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NEWS

Cooper pardons 4 men wrongfully convicted of murder in Buncombe County

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Gov. Roy Cooper has pardoned four men who were wrongfully convicted of murder in Buncombe County, ending a decades-long legal battle surrounding the death of Walter Rodney Bowman.

Though Kenneth Kagonyera, Larry Williams, Damian Mills and Teddy Isbell had already been found innocent in connection to the 2000 shooting of Bowman, a Fairview resident, the pardons now allow each to pursue financial compensation from the state for their wrongful convictions.

Cooper also issued a pardon for Ronnie Long, a Concord resident who was freed in August after serving more than 40 years in prison for a rape he didn't commit. These were the first pardons Cooper had issued in office.

"We must continue to work to reform our justice system and acknowledge when people have been wrongly convicted," Cooper said in a Dec. 17 statement. "I have carefully reviewed the facts in each of these cases and, while I cannot give these men back the time they served, I am granting them Pardons of Innocence in the hope that they might be better able to move forward in their lives."

Bowman was killed after three men broke into his house in September 2000. Five men eventually pleaded guilty to charges related to the slaying, believing doing so would spare them from life sentences or death penalties. Two of them - Kagonyera and Robert Wilcoxson - were exonerated by the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission and freed in 2011 after serving 11 years of a 15-year prison sentence.

Wilcoxson settled a lawsuit against former Buncombe County Sheriff Bobby Medford and several detectives for an undisclosed sum. Yet before Kagonyera could file a similar lawsuit,

the North Carolina General Assembly changed a law in 2012 to make it impossible for wrongfully convicted people to receive restitution until they first were pardoned.

Lawyers for Kagonyera asked former Governors Bev Perdue and Pat McCrory for pardons but to no avail. In October, Kagonyera's attorney, Abraham Rubert-Schewel, petitioned Cooper to grant his client a pardon, which finally arrived this week.

"It's another validation of their innocence," Rubert-Schewel said by phone. "It's a recognition by the state that they are innocent, and that the state does owe people compensation in situations like this."

Isbell, Mills, and Williams were exonerated by a state judge following prison sentences.

While the lawyers who pushed for pardons welcomed Cooper's decision, they also wondered why it took so long for the government to grant them to innocent men.

"We're very happy the governor has done this, but it is remarkable that it has taken this long," said Noell Tin, a Charlotte-based attorney who petitioned Gov. Perdue to pardon Kagonyera eight years ago.

Former Citizen Times reporters Tonya Maxwell and Clarke Morrison contributed to this report.

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