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# Ensuring Justice Is Done in W.Va.

October 16, 2012

The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

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Many West Virginians believe in severe punishment for violent crimes. We simply don't like the idea of coddling vicious predators.

That makes it critically important to ensure those put behind bars for long terms are guilty of the crimes for which they were convicted. In rare cases, some prison inmates were not responsible for the vicious acts for which they were blamed.

For several years, a program called the Innocence Project has been using DNA testing to give second chances to men and women who, even after being convicted of crimes, maintain they were not guilty. About 300 people in 34 states have been released from prison after it was proved conclusively they could not have committed the crimes for which they were incarcerated.

Last week it was announced the West Virginia University School of Law has established a branch of the Innocence Project here in the Mountain State. It will be directed by Valena Beety, a veteran of such work who helped free two Mississippi women wrongly accused of a violent assault. Kristen McKeon, a University of Chicago law graduate, will assist. Four WVU law students will screen potential cases.

Taking its lead from the national program, the Innocence Project here in West Virginia will deal with situations in which DNA evidence can establish innocence. No drug-related cases will be accepted.

Sadly, West Virginians are well acquainted with false accusations that led to terrible wrongs being done to innocent people. Six men in our state have been freed from prison after investigations proved they were innocent of the crimes for which they were convicted. Five were accused of sexual assaults and one had been convicted of murder.

Five of the cases were linked to the 1990s scandal involving former State Police crime laboratory worker Fred Zain, who later admitted much of his work had been faked.

In one case, a hero who was wrongly accused of killing a woman after he rescued her 3-year-old child from a burning building was released from prison through DNA testing.

WVU School of Law officials are to be commended for working with the Innocence Project. It should help ensure West Virginians get what we all want: justice.

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