



Maryland Citizens Against State Executions

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Maryland Clergy Call on General Assembly to Repeal Death Penalty in 2008

ANNAPOLIS (April 5, 2007) – More than 50 Maryland clergy, including leaders of several prominent denominations, called on the General Assembly today to repeal the death penalty in the 2008 legislative session.

In a signed letter, the clergy “write to underscore strong and mounting support for repeal of the death penalty inside and outside the General Assembly. Many Marylanders know that the death penalty is not in the interests of our State, our justice system or the safety of our people.”

Legislation that would have repealed the death penalty in Maryland and replaced it with a sentence of life without parole deadlocked in a tie vote in a key Senate committee last month.

Jane Henderson, executive director of Maryland CASE, said that the 2007 legislative session was a galvanizing moment for death penalty repeal.

“Over the past three months, the Maryland legislature came to see clearly that the death penalty system is broken beyond repair,” Henderson said. “We know from our many conversations that legislators are changing their minds on this issue, and already more voices have pledged to come forward and join the call that Maryland clergy are making today. There is a growing consensus that it is now only a matter of time before Maryland repeals the death penalty. The momentum coming out of the 2007 session bodes well for passing repeal legislation next year.”

Henderson credited Governor Martin O’Malley for effectively addressing one obstacle to death penalty repeal: the killing of a corrections officer. In March, Governor O’Malley moved decisively to close the House of Correction in Jessup, the aging prison that was the state’s most violent and dangerous for both correctional officers and inmates. The Governor also added 150 more corrections

officers in his budget. Last month, more than 50 current and retired law enforcement officials in Maryland – including former prison wardens – urged repeal of the death penalty.

“Some supporters of the death penalty used the killing of a corrections officer to inaccurately claim that the death penalty deters violence,” Henderson said. “But the death penalty is a failed policy that only distracts from the real solutions to prison violence. Veteran prison officials told lawmakers this session that the best way to protect prison guards is through adequate staffing, proper classification, and up-to-date facilities. The governor also recognizes this and has taken important steps to effectively protect Maryland’s prison workers.”

Maryland CASE also will continue to educate lawmakers about the serious problems with the capital punishment system here. Such problems were highlighted when a Maryland State Police ballistics expert committed suicide in early March after it was discovered that he had fabricated some of his credentials. Cases he handled, including at least three involving the death penalty, are now under renewed scrutiny.

“The death penalty system will always be subject to human error, whether it’s inadvertent or intentionally deceptive,” Henderson said. “The risk of executing an innocent person is real and unacceptable.”

Momentum towards repeal in Maryland comes on the heels of growing skepticism of the death penalty nationwide. Last week, the *Chicago Tribune* reversed its century-old position in favor of capital punishment and called for its repeal. This year, legislation to repeal the death penalty passed the Montana Senate and the New Mexico House of Representatives. A similar bill failed in Nebraska’s unicameral legislature by a single vote.

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Maryland Citizens Against State Executions is a coalition of groups and individuals united to end the death penalty in Maryland through education, grassroots action, and public demonstration.