

Grieving Rush calls for end of death penalty

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Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.) doesn't take death lightly.

Three years ago, two strangers shot his 29-year-old son, Huey, to death in a southern suburb of Chicago. Like any father, he struggled with his grief and sense of outrage. But unlike many of his colleagues who support the death penalty, he didn't want his son's perpetrators to die.

On Monday, Rush, a former Black Panther who spent six months behind bars for illegal possession of firearms, held a field hearing in Chicago. The topic: opposition to the death penalty.

As he put it, "We'll focus this hearing on the law enforcement process that placed some 60 individuals in Illinois on Death Row, who were placed there because they were forced to sign confessions after they were tortured in Chicago police stations."

The panel of speakers who testified included former Gov. George Ryan, (R), who pardoned four people on death row before he left office in January while commuting the sentences of more than 150 prisoners on Death Row to life in prison without parole. Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) also testified.

Several lawmakers who back Rush's views against the death penalty also attended the five-hour hearing, including Illinois Democratic Reps. Jan Schakowsky, Danny K. Davis, and Jesse Jackson Jr.

Robyn Wheeler, Rush's spokeswoman who was also there, said much of the discussion centered on defects in the system that cause innocent people to be put to death.

"What inevitably the congressman is trying to do is develop legislation that will deal with these flaws," said Wheeler. "We're going to be working on this to figure out what the best way is to do this. Maybe it should be abolition, or maybe it should be instituting reforms. Yesterday was the beginning of the process."

Congress as a whole has been less sympathetic to the death penalty than Rush. Five years ago, Reps. Bill Delahunt (D-Mass.), who opposes the death penalty, and Ray LaHood (R-Ill.), who supports it, joined forces to introduce the Innocence Protection Act.

The bill gives Death Row inmates greater access to DNA testing and encourages better defense procedures in capital cases. At that time, the bill had two cosponsors.

The measure, now 250 co-sponsors strong, is not considered for or against the death penalty as such. It bears the names of such conservative pro-death penalty Republicans as Reps. Dan Burton (Ind.) and Howard Coble (N.C.), who chairs the Crime Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee.

Despite heavy support, the fate of the measure is uncertain.

Pointedly, Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), who chairs the full Judiciary Committee, which handles matters of crime including the death penalty, has not chosen to co-sponsor the bill.

"It's no secret," said Jeff Lungren, Sensenbrenner's spokesman. "He supports the death penalty."

In other areas of Congress, the death penalty remains a precarious subject.

Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), who chairs the Congressional Black Caucus, issued a statement commending Rush for his hearing. But the caucus spokesman, Doug Thornell, made it clear that Cummings was not speaking for the entire caucus.

"This is not a caucus position," said Thornell.

As an ordained minister who still preaches at his nondenominational Christian church, Rush says religion plays a role in his opposition to the death penalty.

"I've been opposed to the death penalty all my life," he said, adding that not even Osama bin Laden deserves to die. "I don't believe in the death penalty for anyone," he adds.

The six-term, 55-year-old lawmaker is comforted by the fact that his son's murderers are serving out 60-to-70 year prison terms.. But even in his darkest moments of despair, he said, he refused to change his position.

"Although it was painful, I could not be part and parcel in encouraging the state to kill those individuals," he said. "I don't even have the right to demand or expect that the vengeance should be mine."

Rush is aware of the grueling struggle he faces in abolishing the death penalty in a Republican-dominated Congress that caters to a Republican occupant of the White House.

"It's going to be a very vigorous battle," he said. "But I believe we have momentum on our side."