

Valerie Newman, Director
Conviction Integrity Unit
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Ms. Newman graduated from Wayne State University Law School. She began her career as an attorney with the State Appellate Defender Office where she practiced for over 23 years. She argued hundreds of cases before the Michigan and federal courts. She has been a regularly featured speaker at the Michigan appellate bench-bar conferences, law schools and other groups. She frequently taught as an adjunct professor at the University of Michigan Law School for over 15 years. She has trained, supervised and mentored new attorneys and law students for decades and has advocated for women's rights and the professional development of women throughout her career.

In November 2017 Ms. Newman was hired as the Director of the newly created Conviction Integrity Unit of the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office. In this position Ms. Newman is working to strengthen the criminal justice system by investigating claims of wrongful conviction. In the three years that the Unit has been in existence it has received over 1500 requests for investigation. With a small staff of highly experienced attorneys and investigators, the Unit has reviewed over 500 cases and granted relief to 26 men, most of whom were serving mandatory life sentences. The work of the Unit has been positively featured in the New York Times, CNN, the New Republic and other publications – print, radio and television.

PERSONAL CASE HIGHLIGHTS

On October 31, 2011, Ms. Newman argued the case of *Lafler v Cooper* in the Supreme Court of the United States. The case issue was whether ineffective assistance of counsel during the plea-bargaining stage could be remedied following a trial. On March 21, 2012 the Court ruled in her client's favor in a 5-4 decision. The New York Times heralded the decision as the most important right to counsel case since *Gideon v Wainwright*. Legal rights groups and scholars alike cite it as one of the most important cases of that Supreme Court Term. Ms. Newman has presented on the case and its ramifications on the criminal justice system to many groups including the National Conference of Metropolitan Courts.

Ms. Newman returned to the Court in October 2013 to argue the case of *Burt v Titlow*. This was a follow-up case to *Lafler v Cooper* presenting a twist on the issue of ineffective assistance of counsel

during the plea-bargaining stage. Interview footage with Ms. Newman was part of an ID Network “Snapped” episode about the case and her work on the case was highlighted in a book about the case by noted true crime author M. William Phelps.

Ms. Newman litigated the highly publicized case of *People v Thomas (and Raymond) Highers* in 2012, which resulted in the release of two brothers who had each served 25 years in prison for crimes they did not commit. The story garnered substantial media attention and Ms. Newman appeared with the brothers on local and national media including CNN. The story was featured on Dateline in 2014 and included courtroom footage and interviews with Ms. Newman.

In 2016, Ms. Newman’s client Davontae Sanford was exonerated and released from prison. The case captured the nation’s attention primarily due to Davontae’s young age and the confession of a contract killer to the same murders. Ms. Newman supported Davontae throughout the significant media interest including appearances on CNN, all major local and national news stations, a REELZ segment and a segment on Discovery ID’s the Real Story (Failure of Justice).

PROFESSIONAL WORK

Ms. Newman is active within the State Bar of Michigan. She has served on numerous committees and as co-chair of the Task Force on the Recording of Custodial Interrogations. On December 27, 2012, the Governor signed into law important legislation that was prepared and lobbied for by this Task Force, which mandates the recording of custodial interrogations in serious felony cases. Ms. Newman was instrumental throughout the process.

Ms. Newman co-chaired the Task Force on Eyewitness Identification Issues, which resulted in law enforcement and prosecutors adopting significant reforms in practices for conducting identifications and making charging decisions.

Ms. Newman currently co-chairs the Access to Justice Committee of the State Bar and is a member of several other groups within the Bar. The Michigan Supreme Court appointed her in 2019 as their representative to the State Bar Board of Commissioners. She is a former elected board member of the Appellate Practice Section.

HONORS

In 2019 the Wayne State University Law School inducted Ms. Newman to the Wall of Fame. This honor acknowledges graduates and former faculty whose extraordinary professional success and contributions, profound positive influence on Wayne Law, and high degree of character and integrity

are recognized by their peers.

In 2020 the Federal Bar Association for the Eastern District of Michigan chose Ms. Newman as the awardee for the Leonard R. Gilman award. This award “is given annually to an outstanding practitioner of criminal law who exemplifies the excellence, professionalism, and commitment to public service of Len Gilman”.

The Detroit News named Ms. Newman as a Michiganian of the Year in 2016 for her work on Davontae Sanford’s case.

The State Bar of Michigan presented Ms. Newman with the Champion of Justice Award at the Bar’s September 2013 annual meeting. The Award is given for extraordinary individual accomplishments and is given each year to practicing lawyers and judges who have made a significant contribution to their community, state, or nation.

In December 2012, Lawyers USA named Ms. Newman a Lawyer of the Year (one of only 7 lawyers from across the country). Also, in 2012, Michigan Lawyer’s Weekly named her as one of the top 20 woman lawyers in the state and the State Appellate Defender Commission chose Ms. Newman as the first recipient of the Norris J. Thomas Jr. Award for excellence in appellate advocacy. In 2010, Ms. Newman was nominated and accepted as a Fellow of the Michigan State Bar Foundation, an honor accorded to no more than 5% of Michigan lawyers.

In 2016, Cooley Law School honored Ms. Newman with the Integrity in our Community Award. In 2014, Ms. Newman was honored by the Wayne Law Review with the Richard J. Barber Alumni Achievement Award, which is awarded to an alumna who has advanced the reputation of the Law Review and the law school through her service to the legal community. In 2013, Ms. Newman was awarded the Woman of Wayne Headliner award, an honor presented to Wayne State University Alumni who have been recognized in the media for their outstanding achievements. In 2012, the Justice Caucus honored Ms. Newman with its Spirit of Millie Jeffrey Award for her commitment to equal access to justice. In 2010, Alternative for Girls awarded Ms. Newman with its community role model award. In 2009, Ms. Newman received the first ever Volunteer of the Year Award from the Women Lawyer’s Association of Michigan Foundation.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL/ COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Ms. Newman created the Culinary Challenge in 2008. She chaired the event for nine years and continues to serve on the event committee. The event raises funds for several nonprofits that support women and girls. She also is a dedicated volunteer at several nonprofits.