

Death penalty foes hail Tennessee governor's moratorium

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - Death penalty opponents in Tennessee are applauding Gov. Phil Bredesen's decision to temporarily halt state executions to study the state's protocol for carrying out death sentences, but they say it "doesn't go nearly far enough."

Alex Wiesendanger, associate director of the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing, called the move "a great first step," but said "a full study of the entire system is needed" beyond the 90-day study of the state's death penalty procedures.

The Tennessee Catholic Public Policy Commission is also among those pushing for a more wide-ranging moratorium.

Announcing the moratorium at a press conference Feb. 1, Bredesen said he is a death penalty supporter, but believes that "it is incumbent on the state to carry out these sentences constitutionally and appropriately."

He also noted that "there did not appear to be any difficulties" with the executions of Robert Glen Coe in 2000 or of Sedley Allen last June, the only two executions carried out in the state since 1960.

The moratorium grants a reprieve to four death-row inmates scheduled to die during the 90-day study period. They are: Michael Boyd, Edward Jerome Harbison, Daryl Keith Holton and Pervis T. Payne.

Bredesen's moratorium announcement came as the state faced a federal court challenge to its lethal injection process. The decision also coincided with recent botched executions in several states and an "increasing public awareness of the failings of the death penalty system in Tennessee and elsewhere," according to Wiesendanger.

During the moratorium, which will expire May 2, Bredesen wants the state's commissioner of correction to initiate "a comprehensive review of the manner in

which death sentences are administered in Tennessee,” and to research and perform an analysis of the best practices used by other states.

Bredesen also asked the commissioner to “establish and provide to me new protocols and related written procedures related to administering death sentences in Tennessee, both by lethal injection and electrocution.”

The study will focus solely on how death sentences are carried out, and will not address what death penalty opponents see as a myriad of other problems with the system.

“The people of Tennessee deserve a capital punishment system that they can trust,” said the Rev. Stacy Rector, executive director of the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing. “Whether you are talking about the accuracy of convictions, the fairness of the application, the financial cost to taxpayers or the execution procedure itself, our current system completely fails to meet this test.”

The coalition will be pushing for a more far-reaching moratorium when it convenes for the second annual Justice Day on the Hill in March. Wiesendanger said he thinks that “chances are good” that an expanded moratorium bill will be passed because more people are realizing that the state’s current death penalty system “fails to meet the basic standards of justice.”

On its Web site the Tennessee Catholic Public Policy Commission, which will sponsor the annual Catholic Day on the Hill April 11, states: “Keeping with the long and consistent teaching of our faith respecting the dignity of all human life, we oppose laws that legitimize or support abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment.”

“As a part of our pro-life commitment, we encourage solutions to violent crime that reflect the dignity of the human person, urging our nation to abandon the use of capital punishment,” the commission says. “Respect for human life and dignity is the necessary first step in building a civilization of life and love.”