

1 **Proclaim Release to the Captives**

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3 WHEREAS: the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, 6 to 10
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5 times greater than other industrialized nations, even surpassing repressive regimes like
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7 Russia, China, and Iran;

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9 AND WHEREAS: rates of incarceration in the U.S. have quintupled in the past 40 years,
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11 with persons of color, especially black men, jailed in vastly disproportionate numbers,
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13 more than half for non-violent crimes, and receiving much longer sentences than white
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15 persons for the same offenses;

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17 AND WHEREAS: the so-called "War on Drugs" has become the primary mechanism for
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19 a vast pervasive system of racialized social control: while a majority of illegal drug users
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21 are white, three-quarters of people imprisoned for drug use are persons of color;

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23 THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: that we the Michigan Conference, United Church of
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25 Christ, in the Spirit of Jesus who proclaims "Release to the captives and recovery of sight
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27 to the blind," and says that the way we treat prisoners is the way we treat him, express to all
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29 elected officials in our Communities, Counties, State and Nation our profound concern and
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31 moral outrage regarding this unjust system of mass incarceration.;

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33 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: that the Prophetic Integrity Mission Area Team and
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35 the Associations work to educate the people and congregations of the Conference, and lead
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37 them into advocacy to dramatically change this unjust system at all levels of our society;

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39 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: that we support all activities that would achieve
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41 racial justice in criminal sentencing; provide treatment rather than incarceration for
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43 for non-violent drug offenders and those with mental illness; support re-entry
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45 services for ex-offenders; implement restorative justice principles in all possible

46 circumstances, especially within the juvenile justice system; and also prohibit privatization of
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48 Michigan's prison system.

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50 BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that this resolution, if affirmed, be put into proper form for
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52 submission to General Synod.

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54 Submitted by: Walt Kemnitz 734-645-1 168; Mary Bi-owning 734-665-8167; Rebecca Mase
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56 734-645-1 159; Roger Pohl 734-274-1 108; Church In Society Commission, Church of the
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58 Good Shepherd UCC, Ann Arbor; the Rev. Deborah Dean-Ware 734-971-6133.

Proclaim Release to the Captives
Supportive Statement

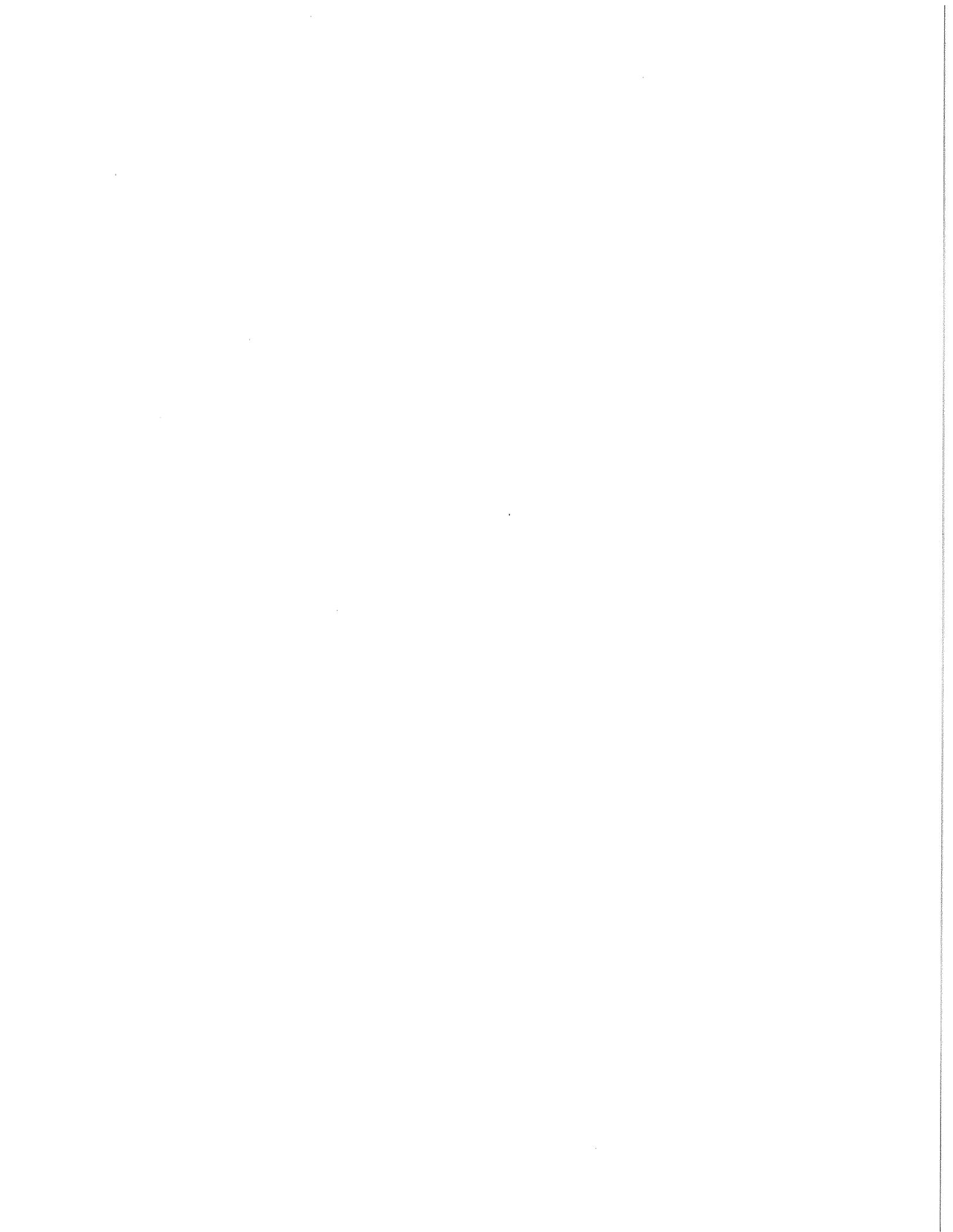
More than 2.3 million of our fellow citizens in the U.S. are in prison today. A total of nearly 7.3 million are under correctional control: awaiting trial, in prison, or on probation or parole. About 65 million Americans have a criminal record. Rev. Sala Nolan Gonzales, Minister for Criminal Justice and Human Rights of the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries writes that "Mass incarceration is one of our country's greatest sins. With less than 5% of the world's population, we house nearly 25% of the world's prisoners - more than any other nation. Over half of these people are in for nonviolent offenses. And the system has a deep racial bias, with people of color (especially black men) receiving more prosecutions and longer sentences than white folks who commit the same crimes."

Michelle Alexander, in her important book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, documents that though illegal drug use has not increased, the "War on Drugs," mandatory sentencing, and dramatic increases in the length of prison sentences, have resulted in an 85% increase in imprisonment since 1985. Michigan leads the country in the average length of prison stays, devoting 25% of our annual state budget to the prison justice system alone. This is money that is sorely needed for our schools and basic human needs of our brothers and sisters suffering because of current economic conditions. The intentional racism driving mass incarceration is glaringly evident. Though a majority of illegal drug users are white, three-quarters of people imprisoned for drug use are persons of color. Another example: though marijuana use among whites and blacks is virtually identical, blacks are arrested and imprisoned three times more often in Michigan for marijuana possession than whites. The statistics are worse in the nearby states of Illinois and Minnesota where African-Americans are arrested for marijuana possession eight times more than whites. Nationally, young black males between 18 and 19 years of age, are incarcerated 9 times more than whites. Clearly, under the drug laws, repeatedly upheld by the U.S Supreme Court, racial profiling is rampant.

Alexander argues that the War on Drugs and mass incarceration have, intentionally and unintentionally, created a new racial caste system that she calls "the New Jim Crow." Once imprisoned or labeled "a felon," persons (far too often and disproportionately persons of color) enter a permanent world of second-class citizenship, locked out of mainstream society. Considered pariahs, they are excluded and shunned. They are discriminated against in employment, educational opportunities, and housing. In many states, ex-felons are prohibited from receiving food stamps and can never vote again.

Rev. Gonzales of the national UCC and co-author Rev. William Mefford, Director of Civil and Human Rights for the United Methodist Church, call for the dismantling of the vast system of racially biased mass incarceration: "And yes, think of the children: There are 2.7 million kids in the United States with a parent behind bars, and 250,000 juveniles enter the adult system each year. We could be giving these kids a fighting chance by investing heavily in rehabilitation and prevention. We're not. And if anyone should be outraged by this, it is Christians, whose Savior said the way we treat prisoners is the way we treat him. [Many] Americans call ourselves Christian, yet our criminal justice policies are anything but."

Over the past twenty-five years, the criminal justice system has become an enormous, largely race-biased, highly lucrative enterprise, allowing private businesses in many states to profit by marginalizing and victimizing of many of the poorest, most vulnerable people in our society. We must be vigilant to make sure prison privatization does not become a reality in Michigan. With the will to do so, creative planning can redirect our investment in the criminal justice industrial complex in ways that seek justice and healing while maintaining jobs, providing treatment and ensuring that all of our brothers and sisters have their basic human rights and needs met.



Proclaim Release to the Captives

Our concern at the Church of the Good Shepherd UCC, Ann Arbor, Michigan, regarding the racialized system of mass incarceration, is deeply rooted biblically, sacramentally, and in our very identity as members of the Beloved Community known as the United Church of Christ.

Biblically:

One of the earliest biblical narratives in Genesis 4:8-9 (NRSV), tells that Cain, a tiller of the ground, in jealous anger kills his brother Abel, a keeper of sheep. God then asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" Cain replies, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" His denial of responsibility for his brother compounds his violent, wrongful act.

One of the last Epistles in the biblical narratives, I John 4:7,12, says, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us." From first to last we live in relationship one with another. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, we are "inextricably bound in a web of mutuality." We are called to live together, by God's design, in love and justice.

Indeed, it is from this awareness that Jesus began his work, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind." (Luke 4:18b). The gospel witness is that Jesus continually prayed, ate, and walked with those on the margins of society, loving, touching, and advocating for them. Justice was central to Jesus' ministry as it should be to ours.

Later, Jesus also tells his followers what life in God's Realm is like: "I was in prison and you visited me." They answered him: "Lord, when was it that we saw you in prison and visited you?" Jesus replied: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:36,39-40)

In American society, persons who are incarcerated, whom we name "felons" or "criminals" are among "the least of these" about whom Jesus says we, his followers, should show special concern and compassion. Jesus suggests, uncomfortably for his hearers, that the Realm of God is like a great banquet to which there is special welcome for "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Luke 14:21), beyond the welcome offered to the prosperous. In other words, there is special inclusion of those who have been marginalized.

Sacramentally:

The Sacrament of Baptism (according to the Book of Worship of the UCC), for both children and adults, "is the mark of their acceptance into the care of Christ's Church, and the sign and seal of their participation in God's forgiveness, and the beginning of their new growth into full Christian faith and life."

Many (but of course not all) persons in U.S. prisons are those who have, already at some time in their lives, been baptized. They have been welcomed into the Community of Christ through the "sacrament of belonging." Their infraction, mistake, crime, or felony does not remove them from the care of the church, nor from the love and care of God.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion "invites all who will come" to the table and meal hosted by Jesus Christ. We say, "Come, all is ready. The gifts of God for the people of God." Do any of us dare presume to turn away anyone whom Christ invites and welcomes?

The sacraments compel us to welcome, nurture, and care for every person loved by God.

UCC Identity:

We affirm that "God is still speaking" and through us extends a life-changing "Extravagant Welcome" to everyone. If that is indeed the faith community we are called to be, then we need to work together to dismantle the massive, racialized system of social control and mass incarceration that has come into being in our society in recent decades.

The Apostle Paul, in prison, wrote to the church in Philippi: "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly now that at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity to show it." (Philippians 4: 10)

Now we in Michigan Conference UCC "have an opportunity to show" our concern.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1] Taking seriously the words in I John "if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us" -how can we, in God's love, work to reduce mass incarceration while maintaining safe neighborhoods?

2] Jesus says, "I was in prison and you visited me." What are some ways each of us personally, and through our local churches, might show love and justice for those caught-up in the criminal justice system, including ex-offenders?

3] Jesus tells us to "Proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind." How might we individually, as congregations, and in coalition with other groups advocate to change government policies, making our criminal justice system at all levels more in keeping with the restorative love and justice Jesus taught and lived?

Proclaim Release to the Captives
Resources for Congregations

Books:

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, Michelle Alexander

Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity, Tim Wise

Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation, J. Braithwaite

Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans From the Civil War to World War II, Douglas Blackmon

Race to Incarcerate And Race to Incarcerate: A Graphic Retelling, Mark Mauer

Videos:

The House I Live In: Eugene Jarecki, Sundance Award Winning Film on the Dmg War
www.thehouseilivein.org/

Broken on All Sides: Matthew Pillischer, Excellent 60 minute film for group discussion, lengthy interviews with Michele Alexander and others.
www.brokenonallsides.com

The Throwaways: Ira McKinley
Film created by an activist filmmaker and ex-felon
www.thetowawaymovie.com

Redemption of the Prosecutor: Jordan Melograna
22 minute film detailing the Christian faith journey of a prosecutor who found he could no longer participate in the broken criminal justice system. Available for free, with a discussion guide.
www.redemptionoftheprosecutor.org

How to Make Money Selling Dmgs: Matthew Cooke, Adrian Grenier
Upcoming theatrically released documentaty on the workings of the illegal dmg trade. Also available to download from iTunes, Amazon Instant video, etc.

Sesame Street "Little Children, Big Challenges"
Recently produced segment on the issues children face when they have a parent in Jail. Check with pbs for video and tool-kit, appropriate for ages 3-8.

Organizations:

- American Civil Liberties Union: ACLU
www.aclu.org/
www.aclu.org/affiliate/michigan

- American Friends Service Committee: AFSC
Michigan Criminal Justice Program
1414 Hill St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48104 734-761-8283
nholbrook@afsc.org
- CAPPS: Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Prison Safety
403 Seymore St., Ste 200
Lansing, MI 48933
734-482-7753
capps@capps-mi.org
- Citizens for Prison Reform
<http://www.micpr.org/>
citizensforprisonreform@yahoo.com
- Dispute Resolution Center
4101 Washtenaw Ave.
Suite 1105
Ann Arbor, MI 48107 734-794-2125
drc@ewshtenaw.org
www.thedisputeresolutioncenter.org
- Michigan Campaign for Justice
403 Seymore St., Ste 201
Lansing, MI 48933 517-372-3656
info@michigancampaignforjustice.org
- MI-CURE: Michigan Chapter of Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants
PO Box 2736
Kalamazoo, MI 49003 269-383-0028
- Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative: MPRI
Michigan Department of Corrections
517-373-3184
www.michigan.gov/corrections/0
- The Sentencing Project
www.sentencingproject.org
- Students Organizing Against Prisons (SOAP), UM Student Organization
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Students-Organizing-Against-Prisons-SOAP/279440078788089>
- Washtenaw Prisoner ReEntry: WPR
4925 Packard
Ann Arbor, MI 48108 734-327-9717
www.wshtenawprisonerreentry.org