



Press Release

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For Immediate Release

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Black Faith Leaders and Decision Makers Announce Full Support for Death Penalty Abolition

On May 18 at 10 a.m., a virtual press conference announced broad support for Senate Bill 103 and House Bill 183 from the Ohio Black Legislative Caucus, Black faith leaders, as well as national and statewide activists. Both bills are identical, strongly bi-partisan, and would abolish Ohio's death penalty. Ohio's death penalty demonstrates a persistent and horrific trend of valuing white lives over Black lives. A Black defendant is twice as likely to receive a death sentence if the victim is white. Furthermore, people of color comprise the majority of death row while only accounting for 15% of Ohio's general population. The death penalty propagates racial injustice and can no longer be tolerated in a system that should idealize fairness and racial equity.

Two members of the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus (OLBC) participated in the press conference, including Senator Hearcel Craig of Columbus and Representative Stephanie Howse of Cleveland. The legislators indicated that they would work diligently to move SB 103 and HB 183 forward in both the House and Senate. The president of the caucus, Representative Thomas West, although not present at the conference, said that the bills had the "full support" of the OLBC.

"Today, we announce the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus' full support and commitment to abolishing the death penalty in Ohio. Senate Bill 103 and House Bill 183 have received

broader support than any prior repeal efforts, and the OLBC is proud to support these bills,” said Representative West.

During the conference, Senator Craig spoke to the urgency of abolishing the death penalty due to the many innocent people who have been sentenced to death in Ohio, as well as its disproportionate impact on Black Ohioans.

“It is time for Ohio to abolish the death penalty. This is a complex issue with serious implications,” said Senator Craig. “Tragically, we know that many people have been wrongfully sentenced to death for crimes they did not commit. We also know that this abhorrent form of punishment disproportionately impacts Black people, other people of color as well as the poor. Sentencing a person to death is an irreversible decision, which is why we must continue to fight for fairness and equity in our criminal justice system.”

Representative Howse also spoke to the concerns around wrongful death sentences, especially as they applied to her district.

“The district I represent falls within Cuyahoga County, which has the appalling reputation for the second most wrongful death sentences in the nation. Of the six innocent men that were sent to death row from Cleveland, five of them were Black. We can no longer ignore that Black lives are consistently devalued by a justice system that should idealize fairness and accuracy. I am proud to stand with my colleagues today as we call for an end to capital punishment in Ohio,” said Representative Howse.

The press conference also featured several Black faith leaders, including Bishop Donald Washington, Senior Pastor at Mt. Hermon Missionary Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr., Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches, Rev. LeCounte Nedab, Pastor at St. James African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and Rev. Dr. Crystal Walker, Executive Director of Greater Dayton Christian Connections. Each of these faith leaders spoke to their personal experience with the death penalty and how their ministry has been affected by the injustice they’ve witnessed. Rev. Dr. Crystal Walker, who lost her son to gun violence, poignantly told her story and expressed opposition to the death penalty.

“As a faith leader, it’s my job to walk with people during some of their darkest days. When I lost my son through gun violence, it seemed the sun would never shine again,” said Rev. Walker. “For me, killing someone who killed does not make any sense at all. It would not bring my son back. Losing a loved one to senseless violence is a wound that never heals. The death penalty only reopens that wound over and over for families like mine. Repealing the death penalty in Ohio and redistributing the funds to programs that could really help heal victim family members is what makes sense to me. The sun did indeed shine again in my life and it was not because someone else died.”

Joining the press conference were national activists Joia Erin Thornton from the Southern Center for Human Rights and Furonda Brasfeld from the 8th Amendment Project. Both women

gave a national perspective on the consistent trend toward death penalty repeal and urged Ohio to be an example for other states that still retain capital punishment.

"The issue of the death penalty under a fine-tooth comb is riddled with racism and perpetuates a cruel and inhumane history and present," said Thornton. "Implicit biases play an outsized role in capital sentencing in the United States; these biases likely influence countless decisions made by prosecutors, police, judges, and juries. Ohio is in a unique position to collaborate with local and national organizers and strategists who have been tirelessly working to end the hackneyed system of state-sanctioned death once and for all."

As time ran short, Jennifer Pryor, Organizing Director at Ohioans to Stop Executions, was unable to give comments. She left these comments instead to be included in this release. "In a moment when our entire country is grappling with our racist past and present, Ohio has a chance to lead. Senate Bill 103 and House Bill 183 would end Ohio's death penalty, a decisive move forward in the pursuit of racial justice. Though we know that there is much work to be done, ending the death penalty would eliminate the proven reality that people are sentenced to die in this state based on their race. I am grateful for the strong bipartisan representation on both of these bills, showing the commitment on both sides of the aisle to the ideal of 'equal justice under law.'"

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#NoDeathPenaltyOH is the official campaign to end Ohio's death penalty. We represent a broad coalition of groups across Ohio calling for an end to an expensive, racist, arbitrary system that convicts innocent people. #NoDeathPenaltyOH speaks for the millions of Ohioans who no longer believe the death penalty is an effective means of achieving "equal justice under law".