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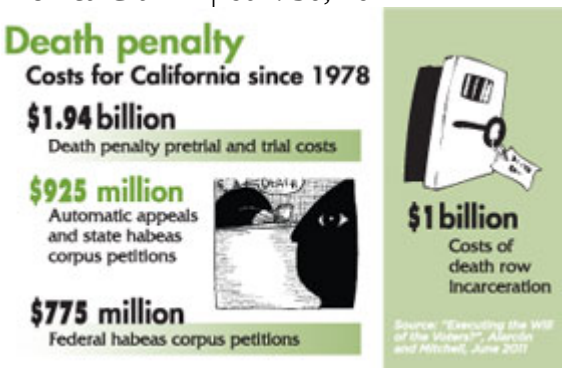
Churches work to get death penalty initiative on ballot

Monica Clark | Jan. 30, 2012



(Illustrations by Margaret Scott)

OAKLAND, CALIF. -- In parishes across California, pastors are urging their parishioners to follow the lead of the state?s Catholic bishops and help put a permanent stop to the death penalty, replacing it with life imprisonment without possibility of parole.

To that end, parishioners are part of a cadre of 2,500 volunteers collecting signatures to qualify the SAFE California (Savings, Accountability, and Full Enforcement for California) Act for the state?s Nov. 6 ballot. If the initiative passes, California would become the 17th state to do away with the death penalty.

California?s Catholic bishops endorsed the initiative Jan. 10, saying, ?As Catholics we hold human life as sacred. In the exercise of justice, this principle must prevail in the manner we treat one another, even those who have done grave harm. ... We have long held that the use of the death penalty is no longer necessary.?

This is only the second time in recent memory that the bishops have endorsed an initiative prior to its qualifying for the ballot. ?It?s fairly historic,? said Carol Hogan, communications director for the California Catholic Conference.

Since the bishops released their statement, there has been a significant upswing in parish and diocesan participation in the campaign.

Volunteers from the San Francisco archdiocese and the Oakland diocese obtained hundreds of signatures during the Jan. 21 Walk for Life in San Francisco while handing out informational flyers on why the initiative should be approved. Additionally, several bishops have sent letters to pastors encouraging them to speak out on the initiative and to authorize signature-gathering before and after weekend Masses.

Bishop Patrick J. McGrath of San Jose told pastors in a Jan. 12 letter that signature-gathering on two February weekends ?is not an optional activity.?

He emphasized that the signature collection must simultaneously include a second initiative effort endorsed by the bishops that would require a young girl, aged 12-17, to include her parents in a decision to secure an

abortion.

Addressing the link between the two initiatives, Bishop Gerald Barnes of San Bernardino emphasized ?the common thread that runs through them -- our belief as Roman Catholics that every human life is sacred, be it unborn or the criminal.?

Catherine Huston, coordinator of the Catholic Campaign to End Use of the Death Penalty for the San Francisco archdiocese, sees the effort as ?the chance for us to live our faith. We don?t kill people to teach people killing is wrong.?

Huston, who with her husband and son has gathered more than 1,000 signatures, rode the Freedom Train from her Burlingame home to San Francisco for the Martin Luther King celebration Jan. 16. On the train and at the rally she collected signatures, finding very few who didn?t want to sign. But, she said, this effort is just the first step in a longer campaign to educate citizens through a ?deeper conversation? about why capital punishment must be eliminated.

As the Catholic representative to the California People of Faith Working against the Death Penalty coalition, Huston is helping steer the 1000 Congregations Campaign to get churches engaged in education and dialogue about the death penalty.

She sees the bishops? most recent statement as a challenge to lay Catholics. ?We can make a powerful difference,? she said. ?The bishops have not changed their stance [against capital punishment] for the past 30 years. Now it is up to the laity to act on this.?

A June 2011 study by former death penalty prosecutor and federal Judge Arthur Alarcón and law professor Paula Mitchell showed that California has spent $4 billion on the death penalty since it was reinstated in 1978. During that time, the state executed 13 people at a cost of $308 million per execution.

By abolishing the death penalty, supporters say, the state can use the savings for additional police to solve the 56 percent of unsolved rape and 46 percent of unsolved murder cases. Additionally, money will be available to develop better crime prevention.

To ensure that the funds are used for these efforts, the initiative requires that for three years the approximately $30 million in annual budget savings be put into the SAFE California Fund to investigate current rape and murder cases. It also specifies that convicted murderers must work to pay restitution into a victims? compensation fund.

California Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye told the Los Angeles Times in December that the death penalty is no longer effective in California and requires ?structural change.? The state doesn?t have the money ?to create the kind of change that is needed,? she said. ?Everyone is laboring under a staggering load.?

Currently more than 700 convicted felons are on California?s death row, the highest in the nation. If voters approve the SAFE California initiative, those sentences would be converted to life imprisonment without parole.

The SAFE California campaign is sponsored by Taxpayers for Public Safety, a coalition of faith, civil rights and legal groups as well as the families of murder victims, people exonerated after wrongful conviction, and members of law enforcement. Organizers estimate it will cost $1.5 million to qualify the initiative for the ballot. Supporters have made donations ranging from $5 to $500,000, according to Miriam Gerace, a campaign spokesperson. Hogan, the bishops? communications director, said the California Catholic Conference will not be a financial contributor.

Endorsers of SAFE California include the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose, the California Province of the Society of Jesus, the Office of Social Ministry of the San Diego diocese, JustFaith Ministries, and Pax Christi USA.

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