

## **NAACP Dane County Responds to Unequal Justice...the Alec Cook Sentence**

Is the “justice” we have witnessed, truly equal justice? Members of the NAACP Dane County don’t believe it to be. At the June 2018 general meeting, members expressed outrage over the sentence received by former UW-Madison Student, Alec Cook by Judge Stephen Ehlke.

Cook had been charged with 23 criminal counts involving 11 women, about half of which involved varying degrees of sexual assault. The prosecutors in the case sought the maximum allowable sentence of 19½ years in prison followed by 20 years of extended probation. Cook pleaded guilty to three counts of third-degree sexual assault, and one count each of strangulation and stalking. Instead, Judge Ehlke issued a sentence of just three years in prison followed by 8 years of probation.

This sentence is another disturbing instance of racial disparities in the criminal justice system in Dane County, the state of Wisconsin, and the United States. It is well documented that people of color and those without economic means are more likely to receive harsher sentences for criminal law violations than those of higher social status. Recently, California Judge Aaron Pesky was recalled by voters because of the light sentence he issued to Stanford University student Brock Turner, who had been convicted of three counts of felony sexual assault. In Dane County, public outcry has similarly been directed toward Judge Stephen Ehlke for the light sentence imposed in this case for another privileged white man.

Politicians on both sides of the aisle, including Attorney General Brad Schimel, have criticized the lenient sentence. UW-Madison Police Chief Kristen Roman concurred, noting that the light sentence sent a message to victims “who have, or might, bravely come forward,” that, “in your pursuit for justice, the odds are very much against you.”

Judge Ehlke has rationalized his sentencing decision by noting Cook’s lack of prior criminal record. This technically clean record, however, should not obscure the fact that Cook was a repeat offender who appears to have engaged in similar misconduct over a period of years. For these reasons, NAACP Dane County joins with others in decrying Judge Ehlke’s decision and calling for:

1. An appellate review of the case.
2. An immediate examination of Judge Ehlke’s sentencing record by race and sentencing data; and for all other criminal judges broken down by race.
3. A meeting with Dane County criminal judges to discuss this and other community concerns.

Judges have broad discretion in the number of years of prison a defendant receives, and it is critical that more sunshine be shone on how the discretion is exercised.

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