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Victims' families, warden, exonerees, and others come together to support ending Montana's death penalty

(HELENA) – Proponents of a bill to end Montana's death penalty and replace it with life in prison without the possibility of parole today told legislators that the current death penalty system is broken beyond repair, costs too much and hurts the people of Montana.

They were testifying on Senate Bill 236. Under the proposed measure, a prisoner would never become eligible for parole and could never be released from prison.

The bill comes amid growing scrutiny over capital punishment throughout the United States. Executions and death sentences are at an all-time low, the Supreme Court has routinely rejected death penalty expansions, and states are re-evaluating their death penalty laws, buckling under the enormous financial burden the death penalty creates.

Bill sponsor, Senator Dave Wanzonried, told committee members, "We, as legislators, are charged with keeping the public safe, and the death penalty fails to do that. It takes resources away from real crime prevention and re-victimizes families who seek healing from the loss of a loved one."

Marietta Jaeger Lane, whose 7-year-old daughter was kidnapped and later murdered, told the committee that the death penalty only prolongs the pain of victims' families, "I have worked with many murder victims' families over the years and a death sentence just brings years of uncertainty for families, endless appeals, and unwanted media attention," she said.

Ziggy Ziegler, former county commissioner of Yellowstone County, said that taking the lives of the murderers does not solve anything. "Nothing yesterday, today or tomorrow will bring our loved ones back," he said. Ziegler's father was murdered in 1978. "I ask you to hold the murderers accountable with a sentence of life in prison – no pleadings, no hearings, no extensions. That's why I support this bill."

Ron McAndrew, former warden of Florida's Death Row, told the committee that the death penalty also traumatizes correction employees. "I've seen what it does to the people that work in our prisons. It is wrong to force correction workers to kill as part of their job. I wish I had never been involved in carrying out the death penalty."

Other proponents talked about the financial burden the death penalty puts on the state and counties. "While I was county attorney, I watched my small county struggle every year to provide adequate funds to its law enforcement agencies," said Tom Biglen, former county attorney for Sweet Grass County. "One capital case — just one — can devastate a small county's budget."

Ray Krone, who in 2002 became the 100th person to be exonerated from death row, warned that there is no way to make the death penalty less expensive except to shorten the process. Such a move would have allowed him to be executed.

“I would not trust the state to execute a person for committing a crime against another person,” Krone said. “I know how the death penalty system works and innocent people can get sentenced to die. It happened to me and if it happened to me, it can happen to anyone.”

“What happened to me is proof that wrongful convictions can and do occur even in Montana,” Jimmy Ray Bromgard, who was exonerated in 2002 in Montana, stated in written testimony; “Until the death penalty is removed, there will always be the possibility that an innocent man will be killed at the hands of the state. .”

“We’ve come a long way since we reinstated the death penalty in 1974,” said Senator Wanzenried. “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.”

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