When Something's Wrong, Know Your Right

Advocacy Through the California Innocence Project

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Most United States Citizens recognize that there are flaws in the legal system. While it is designed, in theory, to determine innocence and guilt based upon evidential facts, the truth of the matter is that wrongful convictions do occur.

Imagine serving a life sentence for a crime you did not commit. Once convicted, it can be nearly impossible to gain the attention of anyone who may help or support corrective action. This is particularly true when it comes to legal advocacy, and that is why The California Innocence Project was founded.

More Than a Decade of Advances

After more than a decade of effectively aiding incarcerated victims of injustice, volunteers and staff team members as this controversial nonprofit are now seeing advances with DNA evidence, as well as other pivotal breakthroughs. Such revelations can change life dramatically for those who have been wrongly convicted.

During their strides so far, the team has successfully reversed 8 convictions for those who had already served more than a century of prison time, combined. In addition, they have established effective screening systems that help them filter through the tens of thousands of requests that cross their desks. This enables them to focus on the cases they will be most likely to impact favorably.

Meticulous Case Screening

Naturally, as a nonprofit organization that must function resourcefully with lean funds, each letter must be screened to determine which are actually claiming innocence. This is the first step. Those battling sentencing decisions or 3 strikes concerns, instead of clear innocence claims, must be filtered out.

All claims of innocence receive a review. The review process includes considerations of the case files and brief, as well as interviews with trial and appellate attorneys. Only cases with solid evidence to disprove the verdict move forward in the process, and this is important for everyone involved. It helps the state government realize that the reversal claims are not frivolous.

Causes of Wrongful Convictions

After all, the main cause of innocent convictions is inaccurate identification. This happens to be a subject matter that is not widely understood.
It is a simple fact that people are prone to mistakes when it comes to identifying strangers, particularly when the suspect is of a different race than their own. Yet, when someone testifies before a jury, pointing their finger to identify someone as having committed a crime, this makes a tremendous impact. That alone can be enough to get a suspect convicted.

Cross-racial misidentification is also tricky, and not inherently indicative of racism. Rather, it is more a matter of being unfamiliar with differentiating features of another ethnicity. Also the lighting, time of day, length of exposure, and a variety of other distractions can influence how well a witness may actually be able to accurately recognize a suspect.

Another highly misunderstood topic is false confessions. Most people who have never been exposed to the tactics used to coerce confessions could not imagine admitting to a crime they did not commit. These tactics are used for a reason, and are effective primarily because people do not understand the manipulation involved. In reality, an exhausted, fearful, intimidated individual who has been locked in a room for 12 hours, and told that a confession is the only way out, is likely to become influenced to take that statement as the truth.

**Efforts Toward Improvement**

Ultimately, The California Innocence Project team serves as advocates for those lost in the system who deserve a second look. They provide hope for those individuals who have, in fact, been wrongly convicted. They also shed light on the pieces of the process that are flawed, in an attempt to improve the Justice System overall, and thereby provide a greater sense of security for US Citizens in the State of California.

*Samuel Wright is a writer and blogger who creates articles related to law. This article was written to explain this project and to answer the question, what is the innocence project?*