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New Mexico Becomes the 15th State to Eliminate the Death Penalty; Other States Consider Taking Similar Action to Ease Budget Concerns

On March 18, 2009, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson signed H.B. 285, which is a bi-partisan bill that replaces the death penalty with permanent imprisonment. New Mexico is the fifteenth state to abandon capital punishment and the second state to do so legislatively in the last two years. New Jersey's legislature passed a similar bill in December 2007. At least ten other states have considered similar measures this year citing the significant savings that could result from ending the death penalty: Montana, Nebraska, Maryland, Colorado, New Hampshire, and Kansas are among them. Earlier this year, Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley called on his state's legislature to end the death penalty citing both financial and ethical concerns.

In June 2008, the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice found that California annually spends approximately \$137.7 million dollars on the death penalty. By replacing the death penalty with permanent imprisonment, the Commission noted that the state could save in excess of \$125 million per year. Just last month, the California State Legislature also doled out an additional \$136 million for a new death row housing facility--for which the total project budget is expected to reach \$400 million.

Governor Bill Richardson's office reported that it has heard from thousands of New Mexicans on the bill to repeal the death penalty over the last three days. On Tuesday evening, they reported that they had received 9413 calls, emails and walk-ins visits on the issue. Of those, the vast majority, 7169, supported repeal of the death penalty and 2244 were opposed. Many murder victims' families also testified in favor of ending the death penalty.

"It is time for the voters of California to realize that death penalty is draining our state and counties resources while providing no benefit to our communities. We should be using our scarce public safety resources on getting killers off our streets, not on a symbolic punishment. We have more than 25,000 unsolved murders in our state--this is a real threat to public safety," said Stefanie Faucher, Program Director of Death Penalty Focus.

Lance Lindsey, Executive Director of Death Penalty Focus, added, "Governor Bill Richardson is a courageous and thoughtful leader who has recognized that the death penalty is an ineffective and costly response to violent crime. Permanent imprisonment is a severe and swift punishment that offers justice to victims' families and effectively protects society."