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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

Legal Aid Marks Wrongful Conviction Day & Calls on Albany to Pass the Challenging Wrongful Convictions Act

(NEW YORK, NY) — The Legal Aid Society released the following statement on Wrongful Conviction Day, calling on Albany lawmakers to pass the [Challenging Wrongful Convictions Act](#), legislation that would remove barriers preventing New Yorkers from obtaining meaningful post-conviction review:

“Since [1989](#), hundreds of people across the state have been exonerated after collectively losing thousands of years in prison for crimes they did not commit. Yet New York’s laws continue to place unjust and often insurmountable barriers between innocent people and the courts.

“The recent exoneration of Legal Aid client [Ronnell Sheffield](#) demonstrates the devastating consequences of these systemic failures. Mr. Sheffield maintained his innocence for more than 35 years following his wrongful conviction for a 1989 sexual assault on Staten Island. As DNA testing evolved, Mr. Sheffield sought to have the rape kit in his case tested but gained no traction on his own. With the assistance of Legal Aid’s Wrongful Conviction Unit, he learned that the rape kit in his case had been destroyed, but a rape kit from a related sexual assault case still existed. The DNA from the related case would exclude Mr. Sheffield and ultimately lead to his exoneration. Yet, with Legal Aid unable to obtain the rape kit, it would take two years to convince law enforcement to test it and another two years for Mr. Sheffield’s conviction to finally be vacated.

“This case is not an isolated mistake, yet people face extraordinary obstacles when seeking to prove their innocence. Those pursuing post-conviction relief have no right to access the evidence in their own cases or to an attorney to help them navigate an exceptionally complex process.

“The Legal Aid Society calls on the Legislature to pass the Challenging Wrongful Convictions Act in the upcoming legislative session and on Governor Hochul to sign it into law. By overhauling Article 440 of New York’s Criminal Procedure Law, this critical legislation would ensure meaningful review of innocence claims following guilty pleas, improve access to post-conviction discovery, strengthen the right to a hearing, clarify when counsel should be assigned, and allow people to seek vacatur when the conduct underlying their convictions has been decriminalized. New York cannot claim to value justice while maintaining a system that prevents credible claims of innocence from receiving meaningful review.”

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The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For 150 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities. www.legalaidnyc.org