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Statement to the members of the
Connecticut Joint Committee on Judiciary
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In Support of HB-6425 and SB-1035

My name is Helen Jack, and I am a junior at Yale University and a member of Amnesty International USA. Even though this week is Yale's spring break, a group of other students and I traveled here from New Haven to demonstrate our support for death penalty abolition. In the past year, nine undergraduate student organizations, six religious ministries on campus, and two Yale Law School groups have joined together to work for death penalty abolition in Connecticut. We have held panel discussions with state legislators, professors, and death row exonerees, such as Juan Melendez, who spent almost eighteen years on death row for a crime he did not commit. We have also rallied students to take direct action by calling or writing their legislators, urging them to work for abolition. I have been thrilled to see hundreds of students getting involved in these efforts, and I am honored to be able to share just a bit of the passion that I have felt on campus with you today.

I am a leader in Yale's Amnesty International chapter and involved with Amnesty's work around the northeast. There are over 5,000 dues-paying Amnesty International members in Connecticut. Thus, I am representing not only my own views, but also those of Amnesty's supporters around the state.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases, regardless of the gravity of the crime. If there is one aspect of the death penalty that Amnesty International is best suited to address, it is how capital punishment is administered around the world. There are now 139 countries that have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. The United States stands virtually alone among advanced industrialized democratic societies in retaining the death penalty. Why should the United States of America, or the state of Connecticut, stand among the governments that currently control China and Iran, when all the countries whose political traditions we claim to share – the United Kingdom, Canada, France, among many others – have long since abolished the death penalty?

There are people who are surprised by Amnesty International's opposition to the death penalty. They applaud Amnesty's efforts on behalf of prisoners of conscience. They share Amnesty's abhorrence of torture. But they fail to understand that an execution is the ultimate form of torture, that if it is wrong to attach electrodes to a prisoner in order to give her pain, but not to kill her, then it is surely wrong to attach electrodes in order to kill the prisoner. Seen in this light, the death penalty is no longer simply a criminal justice issue. It is the ultimate violation of human rights.