



Statement at Death Penalty Abolition Bill Signing Ceremony

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March 24, 2021

Thirty years ago, in 1991, the Virginia execution chamber was moved to this site. One hundred and one people were put to death in this facility.

Later that same year the founders of what came to be known as Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty took the first steps toward ending state-sponsored killing. Our journey is now over, thanks to many people who supported us in many ways over these decades.

I want to acknowledge the essential role of Marie Deans in founding Virginia's death penalty abolition movement. Her work on death row in the "bad old days" resulted in the exoneration of Earl Washington. Her work to get attorneys for the men on the row saved lives and helped to humanize a brutal environment. She was also a key figure in the creation of our organization.

Virginia's faith community was the backbone of the early abolition movement. Religious leaders like Bishop Walter F. Sullivan, Rev. Fletcher Lowe, and many others spoke out publicly in opposition to the death penalty and provided spiritual comfort to those on death row and their family members. Local religious leaders led execution vigils at sites across the Commonwealth and their faith communities provided crucial funding for our work year after year.

I am glad to see that important allies in the abolition movement are here today – the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, the Virginia Catholic Conference, and ACLU of Virginia. Together we were able to accomplish what none of us could do alone.

It would have been impossible to discuss the possibility of death penalty abolition if it were not for the extraordinary work of capital defense attorneys. Since the General Assembly created regional Capital Representational Centers in 2002, a group of outstanding attorneys, mitigation

specialists, and investigators have provided stellar legal representation to indigent defendants. People like David Bruck, Jerry Zerkin, Rob Lee, and many others represented indigent people accused of capital murder for decades.

These women and men were responsible for a 90% decrease in death sentences over the ensuing years. And no one in Virginia has been sentenced to death in the past ten years!

Another key group of advocates for death penalty abolition has been murder victim family members like Rachel Sutphin and Linell Patterson. These courageous women and men have shared their intensely personal stories of lost loved ones in order to educate the public and legislators that our death penalty system fails victims' families. Many became opponents of the death penalty because of their negative and traumatic experiences with a criminal justice system more interested in retribution than meeting their practical needs.

Powerful floor testimony by legislators who lost loved ones to homicide helped secure the final victory. All seven of the murder victim family members who serve in the General Assembly voted to end capital punishment.

Criminal justice funding for expensive capital murder trials can now be better spent on much needed and currently underfunded support programs that help victims' families with funeral costs, counseling, and other services.

Finally, we are grateful for our legislative patrons – Del. Mike Mullin and Sen. Scott Surovell – who shepherded abolition bills through the long legislative process. And we are immensely grateful to Governor Ralph Northam who supported abolition in his State of the Commonwealth address and worked to ensure its enactment into law.

This is an historic day for Virginia. Today we become the first Southern state to end capital punishment. We will certainly not be the last to do so.