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Washtenaw County Prosecutor Eli Savit Announces the Launch of the “Prosecutor Transparency Project” in Partnership with the ACLU and University of Michigan

Data-driven project to focus on uncovering potential inequities within prosecutorial system

Ann Arbor, MI – Washtenaw County Prosecutor Eli Savit today announced that his office will launch the “Prosecutor Transparency Project” in partnership with the ACLU of Michigan and the University of Michigan Law School. The aim of the project is to uncover potential racial inequities through the collection and analysis of data regarding decisions made by the prosecutor’s office, including who is charged with a crime, the nature of the charge, the race of the individual charged, and other crucial information such as plea-bargaining conduct. The results of the project—the first of its kind to be conducted in Michigan—will be shared with the public.

“I’m thrilled to have this incredible partnership in place to drill down into the data in an effort to identify and eliminate racial inequities in the Prosecutor’s Office,” Savit said. “We know systemic racism exists in all facets of society, and the Prosecutor’s Office is no exception. This partnership will go a long way towards helping inform how we make decisions, and ensuring that justice is dispensed in an unbiased manner moving forward. With nationally renowned experts leading our work, Washtenaw County residents will have confidence that our prosecutor’s office is treating everyone fairly and evenhandedly.”

The audit will be done by independent researchers at the University of Michigan, and funded by the ACLU and Oregon-based Vital Projects Fund, in addition to U-M.

The announcement of the partnership fulfills one of Savit’s major campaign promises: to partner with independent, third-party researchers to identify and eliminate racially disparate treatment in the criminal-justice system. No taxpayer funds will be spent on the project.

The announcement also fulfills a recommendation from Citizens for Racial Equity in Washtenaw (CREW). In August, CREW released a report indicating that Black residents of Washtenaw County were far more likely to be charged with criminal offenses than white residents. One of CREW’s primary recommendations was for further, in-depth study of racially disparate treatment.

“CREW is elated by this partnership, and by our new prosecutor’s commitment to address racial inequity head-on,” said Alma Wheeler Smith, who serves as co-chair of CREW and was formerly a state senator legislator and Chair of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission. “The CREW report scratched the surface of deep racial injustice in our criminal system, and further study is sorely

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needed. We are confident that the Washtenaw County Prosecutor's model can be replicated across the state and applaud Eli Savit's leadership."

The project will proceed in three parts. First, researchers will quantify racial disparities in decisions made by the Prosecutor's Office. Second, they will review cases with similar fact patterns for white people and people of color to determine how the outcomes of those cases may reflect racial inequities. Finally, in consultation with researchers, the Prosecutor's Office will identify metrics to track to ensure equitable treatment. These metrics will be made public on the Prosecutor's website.

"Prosecutors are the most powerful actors in the criminal legal system and must be held accountable through transparency in their decision-making," said Shelli Weisberg, ACLU of Michigan political director. "The ACLU is deeply committed to dismantling racism in our criminal legal system and ending mass incarceration in Michigan's criminal legal system and are confident that funding the 'Prosecutor Transparency Project' will go a long way to accomplishing this goal, and hope to develop similar partnerships around the state with other prosecutors."

The research team will be led by Professor J.J. Prescott at the University of Michigan Law School, one of the nation's top empirical criminal-justice scholars. Recently, Prescott's work was instrumental in successfully moving a far-reaching package of expungement bills through the Michigan Legislature.

"It's exceedingly rare—if not unheard of—for prosecutors to take an unflinching, unbiased look at racial bias in our system," Prescott said. "I'm excited that this work is starting in Washtenaw County, and I'm hopeful that this project can serve as a national model for prosecutors across the nation."

Data scientist and University of Michigan Law School Research Scholar Grady Bridges will be primarily responsible for the research project. Bridges has years of experience collecting and analyzing Michigan criminal-justice data. He served as Data Administrator for Michigan's Criminal Justice Policy Commission and was the data consultant for the CREW report.

Poverty Solutions, a university-wide initiative that aims to prevent and alleviate poverty through action-based research at the University of Michigan, will provide technical expertise, and will lead the creation of a transparent, publicly accessible data dashboard for the Prosecutor's Office. Dr. Trevor Bechtel—who manages student engagement at Poverty Solutions, and has led multiple projects designed to increase access to information—will spearhead those efforts.

Work on the project will begin immediately. The results of the research project will be shared publicly as they are completed.