NEWS RELEASE

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Current and Former Virginia Prosecutors Announce Support for Death Penalty Repeal

RICHMOND, Virginia – Twenty-one current and former prosecutors have signed a letter in support of legislation to end capital punishment in Virginia. Among the signers are two former Attorneys General and nine current or previously elected Commonwealth's Attorneys, as well as signers from nearly every region of the Commonwealth.

Calling the death penalty "a failed government program," the prosecutors cite problems with Virginia's inconsistent application of the death penalty. Most jurisdictions have not pursued the death penalty in the modern era, and no judge or jury has imposed a death sentence since 2011.

The prosecutors also point to the financial strain of pursuing a death sentence, the lack of a clear deterrent effect on crime, and concerns regarding wrongful convictions. They urge legislators to support the "more cost-effective, constitutional" alternative of life in prison without the possibility of parole, stating that "[w]e do not need the death penalty to harshly punish murderers."

Several of the signers have prosecuted capital cases. Mark Earley, Sr., a Republican who served as Virginia's Attorney General between 1988-1997, presided over 36 executions during his tenure but now supports repeal. Mike Herring, a Democrat who recently left office as the Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney and has both prosecuted and defended those accused of capital murder, also supports the repeal effort and was "tremendously proud to be a signatory." At least two other signers manage jurisdictions with active capital murder cases.

Parisa Dehghani-Tafti, Jim Hingeley, and Steve Descano, three recently elected prosecutors who took campaign positions against the death penalty, are also among the signers. Amy Ashworth, the newly elected Commonwealth's Attorney in Prince William County, is another noteworthy supporter. Until recently, Prince William County was known as one of Virginia's most active capital jurisdictions.

Two statewide groups led the effort to organize prosecutor support for repeal. Justice Forward Virginia was founded in 2017 and promotes numerous criminal justice system reforms, including an end to capital punishment in the Commonwealth. Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty has existed since 1991 and seeks an end to the death penalty through education, organizing, and advocacy.

The Senate Courts of Justice Committee is scheduled to hear repeal legislation on Monday, February 3. The House of Delegates is expected to consider repeal later in the week.

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