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2013 Annual Report
The Pennsylvania Innocence Project’s mission is to: (1) secure the exoneration and restoration to society of persons who are innocent and have been wrongfully convicted; (2) provide clinical training and experience to law students; (3) collaborate with law enforcement agencies and the courts to address systemic causes of wrongful convictions; and (4) strengthen and improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice system through public education and advocacy.

The Project furthered each prong of its mission in 2013.

Securing exonerations: Through December, the Project had reviewed over three thousand inmate requests for legal assistance. The Project’s lawyers, aided by volunteer lawyers serving as co-counsel pro bono, were litigating 15 innocence claims in four Pennsylvania counties, and another 30 cases were being actively investigated.

In October, the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas granted our petition for a new trial on behalf of Eugene Gilyard. In November, after almost 16 years in prison for a murder he did not commit, Mr. Gilyard and his co-defendant, Lance Felder, were released, pending the Philadelphia District Attorney’s decision as to whether the case would be retried. [Mr. Gilyard and Mr. Felder were subsequently exonerated in 2014.]

Clinical training: In the spring and fall semesters, the Project supervised a clinic at Temple’s Beasley School of Law for law students as co-counsel pro bono, were litigating 15 innocence claims in four Pennsylvania counties, and another 30 cases were being actively investigated.

In June, the Project helped to conduct training for the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association in Harrisburg at its Annual Education and Training Conference on eyewitness identification science and how to run photo arrays and lineups in keeping with best-scientific practices. In October, Ms. Bluestine, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey and Montgomery County District Attorney Risa Ferman presented at the International Association of Chiefs of Police Conference on eyewitness identification and on working with innocence organizations on the investigation of innocence claims.

Ms. Bluestine also worked closely with the Pennsylvania District Attorney’s Office on the investigation of innocence claims, and students from all of the area law schools volunteer at the Project for public service or pro bono credit. During the summer, the Project welcomed twelve interns from area law schools as well as Duquesne and Michigan State.

Addressing the causes of wrongful convictions: Legal Director Marissa Bluestine assisted the Philadelphia Police Department in drafting new protocols, and creating a training program, for conducting photo arrays and lineups as well as recording suspect interrogations.

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Public education and advocacy: The Project partnered with the Center for Forensic Science Research and Education to present the first comprehensive academy on forensic science for practicing lawyers and judges to be offered in Pennsylvania. The eight-week, 16-credit CLE course covered the areas of forensic science most likely to be used in a criminal investigation, particularly homicides.

Other developments: In May, the Project marked its fourth anniversary with a dinner at the National Constitution Center and presented its Hero of Justice Award to Denise Federaro for her extraordinary volunteer work on behalf of the innocence movement on a national level.

The Project’s first staff attorney, Charlotte Whitmore, moved to Massachusetts and was succeeded by Niam Sanghvi. Charlotte came to the Project originally as an Equal Justice Works fellow. When her fellowship ended, she was hired to fill the newly created staff attorney position, funded by a two-year grant from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance. Charlotte received the Project’s 2013 Maureen Rowley Award for her exemplary representation of our clients, including Eugene Gilyard.

In December, the Philadelphia Bar Association’s Public Interest Section presented its Andrew Hamilton Award for distinguished service in public interest law to Legal Director Marissa Boyers Bluestine. The Andrew Hamilton Award honors an exceptional legal services advocate or public defender associated with an organization with the purpose of serving persons who cannot afford to pay for legal representation.