

Death penalty arguments used by Sununu in veto don't hold up

In his statement vetoing SB 593 to repeal the death penalty, Gov. Chris Sununu argued that the death penalty delivers justice for crime victims, protects the law enforcement community and is needed to send a message to those who commit “the most heinous offenses” within our borders.

I would like to examine each of these reasons.

First, does the death penalty deliver justice for crime victims?

New Hampshire has not executed anyone since 1939. That is almost 80 years ago. New Hampshire has consistently been among the states with the lowest homicide rates. Even so, we average about 20 homicides a year. That means that approximately 1,600 individuals have been murdered since our last execution. There is only one person on death row. Does the governor really mean to imply that the State of New Hampshire has “delivered justice” to only one of 1,600 murder victim families?

There are ways to deliver real and lasting justice to crime victims and the Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty has been advocating for them for years. New Hampshire's Victim Compensation Law is among the stingiest in the country. We could provide significant assistance to crime victims and their family members by increasing the amount of compensation they receive, by providing funds for the long-term treatment of their emotional trauma, and by providing a college education at a state school for any child of a murder victim who meets the necessary educational requirements.

Does the death penalty protect the law enforcement community?

In 2009, the Death Penalty Information Center conducted a nationwide poll of police chiefs to determine what the chiefs themselves believed would be the

most effective way to keep front-line officers safe. The report concluded, “The nation’s police chiefs rank the death penalty last in their priorities for effective crime reduction. The officers do not believe the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder, and they rate it as one of most inefficient uses of taxpayer dollars in fighting crime.”

What is effective?

According to the chiefs the answer includes more resources for police departments to provide training and backup, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health treatment, and an end to court backups.

Finally, the governor stated that we need the death penalty for “the most heinous crimes.”

As a homicide prosecutor, a public defender, and a member of the Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, I have had heartbreaking and intimate conversations with hundreds of murder victim family members. Many of those family members and loved ones have told me that this language is particularly painful for them. For anyone who has lost a loved one to murder, that loss is “the most heinous.” And, as many family members have stated, the death penalty doesn’t bring a loved one back ... it only creates another grieving family.

Gov. Sununu said that abolishing the death penalty would send the wrong message, but the Coalition argues that abolishing the death penalty would send the opposite message – that New Hampshire cares about the real needs of victims and takes its responsibility to protect law enforcement seriously.

By diverting taxpayer dollars from the bloated death penalty system (more than \$5.5 million spent so far on a single death penalty case), we could provide real and lasting compensation to murder victim family members and invest in the positive societal changes that truly would serve to keep our police safe.

The death penalty is a false and empty promise. Let's put our money where our mouth is and make a tangible commitment to crime victims and our law enforcement community.

(Barbara Keshen is the Chair of the NH Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.)