

To: The Honorable Senator Angela Williams
The Honorable Senator Julie Gonzales

I am writing this letter to support your efforts to repeal the death penalty by urging the Colorado Legislature to abolish the death penalty. I write to share my perspective on capital punishment as a former correctional professional who has participated in executions.

I am a retired superintendent of the Oregon State Penitentiary with the Oregon Department of Corrections. In that capacity, I carried out the only two executions that have taken place in the State of Oregon in the past 55 years. The experience of participating in the state-sanctioned killing of another human being had a profound and traumatic effect on me, and on my fellow correctional officers. In September 2016, I described that experience in a column that ran in the New York Times on September 15, 2016, which I am attaching to this letter.

My decades as a correctional professional and my direct experience with the administration of the death penalty have left me firmly convinced that capital punishment is a failed government policy. It does not deter crime. It does not make our society safer. It is not imposed on "the worst of the worst." Yes, these individuals committed serious crimes and they should be severely punished for their actions for the rest of their lives. But the men I have known who were sentenced to death were poor, mentally ill, abused, neglected – the death penalty was just one more unfairness life inflicted upon them. These are important reasons to oppose the death penalty. Another is the racial bias we see in the high number of minority defendants against whom capital punishment is sought and obtained around the country. In Colorado, this disparity is extreme – only black men sit on your state's death row, though Colorado's black population is barely 5%.

But there is another reason you should abolish the death penalty in Colorado, one I hope you will give great weight. By doing so, you will protect the men and women who work for the Colorado Department of Corrections from the devastating effects of participating in an execution. I still live with those effects. My colleagues and I experienced long-term repercussions from the process of practicing, over and over, to kill someone, the stress and anxiety of worrying about a possible botched execution, and then, even when things went "smoothly," the after-effects of knowing we had used our own hands, and the power of our position, to take a human life.

Correctional professionals have undertaken difficult and dangerous jobs, and we know and accept the challenges of managing dangerous prisoners. From my decades of experience in this profession, I can tell you that the death penalty does nothing to protect prison employees or other prisoners. Instead, it drains resources that could be used for training, infrastructure, rehabilitation, mental health treatment, and other things that actually do make prisons safer.

In recent years, Colorado has made important reforms to its criminal justice and correctional policies, including a reduction in the use of solitary confinement that has won national recognition. By abolishing the death penalty, Colorado tangibly and significantly reduce costs, allow the Department of Corrections to more rationally and effectively allocate its resources, and protect state employees from ever having to participate in an execution. I hope you will pass this important legislation.

If I can be of any assistance as you weigh these life and death decisions, please call on me at any time.

Sincerely,
Semon Frank Thompson
Salem, Oregon
Plez34@icloud.com