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Wrongfully convicted

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NEWS10's Elisa Streeter reports

"I always believed in the system but the system failed me," Steve Barnes told a panel of New York State Bar Association members.

For nineteen years he sat in New York prisons for a rape and murder that he did not commit. Barnes' case is one of dozens of defendants in New York who were convicted and later exonerated.

On Tuesday, the New York State Bar Association held a hearing to explore wrongful convictions, what causes them and what can be done to prevent them.

"I just thank god for DNA, you know what I mean?" Barnes continued.

42-year-old Barnes was the 24th person in New York State to be exonerated because of DNA, but not before serving almost 20 years in prison.

"I did time in like seventy prisons in New York State," he said, "and there's innocent guys in prison. A lot of people on the streets don't probably believe that, but there is,"

Enough innocent people that a Wrongful Conviction Task Force was created. It blames, among other things, mishandling of evidence, use of jailhouse informants and the use of false confessions as the causes. Some of the men caught up in it have paid with years of their lives.

"The reason why I was invited here today was I served 6,338 days for a crime I had absolutely nothing to do with," said Martin Tankleff.

Tankleff was convicted of killing his parents on Long Island when he was seventeen, in part because of a false confession. He served seventeen years until he was exonerated.

"In my case there was an interrogation that wasn't recorded whatsoever," he added

Tankleff supports taping all interrogations and confessions; something that Schenectady County has been doing, thanks to a pilot program that has equipped police interview rooms with recording equipment.

"It doesn't come without complications, but I think on balance it is the way to go," Schenectady County District Attorney Bob Carney said of the recording system, "It is what jurors expect, and it is what prosecutors will want to do,"

Tankleff further states his point, "I believe it should be mandatory to record all interview or interrogations from the very beginning. This way it protects all individuals,"

Besides videotaping interrogations, the report also recommends any informants' testimony should be corroborated, officers should be trained to investigate alternate theories and lineups should be performed by people who do not know the identity of the suspect.



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