



May 15, 2018

The Problem with the Death Penalty

This week, Governor Rauner proposed reinstating the death penalty in cases where the accused is convicted “beyond all doubt” of multiple murders or the murder of a law enforcement official like a policeman.

Capital punishment was a bad idea before 2011 - when Illinois finally abolished the death penalty - and it is a bad idea now.

Capital punishment is a political issue where both Republicans and Democrats find common ground. Some Democrats and Republicans think the death penalty is a necessary evil. Many others, both Republicans and Democrats, feel that it is ethically and morally wrong for the state to take someone’s life. This country’s unfair justice system have turned most states away from the use of the death penalty.

According to Injustice Watch, “in Illinois, of some 300 defendants sentenced to death under the law that was abolished seven years ago, 20 were exonerated [actually found not guilty with new evidence AFTER they were convicted and sentenced to death]—an error rate in excess of 6 percent. While procedures have been improved to lessen the chances of false convictions, the “demon of error”—to borrow a phrase from former Governor George H. Ryan—will forever be present.”

And, we have to question the racial aspects of handing down the death sentence: 14 of the 20 who were exonerated in Illinois were African American (and three were Latino).

Others have stated that having the death penalty doesn’t even save the state any money, because of all the money that must be spent in the courts in the appeal process. It is a bad investment for the state - if Illinois were to reinstate the death penalty, it would cost taxpayers MORE money. In California, cases without the death penalty cost **\$740,000**, while cases where the death penalty is sought cost **\$1.26 million**. Maintaining each death row prisoner costs taxpayers **\$90,000** more per year than a prisoner in general population.

Some people say we need the death penalty because it deters murders, but it does not. The Injustice Watch notes that “if [the death penalty deterred murders], having the death penalty would result in lower murder rates, but studies spanning more than 150 years have found that proportionately fewer murders occur in states that do not have the death penalty than in states that do—and, in the latter, that murder rates increase after highly publicized executions.”

Illinois continues to invest more in the Department of Corrections, and the reinstatement of the death penalty is an indication of the governor’s priorities. We must prevent mass murders, police killings, and deaths like

Laquan McDonald by investing more in communities like Austin, Lawndale, Garfield Park, and Englewood. We need to enrich and enhance the lives of everyone through the principles of social and restorative justice, improved educational and economic opportunities, and a better quality of life for all.

We cannot let the governor's misguided proposal to reinstate the death penalty derail work that is already going on to form legislation that can increase public safety in Illinois.

Since being named this spring to the governor's bipartisan bicameral Legislative Public Safety Working Group after the Parkland, Florida school shooting, I have been working with colleagues on a wide range of issues that impact the safety and security of Illinois citizens. We are working toward a comprehensive approach to public safety, including critical issues such as gun trafficking, school safety, mental health and crime prevention.

Public safety continues to be of high concern for every school and community across Illinois, and this bi-partisan work group has been a fair process allowing members of the General Assembly and the governor to examine best practices and find common ground for meaningful policies to help eliminate preventable violence, and this work should continue. We should work on increasing public safety with measures that really work, and not go back in time with a debate over the death penalty.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District