SPRINGFIELD — Before distributing a set of awards at his organization's annual reception, Larry Golden made a big announcement. The Downstate Illinois Innocence Project plans to drop the regional identifying word in its title, signifying a plan to adopt a statewide focus.

“It's going to be an evolution,” Golden, the project's executive director, said in an interview later. “I think the important thing is that it symbolizes our intention to move forward in a way that we've not been able to do before.”

Based at the University of Illinois Springfield, the newly-renamed Illinois Innocence Project examines cases and works to free wrongly-convicted inmates from prison. It hosted its fifth annual “Defenders of the Innocent Awards” reception Monday.

Last year, the project received 208 requests for assistance from inmates, Golden said, 74 of which came from northern Illinois. Over time, they gradually took on more upstate cases, including one that led to an exoneration in Kane County last month.

While the name change may cause some confusion initially, Golden said demand for their services continues to grow everywhere, not just in southern portions of the state.

“This was an announcement of the future of this effort,” he said. “It really indicates our intention for the future to work statewide.”

Already teamed up with professors and students at two law schools, Golden said the project will soon begin a partnership with the Northern Illinois University College of Law, which will assist with upstate cases.

You all did the most important thing a person can do. You helped save a life.”
After Golden's news, the project gave three awards, honoring attorney and author Scott Turow and project partners from the University of Illinois College of Law and Southern Illinois University School of Law.

The longest standing ovation of the night, however, went to John Grayson, who spent 10 years in prison on a 2002 murder conviction a Kane County judge vacated in March. Project staff aided prosecutors and police in the exoneration of Grayson, 30, who changed his name from Jonathon Moore after his release.

John J. Hanlon, the project's legal director, thanked the project's advocates and the officials involved in Grayson's case for working to erase his 76-year prison sentence for a crime he didn't commit.

“You all did the most important thing a person can do,” Hanlon said. “You helped save a life.”

The project honored Illinois law school professors J. Steven Beckett and Andrew D. Leipold, along with 26 students, for their work on several cases since 2010.

Southern Illinois law school professors William Schroeder and Christopher W. Behan and 14 students received recognition for their work on project cases, including a posthumous clemency petition for Grover Thompson, a man convicted of attempted murder who died in prison in 1996.

“It’s been an inspiration to me, as a professor, to look at the absolute dedication and devotion that all these students have shown,” Schroeder said. “And to know that this work can pay off, that doors can be thrown open so the innocent can walk out.”

Scott Turow applauded as awards were given during the fifth annual “Defenders of the Innocent Awards” reception. Turow also received an award for his work on the release of the wrongfully convicted. Lane Christiansen

Turow, a partner at SNR Denton and author of nine novels and two nonfiction books, received an award for his work on the release of the wrongfully convicted. The group also praised his membership on the Illinois Commission on Capital Punishment that pushed for reform to the system.

Though Illinois abolished the death penalty last year, Turow said, the need for innocence project investigations didn’t go away.

“The erasure of the death penalty does not solve and, in some ways, obscures the problem of innocence,” he said. “Because the reality is that the systemic problems that bring innocent people to death row continue to exist.”