



Death Penalty Information Center

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ILLINOIS GOVERNOR SIGNS BILL ENDING DEATH PENALTY, MARKING THE FEWEST STATES WITH CAPITAL PUNISHMENT SINCE 1978

Illinois Becomes Fourth State in Four Years to Abandon the Death Penalty

WASHINGTON, DC – Illinois Governor Pat Quinn took the final step today in ending the death penalty and replacing it with a sentence of life without parole. The law also requires that state funds used for the death penalty be transferred to a fund for murder victims' services and law enforcement. The ban on capital punishment comes after an eleven-year moratorium on executions declared by former Republican Governor George Ryan, and makes Illinois the 16th state to repeal the death penalty. It also marks the lowest number of states with the death penalty in more than thirty years.

"The Illinois repeal is an indication of a growing national trend toward alternatives to the death penalty, and an increased focus on murder victims' families and the prevention of crime," said Richard Dieter, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center. "In light of our current economic climate, the public has increasingly recognized that resources used for the death penalty could be diverted to higher budgetary priorities, such as law enforcement and victims' services."

Many murder victims' families were among the strongest supporters of the Illinois repeal. In a letter to the Illinois General Assembly, murder victims' families wrote, "A legal system that wasn't bogged down with committing tremendous resources on capital cases could prosecute and sentence countless other crimes and take dangerous people off the streets before they commit murder. Dollars saved could be put toward counseling for victims of crime or other services we desperately need as we attempt to get on with our lives." The letter was signed by more than 30 individuals who had loved ones murdered in Illinois.

The high costs of the death penalty were influential in the passage of the repeal. Conservative Republican Senator Dan Duffy of Lake Barrington said, "We have spent over \$100 million of taxpayer money defending and prosecuting death row cases. The death penalty does not make our society safer, I believe. It has been an ineffective and expensive use of our scarce resources."

In the last few months, the death penalty has been under scrutiny in other states as well. Days after the Illinois General Assembly voted for the repeal, Ohio Supreme Court Justice Paul E. Pfeifer, who as a Republican state legislator played an influential role in shaping the state's current death penalty statute, stated: "I have concluded that it is exceedingly difficult for this statute to be administered in a fair and just way... Gov. [John] Kasich and the governors after

him, I believe, need to consider commuting all of those sentences to life in prison without the possibility of parole, and I think it's time for Ohio to at least entertain the discussion of whether or not we are well served by having a death penalty."

Across the country, use of the death penalty is declining as states are using alternative punishments like life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. Death sentences in the United States have dropped by over 60% since the mid-90s. A recent poll conducted by Lake Research Partners showed that 61% of U.S. voters chose various alternative sentences over the death penalty as the punishment for murder. The same poll also listed the death penalty *last* in a list of priorities for state spending.

Since 1976, Illinois has carried out 12 executions. In the same period, 20 inmates have been exonerated from the state's death row, the second highest number in the United States. In 2003, three years after the moratorium was imposed, Governor Ryan issued a blanket commutation, reducing the sentences of 167 death row inmates to life and pardoning four inmates. Since then, Illinois has had two different commissions to study the death penalty and has implemented some reforms, yet continues to face an error-prone and costly system. In the meantime, use of the death penalty has declined sharply in Illinois. In the 1990s, the state averaged over 10 death sentences a year. In 2009 and 2010, the state imposed only one death sentence each year.

Illinois is the fourth state in the last four years to abandon the death penalty. New Mexico and New Jersey voted to abolish the death penalty in 2009 and 2007, respectively. New York's death penalty law was declared unconstitutional in 2004, and the last person was removed from death row in 2007. More states are expected to introduce legislation to repeal the death penalty in 2011, including possibly Connecticut, Kansas and Maryland.

For more information on the Illinois repeal legislation, contact Jeremy Schroeder, Executive Director of the Illinois Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, at (312) 673-3816 or jeremy@icadp.org.

To speak with Richard Dieter, Executive Director of the Death Penalty Information Center, about the costs, trends, or declining national use of the death penalty, please contact Elaine de Leon at (202) 289-2275 or edeleon@deathpenaltyinfo.org.

The Death Penalty Information Center is a non-profit organization serving the media and the public with analysis and information on issues concerning capital punishment. DPIC was founded in 1990 and prepares in-depth reports, issues press releases, conducts briefings for the media, and serves as a resource to those working on this issue. DPIC is widely quoted and consulted by all those concerned with the death penalty.

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