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Murder Victims' Families, Law Enforcement, and Civil Rights Leaders Support Newsom's Decision to Commute Death Sentences

By commuting the largest death row in the Western Hemisphere, Gov. Newsom will deal a decisive blow to the death penalty worldwide

SACRAMENTO, CA – Victims' families, prosecutors, former corrections professionals, faith leaders, civil rights advocates, and business leaders today expressed strong support for Governor Gavin Newsom's landmark decision to commute all death sentences in California – home to the largest death row in the Western Hemisphere – to life without the possibility of parole.

"I won't pretend I've always opposed the death penalty. I used to think the man who killed my sister deserved execution. But over time I've realized that whether he's executed has absolutely nothing to do with my recovery or with real public safety. The system tells survivors that execution matters to our healing. It doesn't. It's a distraction from what we actually need," said **Jess Nichol, whose sister Polly Klaas was killed in Petaluma. Klaas's killer is among those whose death sentence will be commuted.**

Current and former California prosecutors noted that the death penalty fails to deter crime or improve public safety, and instead drains scarce resources away from crime-fighting tools. Since 1978, California has spent billions in taxpayer dollars on a death penalty system that has executed just 13 people. Nearly two-thirds of the over 500 people on the state's death row have been there for more than 20 years, and dozens others have been there for more than 40 years.

"By commuting death sentences, Governor Newsom will save California taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars over the long term, and enable the state to continue its long-term investment into policies proven to improve public safety. This includes expanding mental health treatment, investing in law enforcement, drug intervention, and gun violence prevention. Governor Newsom's actions today will improve public safety for Californians," said **Contra Costa District Attorney Diana Becton.**

"As the elected district attorney of Los Angeles, I supported the death penalty, and my office sought death in some of the cases impacted by the governor's clemency grant. I now see that the death penalty is a failed policy that detracts from real public safety solutions," said

Gil Garcetti, former Los Angeles County District Attorney. “We can and must provide justice to our communities while respecting human rights and human dignity. The governor has made the right choice in balancing justice and ensuring that those inmates whose death sentences are commuted will spend the rest of their lives in prison.”

The sentiment that the death penalty serves no legitimate public safety purpose was echoed in a February letter addressed to Governor Newsom and signed by 21 former corrections officials, who also raised concerns about the toll the death penalty takes on corrections officers. **Jeanne Woodford**, who signed the letter and presided over four executions during her time as warden of San Quentin State Prison, also expressed concern over wrongful executions.

“As someone who has carried out executions in California, I am haunted by the fear that we will execute an innocent person. Innocent people have been sentenced to death in California. Since 1973, more than 200 individuals nationwide, including eight in California, have been freed from death row after they were found to have been innocent. Governor Newsom will ensure that California will never execute an innocent person,” said **Woodford.**

California’s death penalty has long been plagued by bias and dysfunction. More than one-third of people on death row have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. Death sentences are more likely to be imposed when the victims are white than when they are Black or Latino, while the majority of homicides with Black or Latino victims go unsolved. Sixty-nine percent of the people under a death sentence are people of color. Of those, one-third are Black, despite Black residents accounting for less than six percent of the state’s population.

“The death penalty is a flawed, expensive, and error-filled practice that fails us all. I commend Governor Newsom for this historic act and hope that other state elected officials follow his lead,” said **Bryan Stevenson, Equal Justice Initiative’s founder and executive director and author of *Just Mercy***. “Now more than ever, Americans need leaders who act on our beliefs, protect the vulnerable, and stand up for human rights and human dignity.”

Governor Newsom becomes the latest of more than half a dozen U.S. governors who have granted mass clemency in their states in recent years. His announcement follows months of advocacy by murder victims’ family members, former corrections professionals, and former prosecutors, as well as faith, business, civil rights leaders who called on him to act before leaving office. **Read letters they sent to Governor Newsom.**

Governor Newsom’s announcement today marks the first step for commuting death sentences. Today, the governor provided official notice to victims’ family members and district attorneys. After ten days, he will commute about one-third of death sentences on his own. The other two-thirds require concurrence from the California Supreme Court. The

governor submitted those cases to the Court today. Once the Court has ruled, he can move forward with full commutation.

** **Access photos for publication here.**

What Others Are Saying:

- **Bethany Webb, whose sister Laura Webb was killed in Seal Beach, CA:** "My sister Laura Webb lost her life in the 2011 mass shooting in Seal Beach, and my mother Hattie Stretz was shot but survived the same shooting. By commuting all death sentences, Governor Newsom can show the country that real strength and wisdom start with compassion and pragmatism. The governor's actions center the needs of victims, ending the decades of appeals and the empty promises that murder is somehow justified or healing." **Read the letter 50 victims' family members signed urging Governor Newsom to grant universal clemency.**

- **Sister Helen Prejean, national advocate for the end of the death penalty and *author of *Dead Man Walking*:** "I have seen the horrors of the death penalty first hand having accompanied eight human beings to their tortured deaths at the hands of the state. I am joined by hundreds of California faith leaders – from all faiths – who have added their voice to the call for the governor to choose justice through mercy and to commute all death sentences. We are so thankful that our prayers have been answered." **Read the letters from over 130 faith leaders in support of universal clemency.**

- **Martin Luther King, III, human rights activist and eldest son of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:** "As Governor Newsom has said, 'the death penalty is by all measures a failure.' The death penalty discriminates against people who are mentally ill, Black and Brown, or can't afford a lawyer. It does not make us safer and it wastes billions of dollars. It is irreversible and irrevocable, putting innocent lives at risk. I thank Governor Newsom for his commendable actions today, which truly reflect the spirit of my father Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s commitment to equality, civil rights, and nonviolence." **Read the message from over 200 civil rights organizations in support of clemency.**

- **Laura Porter, U.S. Campaign to End the Death Penalty, Executive Director:** "We are grateful that Governor Newsom, like other Republican and Democratic leaders across the country, has decided to grant clemency to individuals on death row. The historic number of commuted sentences would set a new record and offer an acknowledgement that the death penalty process is flawed."

- **Carleen Pickard, Social Mission Director, Ben & Jerry's:** "We congratulate Governor Newsom on holding true to his words and convictions as he takes this historic action to commute California's death row. Even more, we recognize the gravity of this moment for the more than 500 people who had been on the state's death row, many for over 20 years. Newsom's action recognizes what we know to be true, that the death penalty does not address the root causes of crime. We need systemic solutions that ensure our justice system is fair, equal and accountable. We hope that his seminal final act as governor will bring much needed momentum to finally end the death penalty nationwide and around the world." **Read the declaration by nearly 600 executives who oppose the death penalty and support clemency** and **the letter from nearly 100 business leaders to Gov. Newsom urging death row commutations**.

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