

FEBRUARY 3, 2003

SCHAKOWSKY PARTICIPATES IN HEARING ON DEATH PENALTY ORGANIZED BY FELLOW CHICAGO CONGRESSMAN BOBBY RUSH

CHICAGO, IL - During a hearing organized by U.S. Representative Bobby Rush (D-IL) to examine the death penalty, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) said, *"The capital punishment system in this country is under the microscope, and rightly so. It is a system that is fraught with errors, deception, fraud, and discrimination."*

Schakowsky added, *"I have worked for a number of years to ensure that the justice aspect of our criminal justice system is always upheld to the highest standard. Unfortunately, in 21st Century America, justice is not color blind and that is why the death penalty is and continues to be unjust."*

Members of Congress heard testimony from death penalty attorneys, advocates, families of murder victims and family members of those unfairly on death row, government officials, and exonerated individuals.

Below is Schakowsky's statement:

I would like to thank Congressman Rush for his leadership and for his unwavering commitment to justice and equality. On behalf of many of my constituents and advocates across the country who share your passion, I want to thank you for convening this hearing and for inviting such a diverse and knowledgeable group of witnesses. I look forward to hearing each of your views on the issue of capital punishment and learning more about your experiences with former Governor Ryan's recent decisions to pardon four Illinois death row inmates and commute the sentences of all those on death row in Illinois.

The capital punishment system in this country is under the microscope, and rightly so. It is a system that is fraught with errors, deception, fraud, and discrimination. Problems of inadequate representation, lack of access to DNA testing, police misconduct, and racial bias are causing innocent people to be condemned to die. This is unacceptable and immoral. Since the death penalty was reinstated in this country in 1976, 821 people have been executed nationwide and 103 people have been exonerated.

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In Illinois, more than a dozen wrongly accused men were freed from death row after spending years not knowing if their unjust end is near. In Maryland, a comprehensive study found evidence of racial bias in death penalty cases. Just last Thursday, Maryland Attorney General Joseph Curran called for an end to the death penalty in that state. He warned that mistakes are inevitable and that the prospect of executing an innocent person is an "intolerable risk." And across the country advocates and law

school students work to free innocent men awaiting their turn on death row.

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That is why I supported Governor Ryan's decision to commute the sentences of death row inmates to life in prison.□ His decision is consistent with my views that the death penalty is arbitrary and that the system is broken.□ I strongly believe, however, that the system cannot be fixed, that the State should not be in the business of killing people, and that as a nation, we cannot risk taking the life of the innocent.

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Governor Ryan's actions were not welcomed by all.□ For the victims' families, I am sorry for your suffering then and now.□ Words cannot express the deep sense of loss you must feel every day.□□

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I have worked for a number of years to ensure that the justice aspect of our criminal justice system is always upheld to the highest standard.□ Unfortunately, in 21st Century America, justice is not color blind and that is why the death penalty is and continues to be unjust.□ I supported the decision in 2000 to impose a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois and it is my hope that all other states and the federal government will follow suit.□ In addition, I supported the efforts and campaigns to free many of the men who are here to speak with us today - men who are finally free.□□

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I think it is a time for hope.□ Three men are free today because someone decided to take a closer look at their cases, a closer look at the evidence.□ It is a time when we have the opportunity to step back and really think about what it means to hand down justice in the United States of America.□ It is a time when we can examine what is fair and how best to ensure equality and due process for all.□ I look forward to the next couple hours as we begin to explore these issues.□ And again, I thank all the panelists for coming here today.□ I know it can't be easy and I appreciate your willingness to speak to us.