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Wrongly imprisoned man wins \$5.3 million settlement

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A former Texan who became the first wrongly convicted man to be freed from prison through the Wisconsin Innocence Project has been awarded \$5.3 million to settle a civil rights lawsuit he filed against the city of Austin, Texas.

Keith Findley, co-director of the project, said Monday he hopes the payment to Christopher Ochoa will cause law enforcement agencies to improve training and oversight of their officers and lead to more compensation for the wrongly convicted.

Ochoa, now a first-semester law student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, declined to comment.

Ochoa alleged in his federal lawsuit that Austin police coerced a false confession from him in the rape and murder of a 20-year-old woman inside an Austin Pizza Hut in 1988. Then 22, Ochoa was convicted and served more than 11 years in prison before the Wisconsin Innocence Project, using DNA evidence to prove he could not have committed the crimes, won his release in January 2001.

The Austin City Council voted Nov. 20 to settle Ochoa's suit, which had sought \$70 million, said Assistant City Attorney Laurie Eiserloh.

"The system failed Chris Ochoa and we did accept that we were part of that, and we want to compensate him," she said.

In summer, the Austin council approved a \$9 million settlement in a similar lawsuit filed by Richard Danziger, Ochoa's co-defendant in the case, Eiserloh said.

Bill Allison, one of Ochoa's Austin attorneys, said Danziger also sued Ochoa because Ochoa's confession implicated Danziger in the crimes.

Ochoa, who has said he made the confession because he feared the death penalty, agreed to pay Danziger \$500,000, Allison said.

Since Ochoa's release, the Wisconsin Innocence Project - which was not involved in Ochoa's lawsuit -

has won a new trial for a former Augusta police officer convicted in an Eau Claire murder and won the release of Steven Avery, a Manitowoc County man who had served nearly 18 years in prison for a sexual assault he did not commit.

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