

# Wrongly convicted Wilson County man awarded \$1 million

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A Wilson County man who spent 31 years in prison before being cleared of his crimes will receive \$1 million after a unanimous vote by the Tennessee Board of Claims on Wednesday.

Lawrence McKinney, 61, was released from prison in 2009 because of new DNA evidence that cleared him of a 1978 rape and burglary conviction in Memphis.

The award includes:

- \$353,000 up front, to pay McKinney's attorneys fees, debts and allow him to purchase a vehicle.
- \$647,000 will fund a monthly annuity that will pay McKinney \$3,350 per month for life starting May 1, according to the recommendation presented to the board of claims. The monthly payment is guaranteed for 10 years; if McKinney dies within that time, the balance of the money will be paid to his wife or his estate if she also does not survive.

The \$1 million is the maximum amount the board of claims was allowed to award McKinney, who did not attend the board of claims meeting.

"I would just not want to suggest that \$1 million is satisfactory," Secretary of State and board of claims member Tre Hargett said just before the unanimous vote to approve the payment that had little discussion.

Gov. Bill Haslam granted McKinney an executive exoneration in December. The exoneration is required to file for compensation in a wrongful imprisonment claim.

McKinney's attorneys David Raybin and Jack Lowery Sr., requested the maximum \$1 million amount, which was the staff recommendation to the board of claims.

"We want to thank the board and the governor for standing by this man and seeing that justice was done," Raybin said. "No amount of money can compensate somebody for that long a time (for wrongful imprisonment), but it's the statement that it makes that is important as well ..."

McKinney's record in the case was expunged after his release from prison, but he was frustrated for years in ongoing attempts to be exonerated.

Haslam's exoneration went against the Tennessee Board of Parole's unanimous recommendation in 2016 that McKinney should not be exonerated despite his prison release.

Pastor John Hunn of Lebanon's Immanuel Baptist Church in Lebanon where McKinney attends, and State Sen. Mark Pody have both supported McKinney's exoneration and his compensation.

"It's a nice exclamation to justice to hear the Secretary of State recognize what he's gone through," Hunn said, pointing to Hargett's comments in the board of claims meeting about the maximum amount McKinney could be paid. "(The approval) was made in the spirit of the governor's decision."

Only the governor has the authority to grant, deny or not act on an executive exoneration application in Tennessee and is not bound by the parole board's recommendation.

Haslam's statement in December on the exoneration read: "Though the facts of this case are complex and reasonable minds may draw different conclusions from them, ultimately I respect the determinations of the Shelby County Criminal Court and District Attorney General that Mr. McKinney was not guilty of the crimes for which he was convicted and would not have been prosecuted if the DNA testing results had been available at the time of trial."

McKinney thanked Haslam personally at the governor's office earlier this year in a meeting arranged by Pody.

McKinney came to Wilson County after his release, which is where his wife Dorothy lived. The couple married after becoming pen pals while McKinney was in prison.