

## **Death Penalty Hearing Testimony**

*June 11, 2015*

My name is Steve Honeyman, and I am the Interim Executive Director of **Witness to Innocence**, the only national organization in the United States composed of and led by exonerated death row survivors and their family members. The mission of WTI is to abolish the death penalty by empowering exonerated death row survivors and their loved ones to become effective leaders in the abolition movement.

Witness to Innocence applauds the moratorium on executions issued by Governor Tom Wolf on February 13, 2015 until he has "received and reviewed the forthcoming report of the Pennsylvania Task Force and Advisory Commission on Capital Punishment, established under Senate Resolution 6 of 2011, and there is an opportunity to address all concerns satisfactorily."

The upcoming release of the Task Force's study will no doubt contain a number of statistics about Pennsylvania's death penalty system whether it relates to cost, deterrence effect or race. However, there is a number that Witness to Innocence believes is the most compelling reason to issue a moratorium – 6. That is the number of death row inmates that have been exonerated from Pennsylvania's death row. Six times Pennsylvania has gotten it wrong. Six times Pennsylvania nearly executed an innocent person.

**Harold Wilson**, WTI member, is one of those six. He sat on death row for 17 ½ years for a crime he did not commit. He came within days of his scheduled execution. Moreover, he lost some of the most productive years of his life. He missed watching his two children grow up. Is the death penalty worth taking the wrong person's life?

While six innocent lives may seem too high a price to carry out a system of executions, compare that number to 15

– the number of death row inmates that have been exonerated around the country. That means that for every nine prisoners executed since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, one innocent person was condemned to die and later exonerated. How many other innocent people still await execution or have already gone to their deaths?

Imagine if a construction company had such an error rate – for every nine buildings they constructed, one building collapsed. Would this company be allowed to keep its license?

Although death penalty abolition has generally been deemed a “liberal” cause, repeal has begun to strike a chord even for those who consider themselves more conservative. **George Will**, conservative columnist at the Washington Post writes, “Conservatives, especially, should draw this lesson...Capital punishment, like the rest of the criminal justice system, is a government program, so skepticism is in order.” While conservative figure

**Richard Viguerie** remarks, “Conservatives have every reason to believe the death penalty system is no different from any politicized, costly, inefficient, bureaucratic, government-run operation, which we conservatives know are rife with injustice. But here the end result is the end of someone’s life. In other words, it’s a government system that kills people.”

Not only are conservatives speaking out against the death penalty, but they are ending this government program in their state. On **May 26, 2015 Nebraska** became the first Republican-controlled state since 1973 to pass repeal. Many lawmakers cited conservative concerns about the death penalty such as cost, but more importantly, they were concerned of the risk of executing an innocent person. After meeting WTI Director of Membership and Training and WTI member Ray Krone, Republican Senator Bob Hilkemann commented, “Ray was the 100th person exonerated by post-conviction DNA evidence, which indicated to me our judicial system doesn't always get it right. There have now been more than 150 people exonerated from death row. To me, this is 150 innocent lives that would have been unjustly ended.” When it came time to vote for repeal, Hilkemann voted to end the death penalty three times, and he joined his fellow Senators, many conservative, to override a governor veto.

The members of Witness to Innocence experience the traumatic consequences of a flawed death penalty system that wrongfully convicts too many people everyday. Governor Wolf's moratorium is a small measure to those exonerates to ensure that what happened to them never happens to another person.