

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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EJI is calling on state officials to improve access to forensic testing after Beniah Dandridge became the second EJI client exonerated and released in the past six months after long-delayed testing proved his innocence. Mr. Dandridge was released last week after a faulty fingerprint match caused him to spend 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, and Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on Alabamas death row after being wrongfully convicted of capital murder based on a faulty bullet match. In both of these cases, state officials kept innocent men in prison for years by refusing to conduct the tests that ultimately exonerated them.

Beniah Dandridge was convicted of murder in 1996 after prosecutors relied on testimony from an Alabama Bureau of Investigation fingerprint examiner that fingerprints at the crime scene unmistakably matched Mr. Dandridge. At least three ABI examiners endorsed this purported match, but none of them compared the crime scene fingerprints to the victims son, who found the body and told police he had gotten blood on his hand.

David Suddeth admitted to committing the murder after he was arrested driving the victims truck in Florida. He said that he acted alone, but Montgomery County officials nonetheless charged and convicted Mr. Dandridge of murder based on the fingerprint evidence, and he was sentenced to life in prison. Mr. Suddeth pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

EJI began investigating Mr. Dandridges case several years ago. EJI made multiple requests for a re-examination of the evidence, but state officials with the ABI and local law enforcement authorities refused. EJI attorneys then involved independent forensic experts with Ron Smith & Associates in Collinsville, Mississippi, to re-examine the evidence. Three certified latent fingerprint examiners excluded Mr. Dandridge as the source of the fingerprints, which they found belonged to the victims son.

State and local officials still refused to re-examine the evidence. It took another year of litigation to obtain a court order authorizing the testing that exonerated Mr. Dandridge and resulted in his release last week. State officials and local prosecutors delayed forensic testing in [Anthony Ray Hinton's case](#) for 16 years before court-ordered testing resulted in his release in April.

EJI Director Bryan Stevenson maintains, There are more innocent people in Alabamas prisons and jails. We fail everyone in Alabama when law enforcement officials refuse to do simple testing that can identify wrongful convictions and provide immediate relief when supported by the evidence.

EJI is calling on Alabama lawmakers to create a Conviction Integrity Unit to investigate wrongful convictions. EJI is also urging prosecutors throughout the state to actively facilitate review of cases where credible claims of innocence are raised, and is calling on the ABI to end policies that allow it to resist re-examining evidence when new facts emerge that raise a plausible claim of innocence.

Keeping one innocent person on death row for 30 years and another innocent man in prison for 20 years is not only unjust it is immoral, Mr. Stevenson said. When available forensic testing can provide immediate relief to a wrongly convicted innocent person in prison, it is irresponsible to fail to act. We can and we must do better.

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