

Written by Kathy

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Pictured in the long view of this article are Ohio Senate Minority Leader Nickie J. Antonio (D-Lakewood) (center) a Lakewood Democrat, and state Sens. Steve Huffman (R-Tipp City) (2nd from rt), Hearcel F. Craig (D-Columbus) (far rt) and Michele Reynolds (R-Canal Winchester) (far lt)

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By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor-in-chief

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio Senate Minority Leader Nickie J. Antonio (D-Lakewood), a Lakewood Democrat, and state Sens. Steve Huffman (R-Tipp City), Hearcel F. Craig (D-Columbus) and Michele Reynolds (R-Canal Winchester) held a press conference this week at the statehouse in Columbus to discuss bipartisan legislation introduced by the lawmakers that, if passed, would put a historical end to Ohio's death penalty and make the most stringent sentence for a capital crime in Ohio life in prison without the possibility of parole. The announcement was followed by a public statement issued Friday by Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost who said that while he opposes the bill and supports the death penalty "let's open up the conversation and allow victims' families to be heard."

From 1981 through Dec. 31, 2022 people in Ohio have received a combined total of 341 death sentences, according to the recently released 2022 Capital Crimes Report, and of those 341 death sentences, only 56, or one in six, have been carried out.

Though Ohio is only 13 percent Black, Blacks make up more than half of the inmates on death row in the buckeye state. Once a pivotal state for presidential elections, the state has turned red since former president Donald Trump, a Republican making his third bid for the presidency in 2024, won it and the White House in 2016 over Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and again in 2020 when he lost reelection to current President Joe Biden, a Democrat.

Flanked by the three other state senators sponsoring the bill, Antonio said at Tuesday's press briefing that "it is time for the state of Ohio to take the pragmatic, economically prudent and principled step to end capital punishment." Her newly carved 23rd state senate district, a byproduct of redistricting that took effect this year, includes state legislative districts 13, 14 and

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15, parts of the cities of Lakewood, Euclid and Parma, and 14 of Cleveland's 17 wards. The state senator says that she is fighting for all of her constituents, and that seeking to end the death penalty continues to be part of her mission as a state lawmaker

"It will take all of us working together to make this kind of monumental change in Ohio," she said. "We join a growing call for abolition against a backdrop of public opinion, which increasingly favors life sentences over the use of the death penalty in Ohio and across the nation."

Antonio agrees that getting the bill through Ohio's Republican-dominated state legislature might be difficult as similar bills have failed But she says that this time around more people and more lawmakers are on board.

Only seven members of Ohio's 33-member senate are Democrats and of the 99 members in the Ohio House of Representatives only 32 are Democrats. Moreover, all of Ohio's statewide offices are held by Republicans, including the offices of governor, secretary of state and the state attorney general, all but three seats on the largely Republican Ohio Supreme Court, a relatively conservative court that is majority female and led by Chief Justice Sharon Kennedy, a Republican and former cop and social worker turned judge.

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The controversial bill has bipartisan support with co-sponsorship from state Sens. Blessing (R-Cincinnati), Craig (D-Columbus), DeMora (D-Columbus), Hicks-Hudson (D-Toledo), Ingram (D-Cincinnati), Lang (R-West Chester), Reynolds (R-Canal Winchester), Roegner (R-Hudson), Smith (D-Euclid), and Sykes (D-Akron). It is also supported by a host of Civil rights and other organizations, including the NAACP, which has long opposed the death penalty due to racial disparities and what it says is an intrinsically racist legal system that disenfranchises Blacks and other minority groups, and poor people.

The three other state senators who are sponsoring the bill with Antonio, state Sens. Steve Huffman (R-Tipp City), Hearcel F. Craig (D-Columbus) and Michele Reynolds (R-Canal Winchester), Huffman and Reynolds Republicans and Craig a Democrat, also spoke at Tuesday's press conference, and like Antonio, they too are adamant about getting the bill passed.

"Like so many Ohioans, I once supported capital punishment and over time, with prayer and reflection, have come to believe it's the wrong policy for the state of Ohio," said state Sen Huffman with state Sen Craig adding that Ohio's death penalty is not equitably applied .

"It is clear that the death penalty is not a sentence being applied justly or fairly," said Sen Craig. "This remains a deeply complicated and deeply divided issue that has led to the real threat of wrongful executions." The state lawmaker went on to say that "this change does not ignore the importance of retribution and punishment but advances a fairer criminal justice system in Ohio."

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State Sen Michelle Reynolds, the fourth sponsor of the bill and a Black state senator like Craig, added that "I believe that life begins at conception and ends in natural death. The death penalty, as it is applied today, devalues the dignity of human life. Human life should not be a bargaining chip.

Efforts to abolish the death penalty in Ohio have been underway for decades and and supported by the majority of Ohioans. Opponents of the death penalty argue that it is a punishment that has shown to be administered with disparities across racial and economic lines. And data also show that it has failed as a deterrent to violent crime and has prolonged the victimization of murder victims' families and loved ones through lengthy appeals processes.

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