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Senate Judiciary Committee votes ‘do pass’ on Senate Bill 236

Bill would repeal death penalty and replace it with life without the possibility of parole

(HELENA) – After a thoughtful discussion, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted 7-5 to pass Senate Bill 236, a bill to abolish Montana’s death penalty and replace it with life without the possibility of parole. Under the proposed measure, a prisoner would never become eligible for parole and could never be released from prison.

The bill’s sponsor, Senator Dave Wanzonried (D-Missoula) said, “Both Republicans and Democrats are waking up to the problems with the death penalty and Senate Bill 236 moves ahead with support from both parties. I’m looking forward to passing this important legislation on the floor of the Montana Senate.”

During the hearing on SB 236, proponents told the committee that the current death penalty system is broken beyond repair, risks executing an innocent person and hurts the people of Montana.

Ziggy Ziegler, a former county commissioner of Yellowstone County whose father was murdered in 1978, expressed appreciation for the committee’s action; “Nothing yesterday, today or tomorrow will bring our loved ones back. A death sentence just brings years of uncertainty, endless appeals and unwanted attention. I thank the committee for its wise action today.”

Carolyn Madplume, whose 20-year-old daughter was murdered in 2005, concurred with Ziegler, “We don’t believe any human being has the right to choose when someone should die. We strongly believe that decision is in the hands of God, as it should be.”

Senate Bill 236 comes amid growing scrutiny over capital punishment across the United States. Executions and death sentences are at an all-time low, the Supreme Court has routinely rejected any expansions of the death penalty and states are re-evaluating their death penalty laws as they buckle under the enormous financial burden the death penalty creates.

“We’ve come a long way since we reinstated the death penalty in 1974,” said Senator Wanzonried. “We now have the option to put someone away for life – a punishment that is both swift and sure. It’s time we put an end to this failed and wasteful system.”

The committee’s Chairman and Vice Chairman, Senator Gary Perry (R-Manhattan) and Senator Jim Shockley, (R-Victor) both voted in favor of the bill. Also voting in favor were Senators Lynda Moss (D-Billings), Larry Jent (D-Bozeman), Cliff Larson (D-Missoula), Carol Juneau (D-Browning), and Jesse Laslovich (D-Anaconda). Voting “no” were Senators Dan McGee (R-Laurel), John Esp (R-Big Timber), Terry Murphy (R-Cardwell), Greg Hinkle (R-Thompson Falls), and Aubyn Curtiss (R-Libby).

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