

Faith Leaders Call for an Immediate Suspension of the Death Penalty in Los Angeles County

We are religious leaders from Los Angeles County who have come together to call on District Attorney Jackie Lacey to change course in her use of the death penalty. Our county has gained the dubious distinction of sentencing individuals to death at one of the highest rates in the country. That troubles us, especially given that our corrections system today can keep society safe without needing to resort to executions. None of us deny the need for accountability and consequences for those guilty of grave crimes. At the same time, our criminal justice system must recognize the dignity of every person and not close off hope and the possibility for redemption.

We were inspired by Gov. Gavin Newsom's recent announcement instituting a moratorium on executions and dismantling the death chamber. He spoke from the heart about how the death penalty system is an abject failure, how it causes many victims' families further harm, and how we should be "better than this" as a society.

In stark contrast is a recent report documenting Los Angeles County's overreliance on the death penalty. Of the over 3,000 counties nationwide, Los Angeles County was [one of only four counties](#) in the whole country to obtain more than one death sentence in 2018, and it is just one of two counties nationwide to have more than 20 death sentences in the last seven years.

The District Attorney's Office in Los Angeles has zealously pursued the death penalty, which has put us out of step with the rest of California and the nation. In 2016, [a majority of voters](#) from Los Angeles County supported an initiative to repeal the death penalty, and a [March 2019 Public Policy Institute of California poll](#) shows that nearly two-thirds of LA county residents prefer alternatives to the death penalty. We are especially concerned that the majority of people who receive death sentences come from some of our most vulnerable populations, including those with severe mental illnesses, histories of childhood trauma and abuse, intellectual disabilities, and brain injury, as well as youthful offenders who were under the age of 25 at the time of the crime.

There is evidence that the death penalty prolongs the suffering of many murder victims' families, since capital cases involve years of legal uncertainty, hearings, and frequent media headlines that can reopen old wounds. Victims' families spend years, and often decades, waiting for an execution that may never come.

In addition, we believe that the death penalty is not the highest and best use of the county's limited financial resources. [Death penalty trials](#) are exorbitantly expensive, and we'd rather county funds be used to support local programs that prevent crime, improve education and opportunities, and provide services to the families of murder victims. And with Gov. Newsom's moratorium, these trials are even less likely to result in executions, making the waste of resources an even greater concern. We should use our resources to improve life, not end it.

Racial disparities in the death penalty's application also suggest that it is being applied unjustly. Between 2013 and the present, *every* person sentenced to death in Los Angeles County was a person of color. We are also troubled by our state and country's alarming rate of wrongful conviction. More than 165 people have been released from death rows across the country, including five here in California, due to wrongful

conviction. A criminal justice system that fails to treat everyone equally, and is riddled with error, erodes trust between the community and its officials.

In sum, excessive use of the death penalty in Los Angeles reflects a belief that we cannot accept – that certain offenders are beyond redemption. No matter what someone did, they remain God’s creation and have intrinsic value. When holding offenders accountable, our justice system cannot lose sight of the dignity of every individual. Change is needed in Los Angeles County to reflect this truth.

Therefore we, the undersigned, call on District Attorney Jackie Lacey to immediately suspend use of the death penalty in Los Angeles County and to support Gov. Gavin Newsom's death penalty moratorium.

Name:

Title:

Place of worship and/or name of congregation:

Faith denomination:

City:

Phone:

Email:

Date:

Please return signed forms to sfaucher@8thamendment.org or visit <http://bit.ly/LAfaithltr> to sign online.