Specialist for resentencing
	Becoming a research rockstar
	Working with Investigators in appellate cases
	Sentencing caselaw update
	Litigating coerced confessions
	MAACS town hall
November 14, 2025	Nuts and bolts of AI and surveillance tech issues
	Building strong attorney-client relationships and avoiding breakdowns
	Client centered representation and ethics in appellate practice
	Youth sentencing issues

Appellate Writing Workshop

On September 3-5, 2025, the CDRC hosted the annual *Appellate Writing Workshop* for SADO and MAACS attorneys. The AWW was attended by 21 attorneys, and offered 21 hours of instruction.



Attendees and faculty of SADO's Appellate Writing Workshop

The Next Generation

Part of SADO's commitment to fostering interest in public defense includes its robust internship program and its continued involvement in law school clinics throughout the state.

The University of Detroit Mercy law school resentencing clinic, taught by Jacqueline Ouvry and Claire Ward, completed its second and third semester in 2025. Students in the clinic develop strong client-interview skills and through their attorney-client relationship, build mitigation in support of term of years sentences. Profs Ouvry and Ward negotiate with the prosecutors regarding whether their offices will seek LWOP. When the prosecutors filed for LWOP at the end of 2025, the majority of clinic clients were in the term of years category.

The JLU continued its valuable partnership with the Holistic Defense Program with Wayne State Law School and School of Social Work. SADO has two licensed social workers and mitigation specialists, Tomiko Gumbleton and Kate Woznicki, who provide on-site supervision to social work students. Two social work students were placed at SADO in the 2025 academic year. They partner with two law students in their fall terms. These students learn to work on interdisciplinary teams, develop strong

client relationships, and build mitigation to prepare *Poole* and *Czarnecki/Taylor* clients for resentencings.

This year, SADO attorneys Emma Lawton, Angeles Meneses, Jason Eggert, Michael Mittlestat, Garrett Burton, Ali Wright, and Jackie McCann taught the Criminal Appellate Clinics at the University of Michigan and Wayne State University law schools.

In 2025, SADO hosted both legal and mitigation interns across all units. We are looking forward to continuing to mentor public-service minded students interested in public defense.



Contact

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