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Testimony in Support of SB 280 to repeal the death penalty

My beloved brother and dearest friend, Joe Healy, was a former priest, a preacher, a teacher, a grief counselor, and a story teller. In the town of Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, he was the Dean of professional story tellers, whose wonderfully fashioned parables and folktales brought laughter, good news, or just plain joy to all, children and adults alike.

On March 1st, 2000, he sat in the local Burger King, as he did every morning, to await the school bus, where he would share parables and character building stories with the children on their long ride to school--. Suddenly, he was shot in the back of the head, one of five victims of a senseless, random, multiple shooting. Two men were badly wounded and three were dead--- including our Joe.

Joe left behind his wife, 7 step-children and 20 grandchildren, for whom he was the "in house" story teller. Our families, like most family members of capital case murder victims, have seen firsthand the destructive effects that the death penalty system has on family members like me and mine...

I have found no solace in the death sentence imposed upon my brother's killer.

Grieving the loss of a loved one is, already, a very slow and complicated work. Yet, following the most traumatic event of our life, and before we could even begin to process what had happened to us, we were thrown into a long and complicated capital process; a process that invites mourners to postpone the work of dealing with grief; counseling, support groups, any of the usual emotional, psychological or spiritual helps. "Only the death sentence" will allow them to heal.

The penalty trial itself further sidetracks grief. The victim impact statement invited us to focus on the horrors of the crime and on our pain and suffering. It encouraged us—even if only implicitly—to seek retribution, thus capitalizing on family pain to turn the hearts of the jurors. I will never forget returning to PA after two years, for the sentencing phase of the trial, and seeing family members of each of the victims of this homicide, still stalled in a waiting pattern. There was no time to consider together the death penalty, or whether we wanted it. Instead, we were sucked into a process that left no oxygen in the room for us to think about, less discuss, anything else. The system focused, not on healing or other needs of victim families, but on the case and the trial- all else was put on hold. As the process unfolded, it continued to short circuit our grieving process. We were promised, not healing, but revenge, under the deceptive name of justice.

This process has the potential for making family members active participants in the call for the death penalty, strengthening bonds against a mutual enemy rather than allowing the natural formation of a mutual support group.

One grieving widow sat immobilized, having "merely existed" for two years. Her 18 year old son had had to leave school in order to be with her in limbo. After the death penalty was assigned, she said, "NOW I have to pull myself together". But now, ten years later, the killer remains on death row, and it saddens me greatly to realize that she is likely, still, tying her healing to the execution of that man.

Only now, am I beginning to learn about how my own family was reeling in the wake of Joe's death.

Instead of supporting the natural grief journey, the death penalty system traps people in an extended process that stalls grief and offers a false promise of "closure" to come with the execution of the perpetrator. Anyone who has lost a loved one to violence will tell you there is no such thing as closure. A sentence of life without the possibility of release, on the other hand, does complete the criminal justice process, opening the door for victim's families to focus on the hard work of grieving and healing, instead of waiting for a magic solution.

In the end, the entire death penalty process forces victims' families into a fight that can't be won. It is an outrageously long and expensive process, particularly unjustifiable in the light of so many unmet family needs.

Better that we take all the money we waste on the death penalty process to help victims of crime receive the support they really need. Couldn't some of that money be better spent on crime prevention programs, like the one my brother Joe actually worked in as a volunteer at his local police department? We could invest in more programs like this in Connecticut. Even that would be a better legacy to my brother and a better way to support all victims in Connecticut.
Simply put...

The death penalty does not benefit victims.