

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety
FROM: Christopher Ochoa, Exoneree
DATE: December 16, 2015
RE: Senate Bill 322 and Assembly Bill 460, fair compensation for exonerated persons

Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety,

Thank you for welcoming us here to testify on Senate Bill 322.

For most of you, your twenties were a time of new experiences and explorations of the world around you. You probably went to college with people of your own age, where you joined clubs, went to social events, and created lifelong friendships. You probably secured your first real job, and some of you may have even started your first business.

For me, my twenties were spent in a Texas prison, serving a life sentence for a rape and murder that I didn't commit. For me, there was not taste of freedom. I lost my job. I did not attend college or have the opportunity to learn and grow with people my own age. I didn't have the opportunity to build a resume that would set me up for financial security or teach me valuable skills.

Fortunately, DNA testing proved my innocence in 2002 after I wrongfully served 13 years. I am grateful for the freedom, but will never regain those years that I lost. After my release, I went to the University of Texas El Paso to obtain my B.A. I then went on to receive my law degree from the University of Wisconsin where, as a student, I worked for the Wisconsin Innocence Project helping others like myself prove their innocence.

I am not here today for my own financial gain. Rather, I am here today to advocate on behalf of those who did not have the opportunity to receive the financial security that I did. I am a Texas exoneree and am not entitled to compensation in Wisconsin. However, a civil lawsuit provided me with financial security after my release and allowed me to get back on my feet. While it can never make up for the years lost, having the necessary resources allowed me to obtain an education and support myself as a practicing attorney. Passing this bill will provide Wisconsin exonerees the opportunity to do the same.

They too, missed their twenties. Or their thirties, or their forties, or their fifties. They missed birthday and Christmas parties. They missed starting families or watching their children grow up. They lost out on an education and career opportunities. They missed memories and experiences that can be so easily taken for granted.

They missed so much, and yet, after leaving prison for crimes they did not commit, they have to step into a world where they have no financial security or resources to assist in this transition.

Liberty is the most important promise America makes to its citizens. There is no price for the loss of that liberty. But we can adequately compensate exonerees for the memories they lost, the skills they never learned, and the opportunities they never had.

Let's not let the wrongful destruction of their past be the wrongful destruction of their future. Please support Senate Bill 322 and Assembly Bill 460.