CCV Asks Governor to Make Tough on Crime Choice to End the Death Penalty

By Judy Kerr, Northern California Victim Outreach Coordinator

As California’s budget woes continue, the state must begin making more responsible budgetary choices. In April, CCV members took that message to Governor Schwarzenegger and California officials. Joined by Aqeela Sherrills, CCV’s Southern California Outreach Coordinator, and Nick and Amanda Wilcox, CCV supporters from Nevada County, we delivered our clearly worded plea signed by 150 CCV supporters to Governor Schwarzenegger: save the state $1 billion dollars over the next five years by converting all 700 death sentences in the state to permanent imprisonment and redirect the money towards victim’s services.

We also presented the Governor with our newly released report, The Silent Crisis in California: Unsolved Murders. According to the report, 1,000 murders go unsolved each year in California due to minimal resources and funding for criminal investigations. This means that thousands of killers are getting away with murder and continue to walk our streets freely. Despite this public safety crisis, we continually waste millions of dollars each year on the death penalty and on housing the 700 death row inmates who are already safely behind bars, occupying the only single-bedded cells in the California prison system.

Nick and Amanda Wilcox of Nevada City described themselves as “tough on crime” in our meeting with Governor Schwarzenegger’s Crime Victim Advocate Susan Fisher and Public Safety Liaison Tom Sawyer. Their daughter, Laura Wilcox, was murdered in 2001 while working as a summer intern at Nevada County’s Behavioral Health Department. Her killer is not competent to stand trial and remains at Napa State Hospital.

Amanda Wilcox told Susan Fisher that, as a school board member, she clearly recognizes the impact of the current budget crisis on all aspects of public education. “It used to be that school board members across the state would point to high school diplomas as the key to preventing crime,” said Amanda. “Now we are recognizing the importance of early childhood programs. The costly death penalty does nothing to bring my daughter back, but it does negatively impact education services for all ages, which can make a difference for so many.”

The Wilcoxes are strong advocates for gun control and services for the mentally ill. They have effectively lobbied for many criminal justice reforms, including California’s “Laura’s Law,” which requires mental health services to be made available to individuals who do not recognize their need for services. It is named for their daughter.

Aqeela Sherrills has worked for decades in Watts, Los Angeles to end gang violence, and understands the tragic implications of failed criminal justice programs, including the death (Continued on page 3)
Where We’ve Been!

Los Angeles, CA—(Left) Jasper Williams at The “F” Word Exhibit at Watts Art Gallery on April 15, 2010. Williams stands in front of a photograph of Phyllis Rodriguez (whose son Greg was killed in the 9/11 attacks) and Aicha el-Wafi (whose son Zacarias Moussaoui was charged with conspiracy in connection with the atrocity); (Above) Sean Kennedy, James Clark, and Aqeela Sherrills speak about the death penalty at Loyola Law School on March 1, 2010. Photo by Robert Mata.

Oakland, CA—Mourning Mothers March on May 15, 2010. Sponsored by 1,000 Mothers to Prevent Violence in partnership with CCV.

San Francisco, CA—Judy Kerr, Howard Morton, and Kate Lowenstein speak about victims, the death penalty, and unsolved homicides at the World Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty General Assembly on June 12, 2010 at Hastings Law School.
penalty. Sherrills’ son, Terrell, was killed in 2004 while home on winter break from his freshman year in college.

The irony of Terrell’s murder gave new energy and insight to Sherrills’ work. He recognizes the similarities between retributive gang violence and the death penalty because both respond to violence with violence. Sherrills asked Tom Sawyer to reconsider his decades old support of the death penalty and support funding for violence prevention programs instead.

Over 450 individuals across the state have joined CCV. That number grows every day. Among our expanding number of supporters, there exists a striking and divergent range in opinion on why the death penalty does not serve victims’ needs. But we are all united in our clear support of effective alternatives to the costly and failed death penalty.

Nearly seven years have passed since my brother Bob’s murder. His killer still walks the streets. My message and voice are focused on dispelling the delusion that the death penalty keeps us safe. We are wasting millions of dollars each year on sentencing a few aging convicts to death while thousands more murders each year remain unsolved and tens of thousands of family members, like me, are left with little hope for any justice.

In the past year, one of the most compelling stories I have heard was from a woman who supported the death penalty throughout years of appeals up until the execution of her loved one’s killer. Her heart rending story ends with her acknowledgment that her health was harmed by years of reliving the horror and anxiously awaiting the execution. In the end, she was left to begin the long healing process much later than she might have if the killer had been sent to prison forever with no chance of release.

When the maximum allowable punishment under the law is permanent imprisonment, victims’ family members are spared decades of re-traumatization. The notion of closure is incomprehensible to murder victim family members on both sides of the death penalty discussion. Healing, however, is something we all hope for. Healing can begin when the murderer is behind bars and when sentencing is complete.

At the end of our meeting, Susan Fisher carefully explained that she serves at the pleasure of the governor. Fisher is an ardent supporter of the death penalty and makes no apology for her view. She is also a murder victim family member who lost her brother many years ago. She and Sawyer ended the meeting by pointedly mentioning that their positions are under budgetary review. The irony hung heavy in the room as the meeting ended.

It appears that even the office of victim services’ may fall victim to the fiscal crisis while wiser policy choices continue to elude our state.

Fisher assured us that she would deliver the letter signed by 150 murder victim family members and victims of violent crime directly to the governor. I asked Susan Fisher gently if she would deliver the message “with a smile.” She smiled back and promised that she would. I hope sincerely that her smile is enlightened by self-interest as well as by duty bound obligation to all victims in California.

“As about 10 years ago I was asked to join a faith-based ministry called Bridges to Life, which takes crime victims into prison to help inmates see the impact of crime on the individual,” Castillo said. It was through Bridges to Life that he learned to forgive the perpetrators of his mother’s unsolved murder.

“I don’t believe in the death penalty because I don’t think anyone has the right to take a life. I also feel that the estimated $2.3 million spent on each death penalty case could instead be used to help us put more murderers behind bars and solve cases like my mother’s,” he said. “Money used for expensive death penalty trials also can be put aside to help crime victims and their families.”

“In his position with MVFR, Chris Castillo will ensure that the perspectives and needs of all victims of violent crime and families of the executed are included in the public dialogue about the application and implications of capital punishment,” said Janis Gay, CA MVFR Board Member. “I look forward to collaborating with him in this vital, cutting-edge work to elevate the diverse voices of the victims’ community in California and across the nation.”
California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty is a coalition of families, friends, and loved ones of murder victims who oppose the death penalty. The coalition supports families, friends, and loved ones in telling their stories and being heard. CCV educates the public about alternatives to the death penalty and provides information, resources, and support to families regardless of their views on the death penalty or whether the perpetrator has been apprehended.

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Resources, Upcoming Events, and Ways to Get Involved!

Resources
The Silent Crisis in California: Unsolved Murders
According to CCV’s new report, 1,000 murders go unsolved each year in California. To read the full report, visit: www.californiacrimevictims.org

COPE Support Group
Meets every 2nd & 4th Saturday, 3-5pm at Regeneration, 219 E. 15th St., Oakland, CA. More info: 510.581.0100 / mothers1000@aol.com / www.1000mothers.org

The Healing Circle for the Soul Support Group
Meets every 2nd & 4th Thursday, 7-9pm at Paradise Baptist Church, 2nd Floor, 2595 San Jose Ave., San Francisco, CA 94112; More info: George Jurand: 415.516.1635 / Mattie Scott: 415.412.1469

Upcoming Event
Wednesday, July 7, 2010 - Richmond, CA
The Death Penalty: Why We Should End it and How
Join us for a free screening of "Race to Execution" and discussion with former prosecutor Darryl Stallworth and murder victim survivor Judy Kerr. 7-9 pm at the Richmond Public Library (Community Room).

Get involved on a local level by joining a county coalition!

Alameda County Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (ACCADP)
Meetings are held on the 1st Thursday of each month, 5:30-7:30pm at 1000 Broadway, 5th Floor in Downtown Oakland. Please check the website to confirm date.
www.alamedadeathpenalty.org

Los Angeles County Coalition for Death Penalty Alternatives (LACCDPA)
Meetings are held on the 2nd Wednesday of each month, 6-8pm at the ACLU of Southern California, 1313 West Eighth St. in Los Angeles. Please check the website to confirm date.
www.enddeathpenaltyla.org

Santa Clara County Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (SCCCADP)
For more information, please visit: www.santaclaraagainstdeathpenalty.org

Taxed to Death Coalition in San Diego County
For more information, please visit www.taxed2death.org