JAY INSLEE
Governor

STATE OF WASHINGTON
Office of the Governor

Governor Inslee's remarks announcing a capital punishment moratorium

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Remarks as prepared

Good morning.

I'm here today to talk to you about an important criminal justice issue.

Over the course of the past year, my staff and I have been carefully reviewing the status of capital punishment in Washington State.

We've spoken to people in favor and strongly opposed to this complex and emotional issue, including law enforcement officers, prosecutors, former directors of the Department of Corrections, and the family members of the homicide victims.

We thoroughly studied the cases that condemned nine men to death. I recently visited the state penitentiary in Walla Walla and I spoke to the men and women who work there. I saw death row and toured the execution chamber, where lethal injections and hangings take place.

Following this review, and in accordance with state law, I have decided to impose a moratorium on executions while I'm Governor of the state of Washington.

Equal justice under the law is the state's primary responsibility. And in death penalty cases, I'm not convinced equal justice is being served.

The use of the death penalty in this state is unequally applied, sometimes dependent on the budget of the county where the crime occurred.

Let me acknowledge that there are many good protections built into Washington State's death penalty law.

But there have been too many doubts raised about capital punishment. There are too many flaws in the system. And when the ultimate decision is death there is too much at stake to accept an imperfect system.

Let me say clearly that this policy decision is not about the nine men currently on death row in Walla Walla.

I don't question their guilt or the gravity of their crimes. They get no mercy from me.

This action today does not commute their sentences or issue any pardons to any offender.

But I do not believe their horrific offenses override the problems that exist in our capital punishment system.

And that's why I am imposing a moratorium on executions. If a death penalty case comes to my desk for action, I will issue a reprieve.

What this means is that those on death row will remain in prison for the rest of their lives. Nobody is getting out of prison -- period.

I have previously supported capital punishment. And I don't question the hard work and judgment of the county prosecutors who bring these cases or the judges who rule on them.

But my review of the law in Washington State and my responsibilities as Governor have led me to reevaluate that position.

I recognize that many people will disagree with this decision. I respect everyone's beliefs on this and have no right to question or judge them.

With my action today I expect Washington State will join a growing national conversation about capital punishment. I welcome that and I'm confident that our citizens will engage in this very important debate.

I'd like to tell Washingtonians about what lead me to this decision.

First, the practical reality is that those convicted of capital offenses are, in fact, rarely executed. Since 1981, the year our current capital laws were put in place, 32 defendants have been sentenced to die. Of those, 19, or 60%, had their sentences overturned. One man was set free and 18 had their sentences converted to life in prison.

When the majority of death penalty sentences lead to reversal, the entire system itself must be called into question.

Second, the costs associated with prosecuting a capital case far outweigh the price of locking someone up for life without the possibility of parole.

Counties spend hundreds of thousands of dollars – and often many millions -- simply to get a case to trial.

And after trial, hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent on appellate costs for decades.

Studies have shown that a death penalty case from start to finish is more expensive than keeping someone in prison for the rest of their lives – even if they live to be 100 years of age.

Third, death sentences are neither swift nor certain. Seven of the nine men on death row committed their crimes more than 15 years ago, including one from 26 years ago. While they sit on death row and pursue appeal after appeal, the families of their victims must constantly revisit their grief at the additional court proceedings.

Fourth, there is no credible evidence that the death penalty is a deterrent to murder. That's according to work done by the National Academy of Sciences, among other groups.

And finally, our death penalty is not always applied to the most heinous offenders.

That is a system that falls short of equal justice under the law and makes it difficult for the State to justify the use of the death penalty.

In 2006, state Supreme Court Justice Charles Johnson wrote that in our state, "the death penalty is like lightening, randomly striking some defendants and not others."

I believe that's too much uncertainty.

Therefore, for these reasons, pursuant to RCW 10.01.120, I will use the authority given to the Office of the Governor to halt any death warrant issued in my term.

I will take your questions.