



On July 13, 2020, the LWVLA hosted a webinar about equal justice with a panel discussion based on the book and movie, *Just Mercy*. The panelists, who are involved in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) included:

Jose Burgos, Michigan State Appellate Defender Office Reentry Specialist
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Michael S. Cheltenham,
Chief Assistant Prosecuting Attorney,
Ingham County Prosecutor's Office
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Kathy Swedlow,
Deputy Administrator,
Michigan Appellate Assigned Counsel System
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If you missed the webinar, you can watch it [here](#) on the LWVLA YouTube Channel.

Special thanks to Susan Chalgian, member of the Suffrage Centennial Committee, which sponsored the webinar, for preparing this overview.

The collective responses from all three panelists, recount a system that is inherently biased against non-caucasians and in need of improvement, thus providing more just service and dignity towards all. Although each panelist represented greatly different aspects of the system, they verified the same story.

The points below are steps toward improving equal justice on which they generally agreed:

- *Increase resources for public defense attorneys including tools and training.*
- *Encourage strategies within the system to embrace and develop procedures that are more humanitarian. View people with dignity.*
- *Establish a broader and clearer recognition that there is blatant and structured racism within the CJS.*

- Although recent protests of injustice and racism within CJS have been intense, it is essential that the movement keep moving towards real change.
- It is unfair to use a defendant's ability to pay bail to determine if they should be locked up during the, potentially very long process.

A specific note is worth pointing out:

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2012 that it is unconstitutional to give juveniles a life sentence. Michigan rates second in the country for highest number of juveniles sentenced to life. Many are still waiting for re-sentencing.

These local organizations were suggested by the speakers if you're interested in learning more:

- **Death Penalty Information Center** <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org> - focuses on disseminating studies & reports related to the administration of the death penalty
- **Michigan Indigent Defense Commission Act** michiganidc.gov/ - provides indigent defendants in criminal case with effective assistance of counsel; and other terms.
- **Children's Advocacy Network** <https://cacmi.org> - partners with prosecutors, law enforcement & protective services to coordinate the investigation of child maltreatment.
- **American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)** <https://www.aclu.org> - defends & preserves the individual rights & liberties guaranteed to every person in this country by the U.S. Constitution and laws.
- **Nation Outside** <https://www.nationoutside.org> - a statewide organization with the mission to drive policy & practice reforms that build transformative systems of support for justice impacted people.
- **Black Lives Matter (BLM) Lansing** [Facebook page](#).

Capitol Area Response Effort

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Note: the movie Just Mercy is available from the Capital Area District Library and on Amazon Prime.
