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UIS Downstate Innocence Project gets \$687K grant

By CHRIS DETTRO**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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The Downstate Illinois Innocence Project at the University of Illinois Springfield has been awarded a \$687,448 grant — one of the largest in the school's history — to help pay for DNA testing.

"This gives us the opportunity to examine cases that haven't received resources before," said Bill Clutter, director of investigations for the project. "It gives us resources to investigate requests we previously had to just file away."

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., helped facilitate the grant, which was obtained with the support of the UIS Center for State Policy and Leadership.

The project initially will focus on 30 cases out of more than 400 requests received, said Larry Golden, director of the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project and a UIS professor. Those 30 or so cases — including two locally — will be further reviewed to determine if evidence can be tested or retested for DNA and if the likelihood is that the person convicted of the crime actually is innocent.

"We have to have some sense that it will make a difference in guilt or innocence," Golden said, noting that only 5 percent to 10 percent of cases have the possibility of being resolved with DNA testing. Even when that is determined, it's still a complicated process to get DNA testing done, he said.

"We have to go into court and request testing," Golden said. "And the DNA may in fact show that the individual is excluded and the prosecutor may say we're not doing anything."

The U.S. Department of Justice Bloodsworth Grant is named in honor of Kirk Bloodsworth, a Maryland man who was the first DNA death-penalty exoneration case in the United States in 1993. The grant will provide funding for DNA laboratories to conduct testing, investigators to locate evidence and attorneys to represent inmates in filing post-conviction DNA testing motions.

The grant is for 18 months.

Huge DNA backlog

To date, 261 people nationwide have been exonerated using DNA testing, Golden said.

"Thirty of those are already from Illinois," he said. "It's a situation that's absolutely intolerable in this country."

"The backlog on requests for testing is huge," he added, identifying DNA as "the most important forensic tool to identify or exclude a perpetrator of a crime."

As part of the grant, the project is working with the University of Illinois College of Law at Urbana-Champaign and Southern Illinois University Law School to have students help review cases and file motions to have the evidence tested.

Golden said two cases with local ties are among the 30 the project will examine:

*The conviction of Thomas McMillen, one of two people serving life in prison for the 1989 murder of 18-year-old Melissa Koontz, who was stabbed to death after her car was stopped along the Waverly blacktop.

Five people were sent to prison for the crime, which authorities said at the time began as a robbery. Gary Edgington, also serving a life sentence, confessed to helping murder Koontz, but McMillen has steadfastly denied he had anything to do with it.

Clutter said a Sangamon County court already has OK'd a motion for DNA testing in that case.

*The convictions of Karyn Slover's ex-husband and his parents for her 1996 murder in Macon County. The Slovers were sentenced to long prison terms.

Karyn Slover disappeared on Sept. 27, 1996, and the car she was driving was found abandoned later that night 10 miles west of Champaign on the shoulder of Interstate 72.

Two days later, her body parts were found floating in garbage bags in Lake Shelbyville. After the case had gone unsolved for almost four years, Macon County prosecutors charged the Slover family with conspiracy to commit murder.

It was the prosecution's theory that Michael Slover's mother killed Karyn when Karyn came to pick up her 3-year-old son, Kolten, at the Slovers' home in Mount Zion.

Expanded involvement

The Innocence Project, established in 2001, is housed in the UIS Center for State Policy and Leadership, which helps bring grant money to campus. Its work has led to exoneration in three cases.

"This grant epitomizes the good that can be done by linking academic and student opportunities with real-world problem solving," said David Racine, interim executive director of the center. "The grant will allow even more UIS students to participate in and learn from the project's important work."

UIS Chancellor Harry Berman said the project "allows our students to work on literally life-and-death issues."

"That's the kind of experience our students ought to have," he said.

Matthew Lawlyes, a UIS senior majoring in liberal studies, got involved with the Innocence Project outside of class. He said he spends about 10 hours a week on it.

"I hope to devote more next year when I take the class," he said.

His work involves research and indexing thousands of pages of evidence.

"The grant couldn't have come at a better time for me," Lawlyes said.

Chris Dettro can be reached at 788-1510.

Exonerated prisoner to speak

Kirk Bloodsworth, who was the first Innocence Project post-conviction DNA death-row prisoner to be exonerated, is scheduled to visit the UIS campus and speak on the topic of wrongful convictions from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Nov. 30 in Brookens Auditorium, on the lower level of Brookens Library.

The event is free and open to the public.

A Maryland resident, Bloodsworth was convicted in 1985 of sexual assault, rape and first-degree murder for the 1984 rape and murder of a 9-year-old girl in Rosedale, Md.

In 1992, while in jail, he pushed to have the evidence against him tested by the relatively new method of DNA.

Testing on the semen, once it was located, proved it did not match Bloodsworth's DNA profile, and in 1993 Bloodsworth was released. He had spent more than eight years in prison, including two on death row.

Paying for DNA tests

The cost of DNA testing at an outside lab varies, according to Downstate Illinois Innocence Project director Larry Golden.

"Depending on the type of tests and the number of tests, it can range from \$500 or \$600 to thousands," he said. Investigator Bill Clutter said sophisticated "touch DNA" testing done in the Tim Masters case in Colorado cost \$60,000.

Golden said it is unlikely that the downstate project can spend that much on any one case.

Downstate Innocence Project cases

The Downstate Illinois Innocence Project has done much of the work that resulted in exonerations in three cases:

* Keith Harris, a Belleville resident who spent more than 20 years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of armed robbery and attempted murder, was eventually granted clemency by ex-Gov. George Ryan in 2003.

Harris, released from prison in 2001 after an appeals judge found his sentence to be unduly harsh, was the first person to receive the assistance of the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project at UIS.

* Julie Rea Harper was a doctoral student at the University of Indiana when in 1998 she returned to Lawrenceville for a Columbus Day weekend visitation with her 10-year-old son, Joel.

On Oct. 13, Joel was brutally killed in the early morning hours. Julie Harper was eventually convicted in 2002 on circumstantial evidence.

Her conviction was reversed in 2004 by an appellate court, although not because the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project developed evidence linking confessed serial killer Tommy Lynn Sells to the crime. Harper was released on bond after having spent nearly two years in prison.

She was retried and acquitted by a jury in Clinton County on July 26, 2006.

* Herb Whitlock, convicted in 1987 along with Randy Steidl of the July 6, 1986, murder of newlyweds Dyke and Karen Rhoades in their Paris home.

While Randy Steidl was convicted on both murder counts, Whitlock was convicted of only killing Karen. Steidl received the death penalty, while Whitlock received a life sentence.

Both men continued to claim their innocence, but their appeals were repeatedly denied until Steidl's case was heard by a federal judge, who ordered a new trial. After intensive review, Attorney General Lisa Madigan dropped all charges against him and he was released in May 2004.

Working with Richard Kling and Susana Ortiz from the Chicago-Kent College of Law, project investigator Bill Clutter, assisted by UIS students, provided evidence that led to an appellate court reversing his conviction.

On the Web

More information about the Innocence Project can be found on its website, www.uis.edu/innocenceproject/.

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