

Illinois governor calls temporary halt to executions

Our reporter
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Illinois Governor George Ryan announced Monday that he would call a temporary halt to executions in the state. A spokesman for Ryan said the Republican governor is convinced the death penalty system is "fraught with errors" and "broken" and should be suspended until it has been thoroughly investigated.

Since capital punishment was reinstated 23 years ago, the state of Illinois has carried out 12 executions. In this same period, 13 condemned inmates have been taken off death row. Some of these men were exonerated after DNA evidence proved their innocence and other cases collapsed after new trials were ordered by appellate courts.

Richard Dieter, executive director of the Washington DC-based Death Penalty Information Center, commented on the Illinois governor's action, "It's quite probable that we have executed some innocent people."

One inmate, Anthony Porter, spent 15 years on death row before student journalists at Northwestern University uncovered evidence that eventually proved his innocence. Porter once came within two days of execution.

Rolando Cruz and Alejandro Hernandez were convicted of the rape and murder of a 10-year-old girl in DuPage County, northwest of Chicago. They spent more than a decade on death row before being freed in 1995 after new evidence presented by Chicago lawyer and author Scott Turow exonerated them.

Students and their professor at Chicago-Kent College Law School last week filed a motion in the Illinois Supreme Court arguing they had uncovered evidence that a death row inmate was wrongfully convicted of a 1982 murder on the basis of coerced evidence. Witnesses in the case now say that they were pressured by Chicago police detectives into falsely identifying the suspect as the killer.

A ~~Chicago~~ series in ~~Tribune~~ the nearly 300 death penalty cases in the state since 1977. The newspaper's investigation revealed that 33 death row inmates had been represented at trial by disbarred or suspended attorneys. The *Tribune* reported that testimony from jailhouse informants had been used in 46 cases.

Governor Ryan has not declared a general moratorium on executions, but will stay executions on a case-by-case basis. He plans to appoint a special commission to study the use and administration of the death penalty in the state. The study is expected to take about a year. Illinois will thus become the first of the 38 US states which allow the death penalty to call a halt to executions.

Nebraska legislators last year passed a death penalty moratorium that was subsequently vetoed by the governor. Moratoriums are under consideration in Oregon, Kentucky, Indiana, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

In other states, executions have been accelerated. Texas has already put seven men to death this year, and Florida recently passed legislation to speed up the execution process, limiting appeals by death row inmates.

There have been 610 executions since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Ninety-eight prisoners were executed in 1999 and 12 were executed in January of this year alone. There are currently more than 3,500 prisoners on death row.



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