

Editorial: A penalty of death is not justice



As uniformed police officers and relatives of murder victims watched, Gov. Chris Sununu vetoed a bill – supported by a bipartisan majority of the Legislature – that would have abolished the death penalty in our state. It was a dispiriting, but not unexpected, outcome for death penalty opponents, many of whom have also lost colleagues and loved ones to murder. But, they do not seek more violence in return.

Twice now, first by then Gov. Jeanne Shaheen in 2000 and now Sununu, the will of the people, as voiced by their elected lawmakers, has been denied. But the latest effort to end state-sanctioned murder is not over. Not yet. The outcome can be turned around. And should be.

The Legislature will be back in the fall to consider overriding Sununu's veto.

The governor says he respects arguments made by those who oppose the death penalty. We trust that if, upon reflection, some lawmakers decide that they can no longer support capital punishment, and vote to override his veto, that those lawmakers too will be respected, in the State House and by the voters they represent.

To abolish the death penalty, according to Sununu, would “deprive” crime victims’ families “of the justice they deserve.” We cannot accept that. We have seen the anguish and anger of those families who have suffered a brutal loss. But no definition of justice includes state-sanctioned killing. The death penalty is vengeance, not justice.

Sununu says that our state applies the death penalty in a “sparing, fair and just manner” and only in the most “heinous” cases, as defined by law. Survivors ask, why is one murder, one life, deserving of more punishment than another? We believe that even in the most horrific cases it is wrong for the state to engage in pre-meditated murder, which is what capital punishment amounts to. No matter how deep the pain of loss, capital punishment does not make anything better, or anything right. It will never bring a single soul back.

The governor contends that New Hampshire doesn’t have to worry about executing an innocent person because we are confident in our criminal justice system, in our public defenders and in the judgment of citizen jurors who decide if the punishment due is life in prison without parole, or death. Of course, that doesn’t rule out the possibility of a mistake – especially with scientific advances – and the irreversible consequence. Death.

When the Legislature voted to repeal the death penalty in 2000 – and Shaheen exercised her veto – it was seen as symbolic since no one was on death row in New Hampshire and no one had been executed here since 1939. The debate is now real. After the signing ceremony, Sununu handed his red veto pen to the widow of a Manchester police officer, Michael Briggs, who was gunned down on the job 12 years ago. His killer, Michael Addison, was

sentenced to die. His execution is on hold while his conviction is appealed, which will take many more years.

The death penalty did not deter Addison from shooting Officer Briggs, in a split second, in an alley in downtown Manchester. We dismiss Sununu's claim that abolishing the death penalty will send a message that New Hampshire is a place where "a person commits an unthinkable crime and is guaranteed leniency." A lifetime in a prison cell, with no chance of parole, is far from leniency.

We have nothing but the utmost respect for the memory of Officer Briggs and gratitude for his service in law enforcement. We condemn Addison's action and believe that he should receive the harshest irrevocable punishment. But in a civilized society, that does not mean that we are ever justified in killing him.