Charges dropped against California man who spent 36 years behind bars

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A California man who served 34 years of a life sentence for murder had the charges against him formally dismissed on Wednesday. Michael Hanline, 69, was freed from prison on November 24 after testing showed that DNA evidence from the crime scene did not match that of Hanline or his alleged accomplice.

The California Innocence Project, which worked for 15 years to free Hanline, was finally able to persuade prosecutors to reexamine the evidence. The group said Hanline was the longest-serving wrongfully incarcerated inmate in California history.

Hanline's conviction was based on "paper-thin evidence," according to Justin Brooks, director of the California Innocence Project. In addition to the DNA evidence clearing him, prosecutors withheld evidence that should have been disclosed to Hanline's legal team during the trial.

"He is 100 percent innocent," Brooks said outside the Ventura courtroom.

A Ventura County Superior Court judge dismissed the charges against Hanline at the request of prosecutors. The judge told the courtroom he was dismissing them because the allegations could not be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

In requesting the dismissal of the case, however, the district attorney's office urged the judge not to issue any finding that Hanline was innocent, contending that its case was still supported by probable cause.

After his November 24 release, Hanline had been required to wear a GPS ankle bracelet and had faced the possibility of a retrial.

Standing outside the courtroom Wednesday with his wife Sandy, Hanline said, "I feel good. Hopefully everything is going to be like it used to be."

"When I first got arrested," he said, "I figured it might take a year or two to get this all straightened around, but not 36." The 36 years included two spent behind bars after his arrest, but before his conviction. "Man, 36 years is a long, long time," he added.

Asked by reporters about his plans, Hanline said, "All I want to do is go fishing and ride my bike and spend time with Sandy and do a little gardening."

Hanline was charged and convicted in the 1978 killing of a friend, J.T. McGarry. Prosecutors claimed Hanline and an accomplice kidnapped McGarry, shot him and dumped his body off of a highway.

Mary Bischoff, Hanline's girlfriend at the time, was granted immunity and was a key witness at his trial. She testified that McGarry had skimmed thousands of dollars from motorcycle swap meets and that Hanline had threatened to "blow his brains out."

Bischoff also testified that Hanline had left home on the night of the killing and returned home later muddy. Hanline maintained he had been working on motorcycles at home all that night except for leaving to buy beer.

Hanline was convicted of first-degree murder in 1980 and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

At least three people have been freed from California prisons in recent years after spending long sentences for murder.

Susan Mellen, 59, was freed last fall after spending 17 years in prison for the death of a homeless man in Lawndale. A Los Angeles County judge said she had been convicted on the testimony of a liar.

Kash Register was freed in 2013 after spending 34 years in prison. A judge said prosecutors had used false testimony from an alleged eyewitness.

In 2007, Timothy Atkins was freed after spending 20 years in prison for a 1987 murder and robbery in Los Angeles. A witness who claimed she heard him confess

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later recanted her testimony.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), since 1973, at least 152 individuals sentenced to death have been exonerated. In order to be included in the DPIC's list defendants must have been either acquitted of all charges, had charges related to their death sentence dismissed by the prosecution, or been granted a complete pardon based on evidence of innocence.

If those sentenced to life in prison without parole, like Michael Hanline, were included the numbers would be much higher.

The most recent exonerations from death row include:

Alabama prisoner Anthony Ray Hinton, who spent 28 years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He spent much of his prison time in solitary confinement, after being convicted of a series of deadly shootings. He was released after tests concluded that six bullets originally submitted in evidence could not be linked to Hinton's revolver, as originally charged.

Last year, Ricky Jackson, Wiley Bridgeman and his brother Kwame Ajamu were all exonerated of the 1975 murder of Harold Franks in Cleveland, Ohio. Witness Eddie Vernon, only 12 years old at the time of the trial, recanted his testimony after admitting that police coerced him into testifying against the defendants. The three spent a combined 100 years on Ohio's death row.

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, 1,587 people have been exonerated of all categories of criminal convictions since 1989. Those exonerated were falsely convicted of crimes as early as 1956.

Contributing factors to these exonerations include false confessions, mistaken witness ID, perjury or false accusation, prosecutorial misconduct, inadequate legal defense, new DNA evidence, and false or misleading forensic evidence.

The US Justice Department and FBI were recently forced to formally acknowledge that among cases reviewed so far over a more than two-decade period before 2000, nearly every analyst from an elite FBI unit gave flawed forensic hair testimony in all trials of criminal defendants.

The cases examined include those of 32 defendants sentenced to death, 14 of which have been either executed or died in prison, raising the likelihood that innocent people have been sent to their deaths. There are currently more than 3,000 people on death rows across the US, according to the DPIC.

US prisons and jails are bloated with over 2.4 million people, more than any nation on record. A 2013 report by The Sentencing Project, a Washington, DC-based defendant advocacy group, found that the number of prisoners serving life sentences in state and federal prisons was close to 160,000 in 2012, including 49,000 inmates serving life sentences without the possibility of parole, an increase of 22.2 percent since 2008.

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