

August 27, 2025

Governor Mike DeWine  
30<sup>th</sup> Floor  
77 South High Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-6117

SENT VIA EMAIL

Dear Governor DeWine:

I would like to share with you some thoughts I have about capital punishment. As you are aware, while serving as Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction from 1991 to 2006, I oversaw the executions of twenty condemned prisoners under Ohio's death penalty law.

I did not object to this responsibility as it was the law of Ohio, and as ODRC Director it was my obligation to enforce the law. Nonetheless, I personally opposed then, as I do now, capital punishment. These are a few of the reasons I hold this position:

My immediate concern as Director, when the likelihood increased that someone would be electrocuted, was that I did not want staff subjected to a "botched" electrocution. A botched electrocution could have been exceptionally cruel and unusual for prisoners. It would have been traumatizing for members of the execution teams, as well. I, therefore, petitioned the Ohio General Assembly to change the law.

When lethal injection became the only form of capital punishment, I was accused by some anti-capital punishment advocates of "sanitizing" executions. I did believe it would have a less harmful impact on staff, but adopting lethal injection didn't change my mind about opposing the death penalty. Immediately following an execution, ODRC made available behavioral health staff as a precautionary measure for personnel involved with an execution.

I have been fortunate enough to have travelled the world promoting and learning about correctional best practices. Corrections practitioners from the USA are often stigmatized for our stance on capital punishment as well as an overreliance on incarceration. The United States is one of a handful of nations that put persons to death for ordinary crimes (unrelated to national security). The USA also stands as an outlier among many Western nations for its continued use of the death penalty.

Since the Ohio legislature in 1994 enacted the "Death Penalty and Life Without the Possibility of Parole" statute, many counties now rely on it in lieu of pursuing the death penalty. Capital cases are extremely expensive to try. I, however, do wonder about two notions: 1) had this statute existed prior to its enactment, would there have been as many people convicted of capital murder, and 2) were there people being sentenced to LWOP who would have once received a life *with* the possibility of parole?

Prisoners sentenced to capital punishment are often indistinguishable from other prisoners with a murder conviction. The difference of whether one's time is done on death row or in the general population may very well depend on the sentencing county. This is the case even when severity of the crime committed and criminal history are taken into consideration.

Racial bias, as well, in the application of the death penalty in the US is a well-documented and persistent issue. Studies consistently show that defendants who kill white victims are more likely to be sentenced to death than those who kill black victims.

The quality of the defense team is also significant. One is much more likely *not* to be convicted of capital murder if they are represented by high-quality lawyers. Their ability to investigate the case, pay experts, and more, is often the difference between life and death. Underpaid and low-resourced public defenders are usually unequipped to provide this level of a defense in a capital murder case.

The claim that the death penalty is *not* a deterrent to crime, particularly murder, is supported by a significant body of research and analysis. Many studies, including a report from the National Research Council, have concluded that there is no reliable evidence that the death penalty reduces crime rates more effectively than other forms of punishment.

The death penalty in the US is significantly more expensive than life imprisonment, often costing taxpayers millions of dollars more per case. Studies consistently show that the costs associated with death penalty cases, including legal processes, trials, appeals, and incarceration, far outweigh the expenses of life imprisonment.

Many murder victim families do not endorse capital punishment. Victims' families are often revictimized waiting years for an execution to take place. Some prisoners have been on death row for two decades. When an execution date is set, the condemned inmate most likely will not be executed due to multiple appeal opportunities. On the other hand, when subjects are convicted of aggravated murder, victim family members know the disposition at the time of sentencing. Even though the sentence may be appealed, and they may disagree with the sentence, they have a sense of closure.

It is because of these notions that I oppose capital punishment. There are 27 states in the US that have a death penalty statute. Of those, some have imposed a moratorium on executions. Others have no one on death row. I have been in touch with the advocacy group Ohioans to Stop Executions for many years. They know the science of these issues much better than I do. I don't participate in anti-death penalty events, nor have I given in-person testimony for pending legislation. I will sign, and have signed, petitions to eliminate capital punishment.

Respectfully submitted,

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September 5, 2025

Honorable Governor DeWine:

In my first letter, I focused on my very personal experiences having served as Director and fully responsible for the execution process and compliance with the protocol approved by the Federal Court. That letter stands as a separate personal reflection.

This communication will attempt to reflect what I observed and felt from the other team members and support staff that were integral to this process designed to end the life of another human being. I want to emphasize that this team was the most caring dedicated group of staff I have ever worked with, always recognizing the dignity of the life in the person condemned to death.

The first group of staff dedicated to the execution process are those staff that are assigned each day to supervise, feed, address the needs of those on death row. Staff make rounds through each cell and recreation area every 30 minutes, every day talking with those confined on death row, answering their questions and responding to issues, all to keep the climate on death row peaceful and healthy. Staff include correctional security staff, nurses, case managers, chaplains and facility supervisors. As Director, I walked death row often and witnessed the positive and normalized interaction between the staff and the inmates. At times those discussions involved matters of spirit and faith. Inmates spend a minimum of 30 years on death row prior to their execution and the relationship between the staff and the inmates created a powerfully healthy place. Within a month of the execution, these same staff were tasked with moving the condemned inmate to a cell staff would be assigned to constantly observe and talk with them, responding to questions and concerns that increasingly are focused on the execution process. Staff are right outside the cell 24 hours a day until they are taken from that cell and moved to the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility the day before being executed. As the condemned inmates were taken from death row to be transferred to SOCF the day before the execution, these staff would tell me about the positive things they observed like teaching other death row inmates to read or talking other inmates through family crisis. Staff would ask me why them?, and how is it fair that these inmates were to be executed when others who have killed in prison, or killed multiple people or law enforcement and pose a chronic threat to staff and security are not?

During the 15 executions I oversaw, I became very close with both the actual execution team identified in the protocol and the dozens of support staff that are necessary to manage an execution event. Prior to each execution, we were required to conduct four rehearsals: one each week in advance of the execution. Detailed records and logs were maintained at every rehearsal. These rehearsal records as well as the documents from the actual execution totaling

in the hundreds of pages were scrutinized in Federal Court often before and after each execution with our team members subject to hours of examination on the stand. As intense as each execution was, the execution team members had to be prepared for their testimony for hours prior to Federal Court Hearings. Preparing to testify brought back all the feelings associated with ending a person's life. These staff carrying out one of the most challenging public service responsibilities were given little respect by opposing counsel attempting to discredit their work. At all fifteen executions I oversaw, the inmates within minutes of their death, told me while I visited with them how much they appreciated the interaction they and their visitors had with the staff supervising them.

At each rehearsal [and there were 60 rehearsals under my watch], a team member served in the role of the person that would be executed. That person experienced everything the condemned would experience except for inserting the needles into their veins. That person experienced being secured in the cell, being walked to the death chamber by the team, lying on the gurney, with their body strapped to the gurney, both arms being strapped to the boards next to the gurney and laying there for the entire time it would take to complete the protocol. On my first execution I played [it was not play] the role of the condemned. As the process concluded, the team called for the medical staff to respond as I was experiencing extreme anxiety symptoms. Other team members in that role had similar experiences.

I want to specifically attempt to describe the intense role of drug administrators. We have all had the opportunity to give blood or be hooked to an IV. I suggest we have all experienced times when the practitioner was not successful in making a good connection. Think about the pressure of a drug administrator inserting a needle into veins in two arms to a man who is strapped to a gurney and arms strapped to two boards realizing he is about to die. There is an audience of witnesses approximately six feet away behind a curtain but can hear everything in the death chamber. Within the protocol approved and closely scrutinized by all, drug administrators had to successfully connect with a vein in no more than three attempts. After 3 unsuccessful attempts, the drug administrators were required to meet with me to determine whether they should continue to search for veins in their arms, or whether they should attempt another part of the body. Many of those executed had been intravenous drug users which complicated the ability to find healthy veins to use. Following the insertion of the needles and IV, the curtains are pulled to allow the witnesses full view of the condemned and remainder of the process.

After the drug administrators completed their work in the chamber, they quickly began a saline drip to confirm they had been successful with their connection, and which arm had the strongest flow before they reported to me with their recommendation to proceed and which arm would receive the flow of drugs. They waited beside me anxiously as the drugs began to

flow into the condemned in the event the veins would not hold and they would be forced to change injection points, perhaps in the legs, or hands. The pressure those drug administrators experience is enormous. They often found themselves on the stand in Federal Court defending mixing the drugs or the pain they were alleged to have inflicted by inserting the IV's. Remember they were inserting a three-drug cocktail into a person to cause death without the counsel of doctors or other medical professionals because the Hippocratic oath prohibits their support of a process that ends life. Instead the cocktail came from protocols being used by other jurisdictions. In all fifteen executions, every member of the execution team was focused on the chest of the condemned hoping and praying the chest would slow and peacefully stop movement without the abrupt contractions we observed with the first three-drug execution, Dennis McClure. No one had absolute confidence that the drug mixture would end life peacefully resulting in all of us contemplating in our minds what contingencies to use if physical distress was witnessed by our team or those witnesses observing.

In addition to the execution team that directly supervise the condemned and carry out duties identified in the protocol that cause the end of life, there are support staff that play critical roles and are impacted by this experience. These staff include those assigned to sit with, talk to, and answer questions from the family victims. These staff experience a wide variety of reactions from the families including reliving, for those that could recall, the events surrounding the loss of their family member. Some family members anticipate they are looking forward to watching death while others regret their decision to be a witness. All are interested in learning what they can expect to see in the death chamber. There are also staff assigned to the family and representatives of the condemned. Their experiences are equally intense but often involve in them listening about their visits and discussions with their loved one, readings from the Bible, and other family members that could not face attending the execution. Spiritual leaders and clergy are often in the room. Many question the existence of the death penalty to which the staff could only listen. I visited both the victims' room and the family of the condemned within an hour of the execution commencing. On one occasion I was chased out of the condemned family room by a priest incensed with my role as the executioner assuring me, I would be judged for my role.

Within fifteen minutes of the execution both the victims' witnesses and the family of the condemned were escorted separately to the single viewing room immediately next to the death chamber with the groups separated only by a partial wall. Staff were assigned to control the behavior and reactions of the witnesses. The greatest reaction from the witnesses often came from the last statement from the condemned, most often an apology. Witnesses have pounded on the glass that looks into the death chamber and screamed to and at the condemned. Both the team in the death chamber and the condemned can see and hear the witnesses. Staff

assigned to supervise that witness room are required to use judgement to allow understandable reactions while being prepared to remove those that may impact the outcome of the execution.

The heaviness felt by the execution team and by the support staff is indescribable. After the coroner has pronounced the condemned dead, the drug administrators remove the IV's from the arms and the team unstraps the body from the gurney and assists the funeral director in transferring the body to his gurney. After the funeral director departs, I gather the entire execution team in the death chamber to discuss any potential issues or departures from the protocol. I always thank them for their caring professionalism. Before departing the death chamber, we join hands and an officer who is part of the team, offers a prayer asking God to forgive the person we just put to death and pray he enters heaven, and for those who participated in this process.

After completion of the work in the death chamber all team members and support staff meet upstairs in large conference room to go through in detail all tasks and events of the day, proceeding through the protocol and all checklists that confirm compliance with every step. Every person is asked if they are aware of anything that happened that is contrary to the protocol. Mental health staff are available to support any staff that feels a need to talk through their feelings, but staff almost always keep their feelings to themselves. Even when we have confirmed compliance with every single step of the protocol, we found ourselves back in Federal Court sometimes for multiple days responding to unfounded allegations.

Governor, I recognize this letter seems scattered in sequence and is certainly not one of my better pieces of work, but like my first communication, this has been a challenge to write. In combination, the two letters define why I believe the time has come to end this process that has such a profound impact on so many beyond the condemned.

With respect,



Gary Mohr, Retired Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction<sup>61r</sup>