

# WASHINGTON INNOCENCE PROJECT

MAY 2026 | VOL. 1



## SSB 5520 SIGNED INTO LAW BY GOV. FERGUSON



Washington's wrongful conviction compensation law is stronger now that SB 5520 has been signed into law. These updates will ensure a smoother path to compensation with less litigation for those wrongfully convicted.

Key changes to the law include an acknowledgment of Alford/Newton pleas, the elimination of the age cap for the children of exonerees who exercise their right to tuition waivers, and extended filing deadlines. While key provisions—like providing cash advances to those awarded compensation while waiting for the annual state budget to be passed—were removed, there is strong support to revisit them in 2027.



## **MEET THE TEAM: CHELSEA HAGER**

Chelsea joined the Washington Innocence Project Board of Directors in 2025 and immediately made her presence felt through tireless advocacy and a clear commitment to our mission.

From the outset, Chelsea worked to advance meaningful reforms for those who have been wrongfully convicted by advocating for Senate Bill 5520, sponsored by Senator Tina Orwall (D - Des Moines). Chelsea worked closely with Executive & Policy Director Lara Zarowsky, Policy Coordinator Sumaiyah Mohamed, legislative

staff, and state lawmakers to shepherd its passage through both the Senate and the House, helping to build momentum and awareness around the need for a more just and efficient compensation process. Chelsea was instrumental to the bill being signed into law on March 25, 2026, marking a significant step forward in ensuring that individuals who have been wrongfully convicted receive compensation more quickly and with less burdensome litigation.

Chelsea's commitment to WashIP's mission began in law school, when she was a student in the WashIP Legislative Advocacy Clinic at UW Law which Zarowsky directed from 2011 - 2019. Since then Chelsea has been unrelenting in her support, and her steadfast dedication reflects a deep belief in fairness, accountability, and restoring dignity to those impacted by wrongful convictions.

Thank you, Chelsea, for your dedication and unwavering commitment to restoring humanity and your countless hours of advocacy on behalf of the mission of Washington Innocence Project.

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## **CASE UPDATE: CODY KLOEPPER**

Exoneration cases take years - and sometimes decades - to prove. WashIP client Cody Kloepper's innocence of a 2009 Benton County sexual assault was clearly established through exonerating DNA test results that identified the actual perpetrator in 2020. Yet Cody has remained in prison for more than 16 years - half a decade since the exonerating DNA was tested. WashIP is ensuring Cody's case is actively moving forward in the Washington Court of Appeals, Division III. Earlier this year, the Court advanced his personal restraint petition to full review—an important step that requires prosecutors to formally respond to our petition that presents compelling newly discovered evidence that Cody was wrongly convicted.

Simultaneously, we have filed a federal habeas petition to ensure Cody's claims are preserved and can be heard in federal court if Washington State fails to acknowledge the injustice. This dual-track approach reflects the dynamic nature of post-conviction innocence claims, the strength of the evidence of Cody's innocence, the severity of the injustice, and the urgency justice requires.

We will not stop fighting to bring Cody home and look forward to supporting him as he begins rebuilding his life in freedom.

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## HEARING ALERT: ROBERT WILLIAMS

83-year-old Robert Williams has been a Washington Innocence Project client since 2019 when we determined that evidence from the crime was available that could prove his innocence. However, as COVID-19 ravaged Washington State's prison population, Mr. Williams' compromised physical health required us to shift our focus to address his conditions of confinement, to ensure he could survive to prove his innocence. While this successful effort culminated with the Washington Supreme Court holding that the Washington State constitution is more protective than the federal constitution when it comes to the conditions of confinement, the work of litigating his innocence claim had not yet begun. Over Pierce County's opposition, we requested the courts to order DNA testing. But our request was denied. We kept fighting on behalf of Mr. Williams, and in February of this year, a panel of judges on the Court of Appeals Division II issued a published opinion reversing the trial court's order denying Mr. Williams access to testing and sent the case back to the trial court to apply the correct legal standard.

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## **ROBERT WILLIAMS (CONT.)**

Mr. Williams' journey illustrates some of the legal battles WashIP must often undertake to ensure the interests of our clients are fairly presented to the courts, and to access the evidence that could demonstrate the truth.

Judge Glasgow wrote in her concurrence that rather than sending the case back for the trial court to decide, she would have directed the trial court to order testing immediately: "Given Williams' age, we risk entirely denying him the justice he seeks by unnecessarily delaying the postconviction DNA testing he is entitled to."

At his upcoming hearing, we will argue on Mr. Williams' behalf that the court should allow us to test the evidence that could prove he is innocent.

Oral argument is currently scheduled for later this month.



## **PRO BONO IN ACTION: SEATTLE UNIVERSITY PARTNERS WITH WASHINGTON INNOCENCE PROJECT**

The Seattle University Post-Conviction Appellate Alliance (SUPAA) continued its 3 year tradition of hosting Pro Bono Day in partnership with the Washington Innocence Project.

This year's program, led by Washington Innocence Project Litigation Director John Marlow and Litigation Fellow Matt Long, provided students with meaningful hands-on experience through data entry

training and workshops focused on collateral attacks and personal restraint petition review.

By working directly with practitioners, law students gained practical insight into post-conviction advocacy and the complexities of wrongful conviction litigation.

It takes a community to pursue justice. We extend our gratitude to Seattle University for its continued commitment, enthusiasm, and support in advancing this important work.

**THANK YOU  
SEATTLE UNIVERSITY POST-  
CONVICTION APPELLATE  
ALLIANCE!**

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## WHEN CELEBRATION MEETS MISSION

Thank you to Hailey Marlow for choosing the Washington Innocence Project to host your birthday celebration in support of our mission. Your event helped bring greater awareness to our work and raised \$750 to support efforts to exonerate the innocent in Washington State.

We're grateful to everyone who joined and contributed to making the occasion both meaningful and impactful.

If you are looking for a small event space, we might be available to partner with you. Contact Programs & Operations Manager Marriam Oliver with inquiries at [marriam@wainnocenceproject.org](mailto:marriam@wainnocenceproject.org).



## SEARCHING FOR SYNERGY: ABOLITIONIST COMMUNITY WITHIN THE INNOCENCE NETWORK

Litigation Director John Marlow and Programs & Operations Manager Marriam Oliver recently joined Staff Attorney Tiffany Bush of the Georgia Innocence Project and Florida Innocence Project Paralegal Stephanie Spurgeon (a freed client) to lead a panel presentation in Chicago at the Innocence Network Annual Conference.

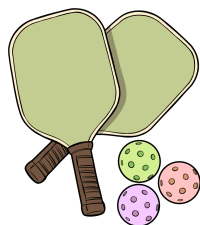
Marriam and John explored a critical and timely question: as

interest in the principles of prison abolition continues to grow across the Innocence Network, how do we align our day-to-day advocacy with the recognition that the criminal legal system causes significant harm to all those it touches—regardless of “innocence” or “guilt”?

The workshop invited participants into a facilitated, community-centered conversation about the tensions and synergies between innocence work and abolitionist principles. Together, they examined how violence, racism, and systemic oppression are deeply embedded in the criminal legal system, and what it means for advocacy to respond to that reality with honesty, care, and accountability.

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## PICKLEBALL FOR A PURPOSE

We're excited to share that the Washington Innocence Project has been selected by 501PB for a special pickleball fundraiser!

Join us on **June 14th from 1:30–5:30 PM** at the Mercer Island Community and Event Center for an afternoon of fun, community, and impact.

**\$ Registration fee: \$85**

**All proceeds go directly to support the Washington Innocence Project's work** freeing wrongfully convicted individuals and advancing justice.

Whether you're a seasoned player or just picking up a paddle, this is a great way to rally for a meaningful cause.

**👉 Register now: [501pb.dink](https://501pb.dink)**

Come play, connect, and make a difference!

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## SUPPORTING OUR WORK

### Save the Date!

Our **12<sup>th</sup> Annual Stand for Innocence Benefit & Awards Dinner** will be held on Thursday, October 1 2026 at the Triple Door in Seattle. Sign up for email updates or check our website for sponsorship and ticket sales information.

### Support our Work!

Washington Innocence Project is an independent 501(c)(3) with **no** institutional or national funding structure.

To support our work:

- Via Donor Advised Fund, our EIN is 83-3498962
- By Check, our address is P.O. Box 85869, Seattle, WA 98145-1869
- By Credit Card, visit [www.wainnocenceproject.org/donate](http://www.wainnocenceproject.org/donate)
- By Wire: Contact our Programs & Operations Manager Marriam Oliver at [marriam@wainnocenceproject.org](mailto:marriam@wainnocenceproject.org)

**Thank You for Standing with us!**