

URGENT ACTION

ILLINOIS GOVERNOR SIGNS ABOLITION BILL

On 9 March, Governor Pat Quinn of Illinois signed the bill passed by the state legislature in January to abolish the death penalty in the state. Following its 11-year moratorium on executions, Illinois becomes the sixteenth abolitionist state in the USA.

The Illinois legislature passed the abolitionist bill in early January. On 12 January, Governor Quinn said that he would look at the bill carefully, and consider opinions expressed to him in the coming period.

In his statement on 9 March, Governor Quinn said that since the legislature had approved the bill, he had “met or heard from a wide variety of people on both sides of the issue”, including “prosecutors, judges, elected officials, religious leaders from around the world, families of murder victims, people on death row who were exonerated and ordinary citizens who have taken the time to share their thoughts with me”. He said that he had concluded that “our system of imposing the death penalty is inherently flawed. The evidence presented to me by former prosecutors and judges with decades of experience in the criminal justice system has convinced me that it is impossible to devise a system that is consistent, that is free of discrimination on the basis of race, geography or economic circumstance, and that always gets it right.”

Governor Quinn emphasised the fact that since 1977, 20 Illinois death row prisoners had been found to be innocent. He suggested that “that is a record that should trouble us all. To say that this is unacceptable does not even begin to express the profound regret and shame we, as a society, must bear for these failures of justice.”

The Governor said that he had found “no credible evidence that the death penalty has a deterrent effect on the crime of murder” and had concluded that “the enormous sums expended by the state in maintaining a death penalty system would be better spent on preventing crime and assisting victims’ families in overcoming their pain and grief.” The abolitionist legislation requires the reallocation of funds earmarked for capital punishment cases to be used for services for families of murder victims and for the training of law enforcement personnel. Governor Quinn said that, “as I heard from family members who lost loved ones to murder, maintaining a flawed death penalty system will not bring back their loved ones, will not help them to heal and will not bring closure to their pain. Nothing can do that. We must instead devote our resources toward the prevention of crime and the needs of victims’ families, rather than spending more money to preserve a flawed system.”

Illinois executed 12 people between 1990 and 1999. In 2000 then-Governor George Ryan declared a moratorium on executions after concluding that the capital justice system was fundamentally flawed. In 2003, he pardoned four death row inmates whom he concluded were innocent, and commuted the death sentences of 167 other prisoners. Capital prosecutions continued and by 9 March 2011 there were 15 men on the state’s death row. In addition to signing the abolitionist bill, Governor Quinn also commuted the death sentences of these men to life without the possibility of parole.

Governor Quinn ended his statement by acknowledging “that some may strongly disagree with this decision”. He said that he nevertheless firmly believed that “we are taking an important step forward in our history as Illinois joins the 15 other states and many nations of the world that have abolished the death penalty.”

Illinois becomes the third state to enact legislation to abolish the death penalty since 2007, following New Jersey in 2007 and New Mexico in 2009.

No further action by the UA Network is requested. Many thanks to all who sent appeals.

This is the first update of UA 9/11. Further information: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/004/2011/en>
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