Bluhm Legal Clinic
Northwestern Law

Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND
CLINICAL PROFESSOR OF LAW
Locke E. Bowman
312.503.0844
l-bowman@law.northwestern.edu

CLINICAL ASSOCIATE
PROFESSOR OF LAW
Sheila A. Bedi
312.503.2492
sheila.bedi@law.northwestern.edu

CLINICAL ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF LAW
David M. Shapiro
312.503.0711
david.shapiro@law.northwestern.edu

CLINICAL ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF LAW
Alexa Van Brunt
312.503.1336
a-vanbrunt@law.northwestern.edu

CLINICAL ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF LAW
Vanessa del Valle
312-503-5932
vanessa.delvalle@law.northwestern.edu

SENIOR INVESTIGATOR
John Conroy
312-218-6968
john.conroy@law.northwestern.edu

GENERAL COUNSEL
David J. Bradford
312.222.9350
dbradford@jenner.com

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CONTACT: Jim Bray
217-494-5532

Lake County Law Enforcement Coerced Witnesses and Fabricated Story to Frame Jason Strong for Murder, Federal Lawsuit Charges

CHICAGO – After serving more than 15 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, Jason Strong on Tuesday filed suit against the Lake County law enforcement officers he alleges conspired to send him to prison for the 1999 murder of a woman he had never even met.

One year ago, Strong was freed from state prison when prosecutors dropped all charges against him, and he became the latest known victim of a string of false convictions in cases investigated by City of Waukegan police and the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force. Last month, the Circuit Court of Lake County granted a Certificate of Innocence, finding him innocent of the murder of Mary Kate Sunderlin.

Strong, who is represented by attorneys from the Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center and Northwestern's Bluhm Legal Clinic, filed suit in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, and seeks to recover damages from the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force; the governments of Lake County, the City of Waukegan, and eight nearby municipalities; 14 current and former police officers employed by those governments; and Gary Del Re, former sheriff of Lake County.

The lawsuit asks that Strong be compensated for the intentional infliction of emotional distress and the immeasurable harm resulting from his lengthy and unjust incarceration.

A few weeks after Sunderlin's decomposing body was discovered in a Lake County forest preserve, the officers individually or in conspiracy invented a false narrative about the circumstances of her unsolved death, and they fed the information to Jeremy Tweedy and Jason Johnson, two purported "witnesses," who had no connection to the murder but parroted the information back to police and claimed Strong participated in the murder, according to the lawsuit.

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The statements by "witnesses" were elicited after they had been threatened by police, and both later attempted to retract their statements, according to the lawsuit.

Strong, then 24, was arrested at gunpoint on Dec. 20,1999, when police burst into his hotel room, moved him to a law enforcement station, ignored his request for an attorney, and subjected him to an all-night interrogation. After hours of questioning, Strong broke down and wept; he was threatened by officers; and finally made a "confession" using information furnished to him by the law enforcement officers, according to the lawsuit.

Although Strong maintained his innocence and no DNA or other physical evidence connected him to the murder, he was convicted and sentenced to 46 years in prison. Years later, three highly qualified pathologists determined the false statements elicited by law enforcement to explain the murder were flatly inconsistent with the physical evidence.

The lawsuit contends the injuries to Strong "were caused in substantial part by the policies, practices, and customs of the City of Waukegan, whose officers played a central role in the misconduct," and by the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force. The suit alleges the Waukegan police force has a long history of fabricating evidence, coercing suspects and witnesses, and suppressing or failing to disclose exculpatory evidence and information.

The police practices in Waukegan also "infected" the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force, which was staffed with numerous Waukegan police officers, and officials share responsibility for allowing the misconduct, according to the lawsuit, which alleges Waukegan did not discipline police responsible for wrongful convictions but instead rewarded and promoted them despite their troubled records.

"The utter lack of consequences suffered (and the rewards enjoyed) by officers who committed multiple acts of serious misconduct directly encouraged abuses. . . and were the moving force behind the misconduct at issue in this case," the lawsuit states. "These practices became widespread because policymakers with authority over the same exhibited indifference to the problem, thereby ratifying it."

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About the Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center
The Roderick and Solange MacArthur Justice Center advocates for human rights and social justice through litigation. As one of the nation's premier civil rights organizations, the MacArthur Justice Center has played a prominent role in bringing Chicago police misconduct and torture to the public's attention and has helped wrongfully convicted men and women win multi-million dollar verdicts and settlements as compensation for the time they spent in prison.

For additional information, visit http://www.law.northwestern.edu/legalclinic/macarthur/