



## For Murder Victims' Families

If you have lost a loved one to murder, we want to hear and learn from you. Please **contact us!**

### **The Closure Myth: How the death penalty fails victims' families**

To be meaningful, justice should be swift and sure. The death penalty is neither. It prolongs pain for victims' families, dragging them through an agonizing and lengthy process that holds out the promise of an execution at the beginning but often results in a different sentence in the end. Meanwhile, it showers scarce resources on a few cherry-picked cases while the real needs of the vast majority of victims' families are ignored.

### **Justice neither swift nor sure**

"[The death penalty means victims' families are] putting their lives on hold for years, sometimes decades, as they attend new hearings and appeal and relive the murder."

*Gail Rice, whose brother, Bruce Vanderjagt, a Denver policeman, was murdered in 1997*

"A serial killer ripped Deirdre away from us in 1982. My family had no idea, then, that our ordeal was just beginning. All we knew was that the worst of the worst had happened, and the person who did it should pay the ultimate price – the death penalty.

From 1982 until 1990 I lived day to day, appeal to appeal, decision to decision. We woke up every day wondering what might happen that day. Will there be another appeal? Another motion? What new decision might come down?

The toll it took on me and my family was horrendous... I learned the hard way that the death penalty is an albatross over the heads of victims' families."

*Jim O'Brien, whose daughter, Deirdre, was murdered*

### **The death penalty fails to meet the real needs of surviving families**

The death penalty's complex process diverts millions of dollars and attention from the critical services that homicide survivors need to help them heal, including specialized



grief counseling, financial assistance, and ongoing support. In most states, these services are sorely lacking.

“The money that we spend on the death penalty would be much better spent funding support groups, providing ongoing counseling to survivors, ensuring that every person who is murdered is able to be buried with dignity, and doing everything we can to prevent the tragedy of murder from ever taking place.”

*Henrietta Beckman, whose son, Randy, was murdered in 2003*

The few services that are available are often provided through the prosecutor’s office, so when the criminal case is over the services for the victim’s family end along with it.

For families in unsolved murders, there is the added pain of never learning what happened to their loved ones. The people responsible remain undetected while countless law enforcement hours are spent chasing a handful of executions instead of solving more cases.

Case in point: Gail LaSuer’s daughter, Monique, was murdered in Colorado in 2000. The killer was never found. There are 1,200 unsolved murder cases in Colorado alone, and families like Gail’s launched a campaign to end the death penalty and use the savings to fund a cold case unit to find the people who killed their loved ones. Gail said, “I would rather have a larger number of people caught than have a few executed.”

## **The death penalty divides families when they need each other most**

“The death penalty is not given out equally. It’s about saying certain cases are more important than others, certain crimes are more heinous than others... and for families it’s a real slap in our face.”

*Khalilah Brown-Dean, whose cousin was murdered*

The death penalty has split families apart, forcing relatives with different views on the issue to engage in a polarizing debate at the time when they need each other most.

It’s supposed to be reserved for the “most heinous” murders, but that implies that most murders are ordinary. There is no such thing as an “ordinary” murder for the grieving family left behind. Many families feel these kinds of distinctions are a slap in the



face. The death penalty has split families apart, forcing relatives with different views on the issue to engage in a polarizing debate at the time when they need each other most.

When the defendant and victim are related, families are even further torn apart. In a number of cases, for example, children must first cope with the murder of one parent and then suffer a new layer of trauma and grief when the other parent is executed for the crime.

Case in point: Felicia Floyd was 11 when her father murdered her mother in a drunken rage. Felicia's father was on death row in Georgia for 21 years, during which time the family was able to find some reconciliation. Felicia and her brother pleaded with the state not to execute their father, but were ignored. The execution left them orphans.

### **Can we make the system faster?**

The death penalty is irreversible. The process is longer because a life is on the line. Many of the extra procedures are legally required to reduce the risk of mistakes. And even these safeguards are not enough – at least 144 people have been exonerated from death row after waiting years or decades for the truth to come out. Streamlining the process would virtually guarantee the execution of an innocent person.

Even states with the fewest protections and a faster process take years or decades to carry out an execution. In Texas, for example, there are people on death row who have been there for over two decades.

We have learned a lot about the death penalty in the last 30 years – and those lessons have meant pain and suffering for the families whose loved ones have been murdered. What was supposed to provide comfort to victims has become a colossal failure that has prolonged their pain. **Isn't it time to say enough is enough?**