

Support House Bill 1435

Assists the wrongly imprisoned

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Imagine this: You are *wrongfully* accused and convicted of rape. Sentenced to 30 years in prison, you serve your sentence, all the while proclaiming your innocence. Appeals come and go. Fifteen years of your life passes behind bars. Finally, someone listens and DNA proves you did not commit the crime. Released from prison after 15 years, it's time to start your life again. The government responsible for putting you in prison doesn't even say they are sorry. Rather, they send you a bill for \$100,000 in unpaid child support.

Hard to imagine but this nightmare scenario has occurred. In Washington, at least 6 cases of wrongful convictions have been acknowledged and documented. Nationally, since the advent of forensic DNA in the early 90's, **265** people have been released from sentences they were serving for rapes and murders they did not commit. The average length of time served is 13 years. 27 states and the federal government have legislation requiring compensation for those wrongfully incarcerated. Washington, unfortunately, is not one of them.

Research shows, and common sense tells us, that years of wrongful imprisonment have profoundly negative psychological and impacts. Many have been physically victimized in prison. Many are released with severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and institutionalization into a world that has changed dramatically from when they first were incarcerated. Cell phones, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc. It's a whole new world, moving faster than ever before. It's tough enough to keep up when you're not doing time in prison. But these guys get released into this world and into the job market with no job experience, education, or vocational training to speak of. Some family and friends are dead. Some spouses have moved on. Children have grown up. The best and most productive years of their lives were wrongfully taken away, through no fault of their own.

Representatives Tina Orwall and Dave Upthegrove, are among the co-sponsors of House Bill 1435. The bill would bring Washington up to speed with the federal government by giving wrongfully convicted exonerees \$50,000 for each year they were incarcerated, and an additional \$50,000 for every year spent on death row. The bill would also give \$25,000 for every year on community supervision or while wrongfully having to register as a sex offender. Other components of the bill would include education tuition waivers, and health and dental assistance. The measure would apply to a small, but deserving, amount of people. Unfortunately, given the state's current budget problems, the measure would not go into effect until 2014.

One of the fundamentals of justice in our society is to compensate those who suffer losses through no fault of their own. Property owners receive compensation. Crime victims receive compensation. However, those *wrongfully* convicted and incarcerated in Washington receive nothing. No amount of money could fully make up for the lost time. No amount of money could make up for having to endure the physical and psychological trauma of prison. No amount of money could compensate for being wrongly labeled a murderer or a rapist. But it is only right and fair to do what we can for these folks. It's time to do what we *should* do to rectify this injustice. Please let the legislature know you support HB 1435.