

Gov. O'Malley to sign restrictions on death penalty

It's not the full repeal she had lobbied for, but Mary Ellen Russell hailed the House of Delegates for passing significant restrictions on the death penalty in Maryland.

"We're really very pleased with the outcome of the vote," said Ms. Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops.

"This measure is a significant step forward in ensuring that innocent lives will not be taken through the death penalty and in ensuring that capital punishment will be narrowed in scope," she said.

The House of Delegates voted 87-52 to pass the measure March 26. The Senate had previously approved it 33-12 and Gov. Martin J. O'Malley announced in a March 26 statement that he will sign the restrictions into law in the coming weeks.

During a March 17 House of Delegates Judiciary Committee hearing in Annapolis, Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien testified in favor of full repeal. But the archbishop also said that in the absence of a repeal he supported the restrictions on the death penalty lawmakers proposed.

The newly approved restrictions will allow the death penalty only when there is DNA or biological evidence or when there is videotaped evidence or confession. It is considered one of the toughest sets of limitations on capital punishment in the nation.

During a March 17 House of Delegates Judiciary Committee hearing in Annapolis, Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien testified in favor of outright appeal and of restricting the death penalty.

"It's encouraging to see that I do think the message of the church on the value of every life, including that of a convicted criminal, is hopefully influencing the public and many of the legislators," said Ms. Russell, who pledged that the Catholic Church

will continue pushing for repeal.

“We’re clearly making inroads,” she said. “The death penalty is not necessary to protect society when we have sentences of life without parole.”

Jane Henderson, executive director of Maryland Citizens Against State Executions, noted that passage of Senate Bill 279 “marks the first time the General Assembly has taken corrective action on the death penalty in more than a decade.”

It gives Maryland the highest standard of evidence for seeking death of any state, she said, but it does not “fix” problems with the application of the death penalty in Maryland.

“The legislation passed today does not address racial and judicial disparities in how the death penalty is applied, the excessive cost required to bring death penalty cases, and the heavy toll capital punishment cases take on the families of murder victims,” Ms. Henderson said.

The only way to solve those “plaguing problems,” Ms. Henderson said, “is to end the death penalty here once and for all, following such actions in New Jersey and, last week, in New Mexico.”

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