



Goodbye

2025

2025: A Year That Shook the Nation From political battles to community breakthroughs, this year forced us to confront hard truths and fight for the future we believe in. As we step into 2026, we do so with clarity, resilience, and purpose.

A year in Review



The Cost of failure

Chicago's Wrongful-Conviction Crisis
is Draining Budgets and Destroying Lives.



Chicago is facing a crisis that can no longer be ignored – not just a moral crisis, but a financial one. Wrongful convictions, born from decades of systemic failures, have become one of the most expensive and devastating liabilities in the city’s history. And the bill is being paid by everyday Chicagoans.

In 2025 alone, Chicago taxpayers spent \$204.6 million to resolve lawsuits brought by people who were wrongfully convicted based on evidence gathered by the Chicago Police Department. That number is staggering – more than double what the city paid between 2019 and 2024 for similar cases.

Behind every dollar is a human being who lost years – sometimes decades – to a system that failed them. But behind every dollar is also a warning: Chicago cannot afford to keep repeating the same mistakes.

These are a few of the Largest Wrongful-Conviction Payouts in Chicago

1. **\$120 million** – John Fulton & Anthony Mitchell

A federal jury awarded \$120 million to John Fulton and Anthony Mitchell, who spent 16 years in prison for a 2003 murder they did not commit. Their case involved coerced confessions, 100 hours of interrogation, and no physical evidence tying them to the crime.

2. **\$90 million** – 180 victims of Sgt. Ronald Watts’ corruption

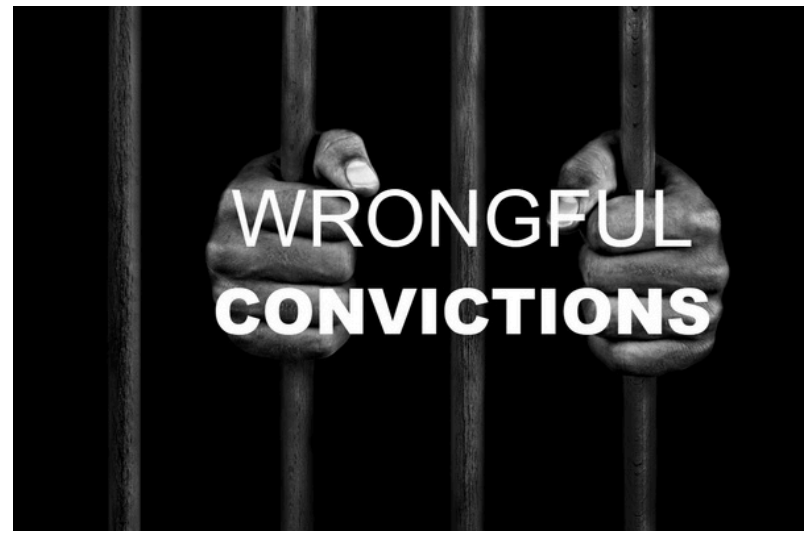
This mass-exoneration settlement compensated 180 people whose convictions were tied to fabricated evidence and systemic misconduct by a corrupt Chicago police sergeant and his team.

3. **\$25 million** – Jacques Rivera

Rivera spent 21 years in prison after detectives suppressed evidence that would have cleared him. His case remains one of the most glaring examples of investigative misconduct.

4. **\$21 million** – Thaddeus Jimenez

Jimenez was wrongfully convicted at age 13 and spent 16 years behind bars. His case became a national symbol of how deeply flawed juvenile interrogations can be.



5. \$27 Million – Alstory Simon

Alstory Simon was wrongfully convicted in a case that became infamous after it was revealed that coerced confessions and manipulated evidence were used to secure his conviction. He spent 15 years in prison before being exonerated. His settlement – \$27 million – remains one of the largest individual wrongful-conviction payouts in Illinois history.

6. \$20 Million – Juan Johnson

Juan Johnson spent 11 years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of murder based on a deeply flawed lineup and unreliable witness testimony. A federal jury awarded him \$20 million, one of the largest jury verdicts for a single wrongful-conviction case in Chicago.

Brian Beals: A Case That Shows the System Is Still Broken

Brian Beals spent 35 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. But under Illinois' outdated compensation law, his restitution is capped at 14 years, meaning he may receive only around \$200,000 – despite losing more than three decades of his life. A bill in the General Assembly would raise compensation to \$50,000 per year served, capped at just over \$2 million, but until that passes, Beals – like many others – is denied meaningful restitution.

A Growing Financial Burden

Since 2000, Chicago has spent roughly \$750 million on wrongful-conviction and police-misconduct settlements. With more than 200 cases still pending, the financial burden is expected to grow. If you think you have a legal case with a wrongful conviction contact <https://ankinlaw.com/police-misconduct-payouts>

Chicago borrowed \$283.3 million specifically to cover police-misconduct and wrongful-conviction settlements. That borrowing was done because:

- The city did not have enough cash on hand to pay the rising settlements.
- Wrongful-conviction payouts have exploded in size.
- Chicago has been relying on long-term debt to cover short-term legal liabilities.

This is money that could have gone to schools, mental-health services, violence prevention, housing, and community investment – instead of cleaning up the consequences of systemic harm.

The Sonya Massey Follow Up Story



THE KILLING OF SONYA MASSEY

A Brief Timeline of a Preventable Death

July 6, 2024 – A Call for Help Sonya Lynaye Wilburn-Massey calls 911, reporting a possible prowler outside her Springfield home.

Moments Later – A Life Taken Deputy Sean Grayson enters her home. Sonya apologizes, raises her hands, and poses no threat. Grayson shoots her in the face, killing her in her own kitchen.

July 2024 – Outrage Across Illinois

Body-camera footage spreads. Community leaders, national advocates, and families across the state demand accountability.

Late 2024 – Civil Settlement Sangamon County agrees **to pay Sonya’s family \$10 million**, one of the largest downstate police-shooting settlements in recent memory.

January 2025 – The Trial Grayson claims “self-defense,” saying he feared she would throw boiling water. Video evidence contradicts him.

January 2025 – The Verdict A jury convicts Grayson of second-degree murder. Sonya’s family calls the verdict “not enough.”

After the Verdict – A State Forced to Look Inward Her killing sparks renewed pressure for stronger police-training standards, crisis-response reforms, and transparency in Illinois law enforcement. Her story now stands as a reminder of how urgently the state needs meaningful change.

Officer Grayson’s Cancer Claim and Legal fight

July 2024 – Grayson’s attorneys file his first motion for release, arguing that the jail cannot provide the treatment he needs for his Stage 3 colon cancer. The court denies the request.

August 2024 – A second request for release is filed. The judge again refuses, stating that Grayson remains a real and present threat to the community despite his medical condition.

August 2024 – His legal team appeals the denial to the Illinois Supreme Court, repeating the argument that his cancer treatment requires him to be released from custody.

Late 2024 – An appellate court briefly rules that Grayson may be released, but prosecutors immediately appeal, stopping the decision from taking effect.

Early 2025 – After Grayson is convicted of second-degree murder, the Illinois Supreme Court dismisses his appeal as moot, ruling that the issue of pretrial release no longer applies.

2025 – Conviction: Second-degree murder

Possible Sentence: 4 to 20 years in prison

Time Actually Served: Illinois requires people convicted of second-degree murder to serve 50% of their sentence with good behavior.

Minimum Time He Could Serve: 2 years

Maximum Time He Could Serve: 10 years

Probation Option: Illinois law allows probation instead of prison for second-degree murder – meaning the judge could legally give zero prison time.

Sentencing Date: January 29, 2026

Donald Trump's Revenge



In 2025, Donald Trump handed extraordinary authority to **Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)** — a unit no American voted for and no Senate ever confirmed.

When Power Moves in the Shadows



What was framed as a mission to “cut government fat” quickly became something far more sweeping. DOGE operatives were placed inside federal agencies, pressuring staff, terminating contracts without warning, and gaining access to internal systems normally protected by law. **Entire offices saw sudden layoffs and the dismantling of programs that millions rely on.**

Even after Musk stepped away, former DOGE staff continued shaping decisions inside the administration. **Watchdogs warned that DOGE had become a shadow force — blurring the line between private influence and public power.**

At the same time, another pattern emerged across the country. **Career prosecutors who had investigated or prosecuted Trump began resigning, citing political pressure, shrinking budgets, and a climate where independence was no longer protected.** Offices that once operated with stability suddenly faced uncertainty and resource cuts that made their work harder to carry out.

Colleges, research centers, and public institutions felt similar pressure. Programs Trump openly criticized — whether for their policies, diversity initiatives, or past investigations — saw funding reduced or eliminated. These weren't strategic budget decisions.

They were political decisions aimed at institutions that challenged him or represented values he opposed.

Taken together, these actions reveal a deeper truth: power was used not to strengthen public systems, **but to punish critics, weaken oversight, and reshape the machinery of government in ways the public never voted for.**

Trump has worked the country like a stage magician — one hand high, glittering, loud enough to steal every eye. Headlines, promises, spectacle. All meant to dazzle.

But the real movement was in the other hand.

While the spotlight burned bright, SNAP cuts slipped through the cracks. While he talked about safety, ICE teams were sent into blue states with quiet precision. While the public watched the show, the machinery of government shifted behind the curtain — judges appointed, systems reshaped, futures rewritten.

It was misdirection dressed as leadership. A trick of light. A practiced distraction. By the time people looked away from the showman's hand, the damage was already done.



Donald Trump Personal United States Supreme Court



The Sleight of Hand

While the country was pulled toward the noise – the rallies, the headlines, the chaos – something quieter was happening in the shadows. A different kind of magic trick. One hand waving wildly to command attention, the other slipping pieces into place where most people weren't looking.

Behind the spectacle, the Trump administration moved with precision: reshaping the federal judiciary at every level.

These are the Judgeships appointed by Trump.

- Supreme Court: 3
- Courts of Appeals: 54
- District Courts: 174
- Court of International Trade: 3

As of December 2025

Trump's administration continued its behind-the-scenes restructuring of the courts, confirming **19 new lifetime federal judges** this year.

Where They Were Placed

- Courts of Appeals: 0
- District Courts: 19
- Other Federal Courts: 0

Vacancies Still Open

- District Court Vacancies: 40
- Appeals Court Vacancies: 0

Pending Nominations

- District Court Nominees Awaiting Senate Action: 8

Trump has Appointed

- **253 Lifetime judges**
 - **26 Specialized Judges**
 - **1 Territorial Judge**
- TOTAL JUDGES 280**

What This Means

A quieter but strategic push: filling district courts – the frontline of federal law – with judges aligned with the administration's long-term goals. No headlines. No spectacle. Just structural power shifting one confirmation at a time.

While the chaos grabs every headline, the real shift happens in the quiet places – the courts. A wave of lifetime judges tilts the system toward Trump's legal worldview long after the noise fades. **By stacking district courts – the frontline for challenges to federal power – the administration makes it harder for agencies, watchdogs, and communities to push back.** Even the perception of alignment chills oversight. The checks meant to restrain power weaken, not with a bang, but with a series of quiet confirmations.

This is the trick behind the spectacle: while the public watches the showman's hand, the machinery of justice is quietly rearranged to make his decisions harder to challenge and easier to cement.

What branch of government will hold the Trump administration accountable **when he owns the United States Supreme Court by appointment and conservative views.** Do not look for help as Ice agents attack only Blue States.

Don't look to the courts for protection. Don't look to this administration for relief. When people needed SNAP, the net tightened. When we pushed for justice reform, the system pushed back. When states tried no-cash-bail, pressure came fast. When borrowers sought student-loan relief, the door stayed closed.

Power isn't coming to save us. We save us – through community, organizing, and refusing to look away.

Educating Our Community on Criminal Justice Reform



As we reflect on 2025 and the impact of our work, we honor the moments, the people, and the progress that brought us this far. And we carry those same building blocks into 2026 – not just as memories, but as fuel – to keep strengthening and uplifting our communities.

2025 was a year that reminded us what real community power looks like. Not the kind that shows up in headlines, but the kind that shows up for each other – in church basements, on porches, in classrooms, at rallies, and in every space where our people gather to learn, to heal, and to fight for something better.

Project Sound Off didn't move through this year alone. We were carried, lifted, and strengthened by a coalition of partners and supporters who believed in our mission just as fiercely as we did.

Every workshop, every conversation, every moment of truth-telling in our neighborhoods was possible because so many of you stood with us.

And at the heart of that work were two women whose leadership shaped the soul of our year.

Darlene Veal, our Treasurer and community anchor, poured her heart into every detail – from organizing events to making sure our resources reached the people who needed them most. She didn't just keep us steady; she kept us grounded. She reminded us that accountability and compassion can live in the same breath, and that our work must always honor the people we serve.

We proudly recognize Willie JR Flemming as Project Sound Off's Community Outreach Director, whose leadership became a bright force in 2025. JR brought connection, consistency, and a genuine love for our community into every outreach effort.



His presence strengthened our work this year, and we know he's only just beginning. JR's future is bright, and we expect great things from him in 2026.

Jazmine Salas-Garcia, representing NPTP at the MacArthur Justice Center, brought clarity, strategy, and deep commitment to our work this year. Her partnership with Darlene Veal shaped a powerful summer of community education and set a new standard for what collaboration can look like.

Together, Darlene and Jazmine became a driving force behind Project Sound Off – building spaces where our community could learn, grow, and understand the criminal justice system with honesty and dignity.

And behind them stood our full team and coalition partners, who helped carry our message into neighborhoods across the city. Your support made 2025 a year of real impact, real connection, and real progress.

Because of you, our work reached further. Our community grew stronger. And our mission stayed rooted in the people we serve.

Thank you for standing with us and helping shape a transformative year.

Our Project Sound Off photo tapestry captures some of the most memorable moments of 2025 – the faces, the joy, the work, and the unity that carried us. Enjoy the photos and the memories. We look forward to seeing you in 2026 and continuing this work with your support.

The Project News Team

Looking Back at

2025



Project Sound Off Photo Tapestry



At the National Conference with our Coalition partner CAARPR



New Orleans NAARPR Conference



Clemency Coalition Support For Jamal Jones



Project Sound Off Family Time



Project Sound Off Board of Directors



Our Community Friends



Project Sound Off Family Time



C-Number Picnic



State Rep. C. Tarver and panelist addressing Parole in Illinois



Khalif and Najje



Khalif



Ben and Najje

Looking Back at

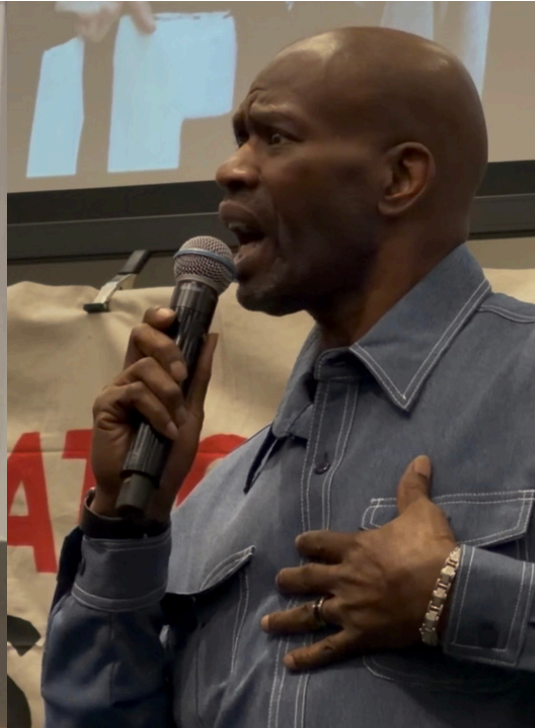
2025



Project Sound Off Photo Tapestry



Jasmine Smith
CAARPR



Johnnie Khalif Veal
PSO



Khalif and Joe Rice



Khalif And State Rep K. Olickal



Ben Austen
Award Winning Author and
PSO Board of Directors



Ben Austen and Panelist



Our Family Community Bond
The Jesse White
Community Center



Ben and Jasmine



Community Discussion

Looking Back at

2025



Project Sound Off Photo Tapestry

Spotlight: Mrs. Darlene Veal Board Treasurer, Project Sound Off

The sacrifices she's made, the strength she's given, and the love she's poured into this mission are the quiet foundation beneath everything we've built. Her support has carried me through every step of this work — and without her, there would be no me, and no Project Sound Off as it stands today. Her commitment isn't just to the organization. It's to the legacy we're building together. I acknowledge all my wife's sacrifices and putting up with all my faults as she guided me on this journey.

Admiring her hard work on stage



Looking Back at

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Building Bridges To Move Forward



Darlene Veal and State Rep. Curtis Tarver

State Rep. Kevin Olickal

Darlene Veal and Attorney Ken Schmetterer

Community Engagement

Looking Back at

2025



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Cheers To the Lady of My Life

