

GEORGIA HOUSE BILL 702:
DEATH PENALTY REPEAL
PARISH ACTION KIT

The Diocese of Atlanta

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Introduction

A bipartisan group of legislators have introduced House Bill 702. If enacted, this bill would repeal the death penalty in Georgia and replace it with life without parole. This powerful action would move our state even further in the pro-life direction it has already undertaken. As Episcopalians, we uphold the dignity and value of all human life, even in the case of someone who has done great harm.

The opportunity to better align Georgia's law with Jesus's call for mercy is increased this year by a continuing [shift in public opinion](#). A December 2019 [poll](#) of Georgia voters found 56% favored replacing the death penalty with a sentence of life without the possibility of parole.

While this is the first time such legislation to be considered in Georgia, we Episcopalians are not new to this effort.

In 1958, The Episcopal Church General Convention went [on record](#) as rejecting the death penalty. In 1976, When the Supreme Court of the United States reinstated the death penalty, Bishop Bennett Sims joined his Roman Catholic counterpart in [opposing](#) the resumption of executions. Successive General Conventions have [reasserted](#) the Episcopal Church's opposition to capital punishment. In his Feb. 28, 2020 For Faith message, Bishop Rob Wright called for replacing the death penalty with life without parole.



BISHOP WRIGHT LEADS VIGIL FOR DEATH ROW PRISONER

It's important to remember that being in favor of replacing executions with life without parole does not mean we devalue crime victims and their families. The thing is Jesus taught compassion for victims and perpetrators. Opposition to the death penalty does not mean lack of compassion for the pain and suffering of the victims or their families.

As Jesus-led people, we cannot accept the demonstrated risk of wrongful conviction, leading to the execution of an innocent person. Six people have already been exonerated from death row in Georgia. The imposition of the death penalty has been shown to be riddled with racial bias and unequal justice for the accused. In addition, millions of dollars are spent on each capital trial, incarceration, and lengthy appeals, for every death row inmate. This money would be better invested in solving other crimes, investing in education to prevent crime, and providing more services to victims and their families.



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For this bill to pass, we need to move quickly to encourage our legislators to hold a hearing on House Bill 702 in the Georgia House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee. That is the first step toward moving it to a vote on the floor of the House.

There are two targeted actions that we are asking Episcopalians to take to help increase the likelihood of this hearing taking place:

1. Most importantly – contact your legislators directly (in person, phone, letter, or email) and ask them to urge Speaker David Ralston and Chairman Chuck Efstoration to hold a hearing as soon as possible on House Bill 702. Information on how to contact legislators about this bill (with sample wording) are included in this document.
2. Conduct a signature drive for a petition to legislators, urging them to hold a hearing on House Bill 702 as soon as possible.

This document offers suggestions and resources for conducting a successful petition drive.

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How to conduct a petition drive – best practices

A petition drive is an effective method to mobilize large groups of parishioners to act right after worship services. The goal is to educate parishioners and then provide an immediate and tangible action step with real-world application. The signatures gathered are shared with the Diocese and then presented to legislators along with those gathered from other parishes. This type of action shows the broad level of support for repeal of the death penalty and makes it easier for legislators to vote to support House Bill 702. Before the day of the drive leading up to the day of the drive, key steps include

1. Secure the support of your rector (**most important**), then seek the support of other clergy and lay ministry leaders. Please do not conduct a drive without the explicit support of the pastor of your parish.
2. Prepare the groundwork for a petition drive at least one to two weeks in advance with bulletin announcements and email/social media communication
3. Recruit volunteers to staff a table in the narthex on the day(s) of the drive. It is best to conduct the drive right after each Mass.
4. Educate yourselves and prospective volunteers about the death penalty and House Bill 702
5. Please let us know that your parish is planning to conduct a drive and let us know if we can help or answer any questions (contact information is at bottom of page)

On the day of the drive

On the day of the drive, key steps include:

1. Setup a table or area in the narthex or outside of the church
2. Print up plenty of petition sheets and have pens and clipboards (optional) available
3. Print up the wording of the petition in large sheets so parishioners can see what they are signing ahead of time
4. Include signage on the table explaining what today's action is about
5. Include fact sheet and background information from GACADP.
6. Ask the pastor and daily presiders/deacons if they would consider preaching a homily that ties in the death penalty on the day of the drive

7. Include one or more prayers of the faithful that touch upon the death penalty and/or repeal
8. Ask the presider to include an announcement from the pulpit at the end of Mass asking parishioners to take part in the petition drive. This simple step has been shown to dramatically increase participation by departing parishioners
9. Most importantly – gather signatures as people depart worship!

The petition sheets

The petition sheet will be delivered to key legislators in bulk – after many parishes have concluded their drives. This increases the impact of showing significant numbers of supporters. It is most important that people put their name and address on the petition sheet. This allows legislators to see that people in their respective districts are supporting the legislation. Gathering an email address is important, but optional. If people would like to stay informed about this legislation and our collective efforts, they should feel free to provide an email and check the box “keep me updated”. Email communication is purposely kept minimal, with only the most critical and timely information being shared. Parishioners can remove themselves at any time from the email list if it becomes a burden to them.

Handling questions, feedback, and opposition

Inevitably, you will receive questions and feedback from some parishioners. Remember that while education is part of the goal of a petition drive, it is primarily designed to gather as many signatures as possible to increase the chances of this legislation passing. Fact sheets should be available to try and help answer questions and further educate parishioners after worship services. It might be helpful to have one volunteer available to answer questions and hand out a fact sheet, while others focus on facilitating signatures. Having a person or two walking about with a clipboard helps reach people who might not be able to sign at the table.

Occasionally, you will encounter a parishioner who is questioning the church’s position on capital punishment, or openly hostile and in opposition. Always remember that our teaching on capital punishment is firmly grounded in The Gospel and on the respect for the dignity and value of all human life. Nothing in the repeal of the death penalty is meant to signal that we do not care about the rights and dignity of victims or their families. On the contrary, eliminating the death penalty is a powerful sign of our community’s respect for ALL life. We always mourn the loss of lives taken in murder and offer prayers, outreach, and services to victims’ families. Please do not feel that you must “convert” someone on the spot. Simply

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offer them the fact sheet on capital punishment and encourage them to pray on the issue or make an appointment to speak to the clergy of the parish.

After the drive

After the drive is complete:

1. Gather all the signature sheets and count the number of signatures received
2. Send the completed petition sheets to the attention of: Don Plummer, Diocese of Atlanta, 2744 Peachtree Road, Atlanta, GA 30305
3. Include a bulletin and/or email/social media communication announcing the number of signatures collected and thanking parishioners for their participation
4. Continue to educate parishioners on The Episcopal Church's position on life and dignity and progress on HB702.

Urge parishioners who want to do more to consider reaching out directly to their state representative.

For any questions about conducting your drive, please contact Community Engagement Director Don Plummer, dplummer@episcopalatlanta.org. He can either help you directly or refer you a member of the task force to help.

Supporting Materials / Petition

The following pages provide bulletin and pulpit announcements, prayers of the people, sample letters to legislators and the standard petition sheets being used across the Diocese. Please print the petition “as is” and make an appropriate number of copies for signature on the day of the drive.

1. The large wording of what parishioners are being asked to sign should be reproduced and copies should be posted and otherwise available at the time of the drive.
2. The actual petition itself with room for 10 signatures per sheet will be delivered to key legislators in bulk – after many parishes have concluded their drives. This increases the impact of showing significant numbers of supporters.

It is most important that people put their name and address on the petition sheet. This allows legislators to see that people in their respective districts are supporting the legislation.

Gathering an email address is also important, but optional. If people would like to stay informed about this legislation and our collective efforts, they should provide their email and check the box “keep me updated”. Email communication will purposely be kept to a minimum, to share only the most critical and timely information. Parishioners can remove themselves at any time from the email list.

Bulletin Announcement

Next weekend [OR INSERT DATE], members of our [INSERT PARISH MINISTRY OR INDIVIDUALS] ministry will be in the narthex after worship services collecting signatures to send to our legislators. Please add your voice and ask for a hearing on House Bill 702 which would replace the death penalty with life without possibility of parole.

Pulpit Announcement

This year, the Georgia Legislature is poised to take up House Bill 702. If enacted, this bill would repeal the death penalty in Georgia and replace it with life without parole. This powerful action would move our state even further in the pro-life direction it has already undertaken. As Episcopalians, we uphold the dignity and value of all human life, even in the case of someone who has done great harm. Repealing the death penalty would remove the risk of wrongful conviction and

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accidentally executing an innocent person. The millions of dollars spent on capital trials, incarceration, and lengthy appeals could be better invested in solving other crimes, investing in education to prevent crime, and providing more services to victims and their families.

Members of our [INSERT PARISH MINISTRY OR INDIVIDUALS] ministry will be in the narthex after services today collecting signatures to send to our legislators. Please add your voice and ask for a hearing on House Bill 702!

Prayers of the People

Merciful Father, we ask your blessing on all we do to build a culture of life. Hear our prayers for those impacted by the death penalty. We pray for all people, that their lives and dignity as children of a loving God may be respected and protected.

We pray for victims of violence and their families, that they may experience our love and support and find comfort in your compassion and in the promise of eternal life.

We pray for those on death row, that their lives may be spared, that the innocent may be freed and that the guilty may come to acknowledge their faults and seek reconciliation with you.

We pray for the families of those who are facing execution, that they may be comforted by your love and compassion.

We pray for civic leaders, that they may commit themselves to respecting every human life and ending the use of the death penalty in our land, especially by supporting Georgia House Bill 702. Compassionate Father give us wisdom and hearts filled with your love. Guide us as we work to end the use of the death penalty and to build a society that truly chooses life in all situations. We ask this Father through your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

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[Month] [Day], [Year]

The Honorable [First Name] [Last Name]
[Street Address]
[City],
GA, [Zip code]

RE: House Bill 702 – Repeal of the Death Penalty

Dear Representative [Last Name]:

My name is (your first and last name) and I reside in your district.

I am writing to ask for your support of House Bill 702 and to ask you to urge Speaker Ralston and Chairman Chuck Efration to hold a hearing as soon as possible on the bill in the Georgia House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee. HB702 would repeal the death penalty in Georgia and replace it with life without parole.

As pro-life people, we cannot accept the risk of wrongful conviction, leading to the execution of an innocent person. Six people have already been exonerated from death row here in Georgia. The imposition of the death penalty is riddled with racial bias and unequal justice for the accused. In addition, millions of dollars are spent on capital trials, incarceration, and lengthy appeals. This money would be better invested in solving other crimes, investing in education to prevent crime, and providing more services to victims and their families.

In a very recent scientific poll, 56% of Georgians favored replacing the death penalty with a sentence of life without parole.

Georgia already leads the way with some of the nation's strongest pro-life laws. Now we need your support to expand that commitment with a hearing on HB702. Please urge Speaker Ralston and Chairman Chuck Efration to hold a hearing as soon as possible on the bill in the Georgia House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee.

Sincerely,

[SIGN YOUR NAME]
[Print your name]
[Street Address]
[City, State, Zip code]

Diocesan contact: Community Engagement Director
Don Plummer, dplummer@episcopalatlanta.org



DIOCESE OF ATLANTA
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MIDDLE & NORTH GEORGIA

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[Month] [Day], [Year]

The Honorable [First Name] [Last Name]

[Street Address] [City], GA, [Zip code]

RE: House Bill 702 – Repeal of the Death Penalty

Dear Senator [Last Name]: My name is (your first and last name) and I reside in your district.

I am writing to bring to your attention House Bill 702. HB702 would repeal the death penalty in Georgia and replace it with life without parole. As pro-life people, we cannot accept the risk of wrongful conviction, leading to the execution of an innocent person. Six people have already been exonerated from death row here in Georgia. The imposition of the death penalty is riddled with racial bias and unequal justice for the accused. In addition, millions of dollars are spent on capital trials, incarceration, and lengthy appeals. This money would be better invested in solving other crimes, investing in education to prevent crime, and providing more services to victims and their families.

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Sincerely,

[SIGN YOUR NAME]

[Print your name]

[Street Address]

[City, State, Zip code]

Diocesan contact: Community Engagement Director
Don Plummer, dplummer@episcopalatlanta.org



The undersigned respectfully urge the Georgia House Judiciary Non-Civil Committee to hold a hearing as soon as possible on House Bill 702. HB702 would repeal the death penalty in Georgia and replace it with life without parole. As pro-life people, we cannot accept the risk of wrongful conviction, leading to the execution of an innocent person. Six people have already been exonerated from death row here in Georgia. The death penalty is riddled with racial bias and unequal justice for the accused. In addition, millions of dollars are spent on capital trials, incarceration, and lengthy appeals. This money would be better invested in solving other crimes, investing in education to prevent crime, and providing more services to victims and their families. Georgia already leads the way with some of the nation's strongest pro-life laws. We ask you to expand that commitment by holding a hearing on HB702.

