



Maryland Office of the Public Defender, in Partnership with University of Baltimore School of Law and University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, Announces Expanded Innocence Work with New Clinic and Leadership Appointments

Historic Expansion marks major milestone in Maryland's fight against wrongful convictions: Erica Suter leads the new MOPD Innocence Project Clinic at Maryland Carey Law and Rachel Bennett takes the helm of MOPD Innocence Project Clinic at UBalt Law

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The Office of the Maryland Public Defender (MOPD), University of Baltimore Law School (UBalt Law), and University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law (Maryland Carey Law) have unveiled a transformative expansion of exoneration work across Maryland that will revolutionize how our state addresses wrongful convictions.

This historic collaboration includes the exciting launch of a new exoneration-focused clinic, *MOPD Innocence Project Clinic at Maryland Carey Law* and new leadership at the long-standing *MOPD Innocence Project Clinic at UBalt Law*.

With a clinic at each of Maryland's law schools, twice as many individuals challenging wrongful incarceration will be able to receive dedicated exoneration services; and the number of law students engaged in this work will increase. Law students in both clinics will work on real cases for an entire year, gaining hands-on legal training and advocacy skills that often lead to careers in public defense and criminal justice reform.

The announcement comes at a time of heightened national awareness around wrongful convictions. According to the 2023 Annual Report of the National Registry of Exonerations:

- **The individuals exonerated** in 2023 collectively served 2,230 years in prison.
- **63% of exonerations** involved innocence organizations or conviction integrity units.
- **Since 1989, there have been 3,478 exonerations** nationally, with the wrongfully convicted serving a total of 31,678 years behind bars.

“Innocence Project Clinics transform lives and reveal deep flaws in our criminal legal system. Exposing wrongful convictions is not only life-changing — it is essential to the pursuit of justice,” said **Natasha Dartigue, Maryland Public Defender**. “With this powerful partnership between Maryland's premier legal institutions, we're creating an unprecedented force for justice that will scrutinize questionable prosecutions, challenge faulty evidence, and zealously advocate for those who have been wrongfully convicted.”

Dean Renée Hutchins Laurent of Maryland Carey Law expressed enthusiasm for the new clinic, stating, “This collaboration represents a significant step forward in our efforts to provide our students with hands-on legal experience while making a meaningful impact on the lives of those who have been wrongfully convicted.”

“We value our longstanding partnership with the Maryland Office of the Public Defender and are thrilled that our state will soon have two law school clinics working to exonerate the wrongfully convicted,” said **Dean LaVonda Reed of UBalt Law**. “Our incoming Innocence Project Clinic director, Rachel Bennett, brings extensive experience and passion for this important work, and we look forward to continuing the clinic’s advocacy with our student-attorneys.”

The expanded partnership builds upon the legacy of the MOPD Innocence Project Clinic at UBalt Law, which has been operating since 2008. Over the past 17 years, the UBalt Law clinic has obtained relief for 20 clients — including both sentence reductions and exonerations — all involving individuals who maintained their innocence. Collectively, these men and women served hundreds of years in prison for crimes they did not commit. The clinic’s work includes high-profile cases such as **Adnan Syed and John Huffington**, who received an innocence-based pardon in 2023 after serving 32 years, ten of them on death row.

The new Maryland Carey Law clinic will be led by **Erica Suter**, a leading post-conviction attorney best known for her work on behalf of Adnan Syed. Suter has served as an assistant public defender and director of the MOPD Innocence Project Clinic at UBalt Law since 2021, succeeding **Michele Nethercott**, who led the clinic from its founding in 2008.

The UBalt Law clinic will now be led by Rachel Bennett, who joins as the new director. Bennett is currently a senior attorney at the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights. She was previously an assistant public defender for 11 years, most recently as a felony attorney in Baltimore County.

Bennett will begin her role as director on July 1, 2025. The new center at Maryland Carey Law is currently registering students and will officially open at the beginning of the Fall 2025 semester.

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