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Death penalty grows rarer in US

by Religion News Service

Washington — Death penalty opponents say 2012 showed capital punishment is on the wane, even though the number of death-row inmates executed remained unchanged from 2011 at 43, according to an annual report released Dec. 18 by the Death Penalty Information Center.

"In 2012, fewer states have the death penalty, fewer carried out executions, and death sentences and executions were clustered in a small number of states. It is very likely that more states will take up the question of death penalty repeal in the years ahead," said Richard Dieter, director of the center.

California voters rejected a November referendum that would have abolished capital punishment there.

Nine states executed death row inmates in 2012, down from 13 in 2011. Four states -- Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi and Arizona -- carried out more than three-quarters of all state executions. Texas executed 15 people.

After the Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, the execution rate peaked at 98 executions in 1999. Since then, the trend has been downward, attributed in part to some high-profile cases in which death row inmates have been found innocent after DNA testing.

After serving 15 years on death row, Damon Thibodeaux was freed in September from Louisiana State Penitentiary after DNA evidence cleared him of the crime. He was the 300th person exonerated by DNA evidence in U.S., and had the help of the Innocence Project, a nonprofit that labors to free the wrongly convicted.

Such cases "open the eyes of everyone that there are some mistakes in the system that need to be fixed," said Paul Cates, spokesman for the Innocence Project. "And this has critical consequences when you are

talking about the use of the death penalty."

Anthony Granado, a policy adviser for the U.S bishops' conference, said, "The trend away from use of the death penalty is a hopeful sign that we are moving in the right direction on this issue.

"The church will remain unequivocally pro-life in its advocacy and continue to urge our nation to turn away from use of the death penalty," he said. "We reaffirm that as a society we cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing more people."

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