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The Great North Innocence Project granted \$500,000 to fuel the statewide Conviction Review Unit

The partnership between the Great North Innocence Project and the Office of the Attorney General is only the fourth of its kind in the country

(Minneapolis, MN) – The Great North Innocence Project (GN-IP) announced today that it has received a two-year, \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice that will fuel the ongoing work of Minnesota’s first-ever Conviction Review Unit (CRU). This DOJ grant represents an increased investment from the previous \$300,000 two-year grant GN-IP received to launch the CRU in 2020. The CRU operates as a partnership between GN-IP and the Minnesota Attorney General’s Office. This increased investment will allow the CRU to continue to review and investigate legal cases for people believed to be innocent. Minnesota’s CRU is only the fourth in the United States to operate statewide as a partnership with the state Attorney General’s Office rather than with an individual county prosecutor’s office. To date nationwide, CRUs have helped initiate the exoneration of 444 people.

“This tremendous investment in the CRU’s work demonstrates that the U.S. DOJ believes in the project’s ongoing mission and the importance of remedying wrongs made by an imperfect criminal legal system,” said Sara Jones, executive director of the Great North Innocence Project. “The Minnesota CRU increases GN-IP’s capacity to investigate and remedy cases of wrongful convictions in Minnesota and provides a pathway for justice and freedom to innocent people who have exhausted all other legal options.”

“Prosecutors are ministers of justice. We have a duty to ensure those convicted of crimes are in fact guilty of those crimes,” said Attorney General Ellison. “The only person who benefits from a wrongful conviction is the true perpetrator of a crime. This grant will allow us to continue investigating cases to make sure justice was served, and if not, we are bound by our duty as prosecutors to right those wrongs.”

The purpose of a CRU is to prevent, identify, and remedy wrongful convictions. The development of the CRU as well as its ongoing operations are guided by an advisory committee composed of legal system stakeholders with a wide range of relevant perspectives including defense lawyers, prosecutors, a retired Minnesota Supreme Court justice, crime survivors advocates, law professors, and members of diverse Minnesota communities.

Since Minnesota's CRU launched, it has received more than 900 applications of cases to review and has already dedicated hundreds of hours investigating those cases. Under the supervision of the Unit's director, Carrie Sperling, the Unit's legal assistant, paralegal, legal externs, and clinical students from local law schools screen the applications to determine which cases qualify for further investigation. The CRU seeks cooperation from county attorneys, GN-IP, the State Public Defender's Office, and private defense attorneys to review existing evidence and uncover any additional evidence, if possible. GN-IP also uses grant funding to pay for investigators, scientific testing, expert witnesses, and other resources necessary to complete case reviews. Once an investigation is completed, Director Sperling creates a comprehensive report and recommendation for the attorney general who then consults with the office that prosecuted the original case. Together, they determine whether a miscarriage of justice has occurred and whether to recommend relief to the trial court.

Director Sperling is encouraged by the relationships the CRU has established with stakeholders across Minnesota. "From county attorneys to the Department of Corrections to victim advocates, I have found the stakeholders in Minnesota to be enthusiastic, practical, and willing to assist with our work. Their input makes the CRU more effective and a model for other states who may adopt their own systems for conviction review."

As another critical component of public safety, where an individual has been wrongfully convicted, the CRU and the County Attorney will work to identify the person or people who committed the underlying crime. Minnesota's CRU tracks all of the relevant data from the applications it receives to develop recommendations for policy proposals to address the most frequently identified causes of wrongful convictions.

About the Great North Innocence Project

The mission of the Great North Innocence Project (GNIP) is to free the wrongfully convicted and prevent future wrongful convictions from occurring in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Formerly known as the Innocence Project of Minnesota, GNIP has screened and investigated individuals' credible claims of actual innocence and represented people who were wrongfully convicted or incarcerated for crimes they did not commit for over 20 years. GNIP also educates attorneys and other criminal justice professionals on best practices and works to reform the criminal justice system to prevent innocent people from going to prison. For more information visit greatnorthinnocenceproject.org.

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