

# Peter Wagner '03

By Mary McLean Orszulak G'10

## Champions Prison Policy Reform



**Peter Wagner '03** was recently honored with the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers' 2013 Champion of State Criminal Justice Reform Award. This award is granted to individuals whose exceptional efforts have led toward progressive reform of the state criminal justice system.

Peter is an attorney and Executive Director of the Prison Policy Initiative in Easthampton, MA. He was recognized for his tireless decade-long work to expose how the U.S. criminal justice system negatively impacts all people, even those who are not directly involved in the legal system.

He pursued his law degree at Western New England with the original intent of working in prison conditions litigation or criminal defense. From 2000-2001, he conducted an independent study under the guidance of Professor James Gardner that changed the focus of his educational goals and ultimately his career.

Internships at Massachusetts Correctional Legal Services (now Prisoner's Legal Services) and at the Capital Defender of New York confirmed for Peter that his real passion was in policy work because he wanted to make change on a larger scale.

Through his research, Peter found that an archaic Census Bureau policy, which counts incarcerated individuals as residents of prison locations, artificially inflates the resident count and thus political influence of communities that contain prisons. This dilutes the votes cast by everyone who does not live near a large prison. After discovering problems with the current system, Peter

built and led a bipartisan urban and rural movement to abolish the practice.

"From my research, I wrote a paper about how the Census Bureau's practice of counting incarcerated people from New York City as residents of rural upstate communities, combined with the state's practice of barring incarcerated people from the polls, was undermining the constitutional "one person one vote" guarantee," he says. "*The New York Times* later named this phenomenon 'prison gerrymandering.'"

The paper formed the core of the Prison Policy Initiative's first report, *Importing Constituents: Prisoners and Political Clout in New York*, which was published while Peter was still a student "with some great help from my Western New England classmates," he says.

That report led to the national movement to end prison gerrymandering. According to the National Association of Criminal Defense Attorneys, "The U.S. Supreme Court's endorsement of Maryland's law to end prison gerrymandering has been hailed as one of the major criminal justice and civil rights victories of the decade."

Peter's work has been featured in hundreds of papers nationwide and he has won editorial endorsement for criminal justice reform from such publications as *The New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*.

Today, at the Prison Policy Initiative, Peter researches and brings to light a wide range of issues plaguing the U.S. prison system. He recently presented his research on perverse incentives and price gouging in the prison and jail phone industry at a Federal Communications Commission workshop.

Peter hopes his work will help the legal community and citizens at large to better understand how the prison system impacts them.

"Because we build prisons and jails in out-of-the-way places, it is easy to miss just how many people we lock up in this country," he says. "It's one percent of our adult population, far more than any other country on the planet. And because this population is so large, the economic and political effect of this mass incarceration policy choice reverberates throughout our society to the detriment of everyone."

Peter is honored that his award has brought attention to the Prison Policy Initiative's work to bring real change that creates stronger communities. "In a decade, we transformed a law school paper into a broad-based movement that has permanently changed how our democracy works in four states and hundreds of counties and cities," he says. ♦