



Appellate defender to join Innocence Project at UIS

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An appellate defender who has helped exonerate three Illinois Death Row inmates has been selected as the legal director for the DNA post-conviction program of the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project.

John Hanlon, currently assistant deputy defender for the capital trial assistance unit of the Illinois Appellate Defender's Office, will begin his new job Feb. 1.

The Downstate Illinois Innocence Project, established in 2001, is housed in the University of Illinois Springfield's Center for State Policy and Leadership. The project's work also has helped exonerate three inmates.

Larry Golden, emeritus professor and director of the Innocence Project, said Hanlon will be responsible for coordinating all the project's cases.

"We have a lot of cases that come to us and it is difficult to determine if they are going to be DNA cases," Golden said. "Other cases we get start out otherwise, but then turn out to have a DNA component that may resolve guilt or innocence."

Hanlon's position was made possible by a \$687,448 grant the project received in November from the U.S. Department of Justice to help pay for DNA testing.

"We're moving into an area of legal representation, and we've never had a lawyer on staff," Golden said. "We couldn't afford it without this federal grant."

Golden said the project has received about 500 requests for help from prison inmates around the country since 2004. Cases that aren't in downstate Illinois are eliminated, and the rest are further evaluated.

"We have it culled to about 40 cases we're looking at," Golden said.

"The work John will be doing is critical," he said. "We're delighted to have someone with his background and experience."

Tough work

Hanlon said he's looking forward to working with the Innocence Project.

"I've just been in the right place at the right time," Hanlon said. "Twenty-five years ago, I was asked to represent Rolando Cruz, then two others (Randy Steidl and Joseph Burroughs) who are among the 20 people released from prison based on actual innocence."

Hanlon said the fact that he took the new job when Gov. Pat Quinn is deciding whether to sign a bill repealing the death penalty in Illinois is "entirely coincidental."

"We've been talking about this for a long time," he said.

Golden said Hanlon's name was submitted on the project's grant application when it was submitted to the Department of Justice several months ago.

"Having to work on these cases is something we as non-lawyers have never experienced," Golden said. "It is so slow, and you run into so many roadblocks. It's very rewarding all the way around, and at the same time very frustrating."

Even when it is determined that a case may be resolved with DNA testing, the project must go to court to request it.

National goal

Hanlon has been with the state Appellate Defender's Office for 25 years and in his current position, in which he supervises nine people in offices in Springfield and Belleville, for 11 years. He's

Golden said the UIS Innocence Project is unique in that it isn't part of a law school or journalism school. It uses graduate and undergraduate students at UIS for its work.

With the grant, the project is creating a partnership with the University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University law schools.

"We're going to establish one national model on how this can be done," Golden said. "Its uniqueness will be important in looking at what can be done with higher education and innocence work throughout the country."

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