

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

David: Correcting injustice is the key work of state's appellate defenders

Marilena David The Detroit News

Dec. 25, 2025, 8:00 p.m. ET

Typically, when defense attorneys, judges, prosecutors and police are in the same room to talk about a criminal case, it's a courtroom. But that wasn't the case during the Sentinel Event Review that recently took place at the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office. A sentinel review is a blameless analysis of an undesirable event — this time the wrongful conviction of Eric Anderson — to determine what went wrong, why, and how it can be prevented in the future. This was the first time such a review process took place in Michigan, but it should not be the last. At the State Appellate Defender Office (SADO), our work includes identifying wrongful convictions based on faulty or insufficient evidence and other legal and constitutional grounds, and advocating for the release of innocent people. For appellate defenders, this work is not optional, but a core duty to our clients and to the public. When someone is convicted, many assume the system got it right. But experience shows that isn't always the case. Wrongful convictions can stem from mistaken identifications, flawed forensic science, suppressed evidence, coerced statements, or human error.

Uncovering these errors is a painstaking process. We scrutinize trial transcripts, police reports, and legal filings. We re-evaluate witness testimony, identify inconsistencies and pursue leads that may have been overlooked. When new information emerges, whether from updated science, witnesses recanting, or evidence of misconduct, we fight to bring those facts back before the courts. We do this because the criminal legal system must never be powerless to correct its own mistakes. With this approach, SADO has helped exonerate more than 20 people over

the past two decades — individuals who collectively lost centuries of freedom for crimes they did not commit. Many of their stories are documented in the National Registry of Exonerations, reflecting both their resilience and the importance of thorough appellate advocacy. James Eugene Grissom won relief after SADO brought to light numerous fabrications by the complaining witness, seriously calling into question the reliability of the verdict. Grissom was released after nine years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Duane Williams spent more than 11 years behind bars for an arson and murder he did not commit. His conviction was based on an unreliable jailhouse informant, withheld evidence, and flawed fire-investigation testimony, which SADO brought to light. Williams's convictions were reversed, and he was released, giving him the chance to return to his family and rebuild his life. And the case of Roderick Pippen shows how crucial it is for defense counsel to conduct a full investigation. Pippen was sentenced to life without parole for a 2008 Detroit shooting despite conflicting witness accounts and ballistics evidence that could not clearly link him to the crime. On appeal, SADO conducted a complete investigation and presented new evidence to the court. The Michigan Supreme Court ordered a new trial, and in 2024, all charges were dismissed, freeing Pippen after more than a decade of wrongful imprisonment. These cases demonstrate the indispensable role of appellate defenders in uncovering the truth and correcting injustices that would otherwise stand. But we need to go further. These cases, and others like them, must be put under the microscope to determine what went wrong, why, and how to prevent it in the future. As policymakers and the public continue examining how to strengthen Michigan's criminal justice system, we must remember that preventing wrongful convictions is only half the job. When errors occur, our system must be equipped and empowered to correct and prevent them.

That requires ongoing investment in appellate defense and investigative resources, and greater access to sentinel event reviews, whenever a person is convicted of a crime they did not commit. Justice is not final until it is accurate, and to get it right, we must first understand how we got it wrong. *Marilena David is director of the State Appellate Defender Office.*