

House Judiciary Committee
February 14, 2007
SB 5786 – Creating a Death Penalty Task Force

My name is Kevin Glackin-Coley and I am here this afternoon on behalf of the Washington State Catholic Conference, which represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State. The Conference urges you to support the passage of SB 5786, creating a task force to study the use of the death penalty in Washington State.

It is important to note that in January 2000 the Catholic Bishops of Washington State issued a statement, *A Call for the Abolition of the Death Penalty*. While SB 5786 would not abolish capital punishment, it would provide a forum for reviewing whether the death penalty is being applied equitably in our State.

The Bishops frame their opposition to the death penalty and their support for this bill in the context of their compassion for those who have lost a loved one to murder, the safety of the larger community, and their respect for the sanctity of human life. As they declared in their statement:

“Our reverence and love for every human person demands that we reach out in a special way to the victims of violence. We decry the evil of murder, and we recognize the anguish of those whose loved ones have been murdered. Families and friends of murder victims have suffered terribly because of the loss of their loved ones. Our shared humanity requires that we try to console them by welcoming them into our communities of love and support. We call upon parishes and faith communities to develop meaningful ways to minister to, and journey with, those who have suffered so grievously.”

State Legislatures across the country are considering proposals to review their use of the death penalty. These efforts have been spurred on by the increasing concern over the potential for innocent people to be sentenced to death and executed. Additional concerns include the vastly disproportionate percentage of death sentences for those whose victims were white, and the inability of many capital defendants to afford adequate representation. In Washington State there is also the impact of the Gary Ridgeway case that raises serious concerns about proportionality of any death sentences that might be handed down in the future.

As stated previously, this bill does not abolish the death penalty. It does, however, allow us to review the practice of capital punishment in Washington State, and determine whether it is being applied fairly and equitably. The conclusion may be that our current laws are sufficient, that they may need some fine-tuning, or we may be forced to conclude with former US Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun that we “can no longer tinker with the machinery of death.” Given the finality of capital punishment we must take all steps possible to ensure that we can live with the reality of how the death penalty is applied.

Again, in the name of the Catholic Bishops of Washington State, I urge you to support the passage of SB 5786. Thank you for your consideration.