Catherine Ednie, Stamford CT, sister of a murder victim
Testimony in Support of SB 280

This is me and my little brother, David. This was taken a long time ago, in 1977, when we both still imagined a bright future ahead for us. Little did I know that my brother would be taken from my family by a shocking and horrible crime. My 22-year-old brother and four of his friends were murdered by their landlord in Georgetown, CT, on April 18, 1995. I really hate remembering the details of that April day, and the aftermath--the funerals, the trauma of the families and community, the difficult process of trial and sentencing, the long years of trying to recover a sense of sanity. I'd rather remember my brother in happier times like the picture shows here.

So why am I here today? I'm here because I feel so much responsibility as a family member of a murder victim to speak up about the realities of the death penalty system in Connecticut. So many times I hear people arguing for the death penalty say "What if it happened in your family?," like the answer would be obvious. Well, it did happen in my family. And I'm here to tell you I don't want the death penalty. The death penalty harmed and continues to harm families of murder victims in a multitude of ways.

I'd like to highlight one of the harmful effects of the death penalty that's painfully obvious in my brother's case. It's the often-heard argument that "We need the death penalty for crimes that are the worst of the worst."

First of all, the term "worst of the worst" is insulting and hurtful to family members of murder victims. It divides murders into two classes, the worst and the not so bad. One class--the worst--deserves the hugely disproportionate resources of a death penalty case. The other class--the not so bad--does not. All the families here today feel that their experience qualifies as the worst of the worst. All the families here would benefit from a more equitable distribution of resources to all victims of violent crime.

Second the "worst of the worst" argument is also just not true. Connecticut does not apply the death penalty to the worst of the worst. My brother's case is a prime example. In the Donohue report mentioned earlier, Professor Donohue called my brother's case "a clear illustration of the arbitrary and capricious nature of the Connecticut death penalty system." Professor Donohue wrote:

...most would find a case where the killer drives all the way from North Carolina to kill five tenants with whom he had been feuding, shoots them all, and lights the house on fire...to be an unusually egregious crime.

The prosecution did pursue the death penalty for two years in my brother's case and then suddenly, in what was called "a stunning reversal" dropped it. To this day, I'm not really sure why. Now, there were a lot of people affected by this mass murder: five families, not to mention countless friends and community members, and they had a range of different views. Some of them really wanted the killers to die; others didn't want to go there. However, none of them wanted to be put through the brutal ordeal that is a capital case in Connecticut, and all of them found a way to come to terms with the eventual sentence of life in prison without possibility of release.

So this is the system we have in Connecticut. It's a system of smoke and mirrors, a system where the state tells a grieving family sorry, the murder that destroyed your family was not egregious enough for the death penalty. A system where the prosecution first finds a case of mass murder egregious enough, and then wakes up one morning to find that it's not egregious enough. A system where even if there is a death penalty conviction, it is most likely not followed through with an execution.

I would feel a tremendous sense of relief if Connecticut dropped the arbitrary and hurtful illusion that the death penalty is needed for the worst of the worst. All families of murder victims would be better served by having a maximum penalty of life in prison without possibility of parole.