

Nine family members of murder victims testified before the Judiciary Committee on Jan. 31. Their testimony is below.

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GAIL CANZANO: Good morning. I am a clinical psychologist. I am a family member of a homicide victim. I am so deeply sorry for the families ravaged by the unspeakable acts of Michael Ross. I am saddened further to think that there are those who feel his execution will lessen their pain.

I know firsthand something about the rage they must feel. I know better than most the outrage toward a man like Michael Ross. My brother-in-law was murdered five years ago. He died an ugly, brutal, and horrifying death. His murder was not only savage, but it was filled with horrifying details, details I now know by heart because I have played them over and over again in my mind.

Like the families of Mr. Ross's victims, my family suffered with every piece of publicity, every nightly news report, and every court appearance. Compared with them, we had it easy because ours was not a capital case. Two years after Tom's death, his murderer was sentenced to 30 years in prison with no possibility of release. And my family could finally let go.

We could turn our energy away from the murderer and toward healing. Had Mr. Ross been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of release, this would have been over 18 years ago. Instead, we have a deranged maniac choreographing a legal circus and torturing the families of his victims. Shame on us.

In spite of my own horrifying experience with murder, I have never heard one rational argument in favor of the death penalty. There are none. The only thing satisfied by capital punishment is the desire for vengeance.

Hatred and rage are normal responses to psychological trauma. Together with a desire for vengeance, they are part and parcel of homicide grief. The families of Mr. Ross's victims are calling for blood because of deep psychological distress that not one of you can imagine.

I beg you, do not inflame their cry for vengeance because the quest for vengeance makes us ill. The obsession with revenge is an indication of a person overwhelmed by pain. Their healing will not come from the legal system.

If you care about these families, if you want to see justice done, get rid of Michael Ross, but do not execute him. Close the door. You don't have to execute him to do that.

ELIZABETH BRANCATO: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. Had she not been murdered, my mother, Barbara McKitis would have been 79 years old yesterday. Instead, she died at 53. Her death and the way she died broke the lives and hearts of every member of my family.

Even now, more than 25 years later, our lives are still colored by it. We've all gone on with our lives, but the shock, horror, and pain will probably never completely go away. I tell you about my mother, so that you know that I did not come to my position about capital punishment lightly or casually. I have always known it was wrong.

I will admit that for some time after my mother's murder, I had angry vengeful thoughts and wished my mother's killer dead. I thought I wanted vengeance and justice. What I really wanted was to have my mother back and to not have to think about the horror of her death. I found it impossible to process the grief, and anger, and loss while the wheels of justice were slowly grinding.

Feelings I had were so big, so consuming, and so overwhelming that I could only experience them a little at a time. I could not allow myself to process them all while the long legal process was going on. I had to conserve all my emotional strength in order to have enough to get through all that the criminal justice system demanded.

That long-lasting roller-coaster ride of all the parts of my mother's case is what delayed my healing and prolonged my pain. It was only when that stopped that I was able to deal with my grief and loss. At some point, when I had seen that the process had pretty much played itself out, I was able to stop steeling myself every waking hour of every day for whatever else might be coming and to begin to process the grief, the sorrow, and the anger I felt about my mother's death.

I was able to do it a little at a time as I could handle it. Any healing that I've been able to accomplish has been accomplished by the process ending, not by the death of my mother's murderer. It is the end of the process that brings closure, if indeed there is closure. It is not the death of the murderer.

In closing, I would urge you to support the abolition of the death penalty and the passage of a bill that would substitute life in prison with no chance of release. We want not to be confronted over and over again with the gruesome facts of our loved one's death or even the fact of their death.

We do not want to be on public display. We want the time, and space, and solitude to confront the death and to deal with it in our own best ways. We want to get to the place where we can keep our loved one in our heart without breaking it. Please, help us do that by repealing the death penalty and substituting life in prison without chance of release.

HELEN WILLIAMS: My son was slain in the line of duty. He was a police officer in Waterbury. I heard a new phrase today, death row syndrome. Well, I'm sure when my son was laying on the cold freezing ground in December, knowing he was shot in the back of the head, the back of the head nevertheless, by Richard Brenos, I'm sure he was thinking of [inaudible] where he is spending the rest of his life.

He will be forever 34. I hope you people do not abolish the death penalty. No, it is probably not a deterrent in every case, but I'm sure in some cases, it is. What do we value most? Our life. If you know it is going to be taken from you, you may think twice if you are premeditating murder.

What the gentleman over there said, I didn't catch his name, if you do abolish the death penalty, then what is next? Abolishing life in prison? They talk about restraining them for life in prison. Isn't that cruel? When you go into one-day surgery, does that feel cruel to you? That is what death today is on death row, one-day surgery.

Mr. Tulisano, excuse me, speaking, I think he said, he was talking about the limitations of who go on death row. Well, if a police officer is not to be considered for the death row, then who is? They are our first line of defense. Who will Mr. Tulisano call when he needs help? Ghostbusters? I don't think so.

So I wish, I'll be very brief, these people who want to abolish the death penalty, think twice and put their time and energy into teaching our young in high school perhaps, high school students, to live a righteous, not righteous, but to give a good life. Teach them that murder is not the way.

Spend your energy there, not after the fact that they've done these cruel and heinous crimes to try to get them off. Like I said, if you're going to get them off death row, then you're going to try to get them off life in prison.

This woman here who spoke in the pink shirt, she doesn't want the death row, but she doesn't have an answer about life in prison. Well, then let Mr. Ross go live with her and see how she feels for the rest of her life, if that is the answer to rehabilitate them. I don't believe there is rehabilitation. Thank you.

CINDY MOECKI: My name is Cindy Moecki. I'm a resident of West Hartford. I speak as the niece of a man murdered by someone on parole from a conviction for armed robbery. I am an opponent of the death penalty.

Previous speakers have expressed more eloquently than I can how state sanctions, ritual killings demean and dehumanize us all. Therefore, let me discuss instead closure and some hypothetical that have been raised.

The execution of Michael Ross or any person cannot and does not bring closure. The only thing that can bring closure is to free one's self from the burden of vengeance in the heart. Having society cooperate in exacting revenge will do nothing to help victim's families.

Representative Cafero, and Senator Cappiello, who is absent at the moment, so I guess I will put the burden on you, Senator, in order to prevent the hypothetical murder of a prison guard, are you willing to take responsibility and to cause your fellow citizens to take responsibility for the actual execution, murder through lethal injection, of a possibly innocent person, as has happened without a doubt?

You do not have to first solve the problem of what to do with convicts if capital punishment is abolished to understand that the death penalty is barbarous and must be removed. The only time there is no time to find remedies is once capital punishment is imposed. Thank you.

WALT EVERETT: I am glad you got my name right. It's printed on the order as Wait Everett. I've been waiting, and I commend you. You have been waiting. I commend you for staying through the process.

Esteemed committee members, I address you today as a murder victim's family member. On July 26th, 1987, my son, Scott, 24 years old, was murdered in Bridgeport. I lived a life full of rage for almost a year. Toward the end of that year, I was invited to the State's Attorney's Office where I was told that the state had agreed to a plea bargain.

The offender would accept a sentence of ten years, suspended after five. I was furious, but the State's Attorney informed me, we know you don't like it, but you don't have any say in the matter. The state is the injured party. The state prosecutes. You are just a bystander.

Nobody who has lost a family member to murder is a, quote, just a bystander. At the same time, I am convinced that the death penalty does not meet the needs of the victims. For 20 years, the victims in the state's highest profile case have been dragged into court again and again at a tremendous financial cost to the State of Connecticut and a tremendous cost, both financial and emotional, to the families of the murder victims.

There are mandatory appeals, which necessitate this. I don't advocate removing

those mandatory appeals. They are necessary to assure that a fair process is followed all the way through. A life sentence without the possibility of parole is far less costly to the state, such a sentence almost two decades ago would have essentially finalized the case.

The families would have been able to begin the long arduous process towards some semblance of healing. There is no such thing as closure or instantaneous healing with the death of a loved one. Healing is a life-long process. We owe it to the victims to allow this process to begin long before two decades have passed.

Additionally, if we eliminate the death penalty, some of the money saved could be targeted for additional counseling for victims. Currently, the state offers ten free sessions, not nearly adequate to combat the emotional trauma they have suffered.

I point to our neighbor in the north, Massachusetts, which has a two-tier system of sentencing. One is life with the possibility of parole at some future date. Two is natural life, in which the offender can never be paroled. The latter should be reserved for those who may remain a continuing threat to society.

REP. LAWLOR: Sir, if you could just sum up a bit, that would be great.

WALT EVERETT: Let me just say a couple more things. As the father of a murder victim, I know the pain that goes with the death of a loved one. I also know that victims deserve better than having to wait two decades for the promise of some elusive, quote, closure.

Life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for the offender would give the victims at least a fighting chance to begin the slow process toward some measure of healing.

RENNY CUSHING: Thank you very much. My name is Renny Cushing, and I am the Executive Director of Murder Victims Families for Human Rights. We are an international organization of people who have had someone murdered who oppose the death penalty.

I come to this position because 16 years ago, two shotgun blasts tore my father's chest into hamburger in his home in front of my mother's eyes. So for me, contemplating what to do in the aftermath of murder is not an intellectual exercise. It is something I do every day.

I also one time served as a member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives for a couple terms. I have an appreciation for the work that this committee has before you.

REP. LAWLOR: How much do they pay up there, by the way?

RENNY CUSHING: They pay \$100 a year. They pay it whether you show up or not. My opposition to the death penalty is victim centered. I oppose the death penalty not so much because I care about what it does to those upon whom it's imposed. I oppose the death penalty because of what it does to me, what it does to the rest of us. It makes us become killers. It makes us become that which we abhor.

It struck me after my father was murdered when a man came up to me who had known me my whole life and said, I hope they kill the person. They actually didn't say person, but that was the sentiment. I hope they kill the person, so you and your family can get some peace. I understood that sentiment because it was meant to try to bring comfort. I get that.

At that moment, there was nothing that would have bothered me more. What he

was saying, because he knew me, is that he presumed that because my father had been murdered, I would have changed my position on the death penalty. Think about it. If that had been the case, that would have only compounded the act of murder because not only would the killer have taken my father's life, but he also would have taken my values.

I think it's that as much for individuals as it is for society. If we let murderers turn us into killers ourselves, then we become them. We become that evil. I think that the focus of this discussion ought to move beyond the offenders.

It ought to really include what society can do to meet the needs of victims. It is too long right now for me to begin a discourse on the psychobiology of trauma, but it is very important for you at some point to sit and try to understand the victim's experience.

The sad reality of our criminal justice system is that it constantly re-traumatizes victims. You can see the trauma that was being played out this past week in Connecticut, the past couple weeks in Connecticut.

When the psychobiology of trauma, trauma memories are such that they are different from narrative memories. Trauma memories take place in the amygdala, the reptile part of the brain. They cannot be controlled, but they can be triggered. If you think about it, what are the things that trigger trauma memories? It is violence, the act itself.

So as a matter of self-care, oftentimes survivors of homicide try to put ourselves in a position where we don't get the proximity to events that are going to trigger that trauma memory. I mean, I hear the buzzer going off, and I am respectful of the late hour.

There are ways that we can help transform to create conditions where trauma memories can be transformed to the narrative memories. We can actually help to find out ways to help victims heal. I would just urge this committee to not just abolish the death penalty, but also to incorporate a more comprehensive plan for addressing the needs of victims in Connecticut.

I will say, as someone who works with victims all the time throughout this country, you in Connecticut are lucky. You have a victims assistance program headed by Mr. Papillo that is really one of the leaders in the country, but it has a long way to go.

Fifteen years ago, the United Nations adopted the Basic Declaration of Principles for the Rights of Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power. It made a promise to victims on behalf of the world community that set out a goal for us all to achieve. Connecticut has taken some initial steps toward meeting that promise, but it has long way to go.

I would hope that all of the attention and all of the activity that has gone on in recent times in this state would be redirected into ways that would prevent crime and help victims to heal. That is, ultimately, the most important tribute that we can pay to victims. It is to help people heal individually and in society

DEBBIE FLORENCE: Hi. Good evening. My name is Debbie Florence, and I've been before you in the past. My daughter, Jenny, was murdered while she was nine months pregnant on New Year's Eve of 2001. I know firsthand the lengthy appellate process and the frustration it can cause.

I am here today in opposition of the death penalty. I don't believe that it's right to kill under the guise of a law. For me personally, I can say that it will not bring peace to me or closure in any way, shape or form. I think that it would be, with the laws, just saying it's okay to kill, and it is not.

I think that the person that commits a murder and is sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of release is more than sufficient. However, if you do decide to keep the death penalty, in the second section of this bill, I believe that victims' families should have the right to genuinely speak what they feel in the early processes when it really counts and not be left to not have any say until it is over.

You asked somebody here earlier if they knew any of the families of Michael Ross's victims. I do. I can tell you that the family to this day has yet to even begin to heal. It is constantly being brought up, and it is very painful. My heart goes out to him. I feel that Connecticut had amply enough time over 20 years to deal with this matter.

I am asking you as lawmakers to abolish the death penalty. Michael Ross doesn't need pen pals and a website. Somebody said it was inhumane what was being done. Well, what he did was inhumane too. He made his choice.

He should not have all the luxuries that everybody else does have. He is where he belongs, and he should stay there until he dies of natural causes. Thank you.

SEN. LAWLOR: Thank you, Debbie. You've helped us write other bills during the last few years, and I know it is not your first time up here. You've always been very constructive in the process, so I want to thank you once again for that.

DEBBIE FLORENCE: Thank you for listening.

NANCY FILIAULT: Good evening. I actually don't really have a whole prepared anything because I didn't really think I was going to be able to speak. I did drive down here from New Hampshire and didn't get here in time. I guess the reason why I am here, I am opposed to this.

I can begin by saying I am opposed to the death penalty. I would like to see it abolished in the State of Connecticut. My sister was killed in December of 2000 with two of her children.

I just recently experienced a trial in New Haven in October and September of this year. It was a death-penalty case. Had it not been such a heinous incredibly cruel murder, it might not have been a death penalty case. I guess because it was, it was chosen that it would go to trial.

The person who did it was willing to plead guilty to four murders, life in prison with no parole. I think that was within a couple of days of being arrested. It was a horrendous experience, traumatizing. The judicial process does not work. I think that you either need to abolish it or make it work.

If there was any time that I would have been for the death penalty, this was it. I have to say that the murder of my sister almost turned me into a murderer. Plenty of times in that trial, I could have jumped that bench and killed him, but I know the difference between right and wrong.

I have a family I love, and I am a law-abiding citizen for the most part. I don't know who can say they totally are, but I speed occasionally and stuff like that. I guess my issues would be, I do have a problem with abolishing the death penalty. I'll just take a few minutes, and I would hope you all have questions for me, being through one of these trials just recently.

I don't know what all these people have talked about, especially people who have never been a victim, having a loved one butchered by someone is very hard to go to forgiveness. I'm working on it, but it's hard to go there. It's hard to have someone you loved treated that way.

I guess the problem I have, the little problem I have with abolishing the death

penalty, life in prison without parole is also the punishment, and we have to talk about punishment here. We live in a society where we all have to live by laws. If you break them, there needs to be a punishment.

So if we can send people to life in prison for drug abuse, drug crimes, burglary, larceny, then where is the difference? A couple of you have, I think, asked the question, you know, what would be, if you abolished the death penalty, what would be the punishment?

I like hearing that word. They're not clients. They are convicted criminals, and in my case, a confessed murderer, four times. So there really was no need for a death penalty, a trial at all. He was willing to plead guilty. There was no question of innocence. It took the state, I hate to talk about the money issue because to say it's a waste of money is horrendous and unacceptable to me. There are better ways to spend it. Public defenders would be doing their job, whether they were defending a murderer or whoever else they defend.

I don't know that the money issue is really like what they say. They put in so much overtime and all of that. I don't know how that works. I guess that is what I would like you guys to really think about. Where is the punishment for the crime?

If you abolish the death penalty, which I would like to see done because I never would want anybody to go through what I just went through, but do you lessen the punishments for lesser crimes by taking it away or your accountability? Thank you.

REP. LAWLOR: I am from that area of the state, so I followed that trial as it progressed. As you stated, given the fact that the offender, the murderer involved was willing to plead guilty right off the bat, the whole ordeal that your family [Gap in testimony. Changing from Tape 4A to 4B.]

--family members of murder victims. Some are in support of the death penalty, but many oppose it as well. They express sentiments similar to what you've just expressed. I think, you know, people here have all kinds of different views, members of the Legislature, I mean.

I think this one is sort of a new one for them. For many people [inaudible] sinking in, given the complexity of the Ross case. I think it is very important that you and others come here to share that particular point of view.

It is a unique one and an unenviable one, of course, but it is an important one. Are there other questions? If not, thank you very much.

JANE CARON: My name is Jane Caron. I'm a lifelong resident of the State of Connecticut. I live in Thomaston. I'm here today to strongly object to the use of the death penalty and to urge you to abolish it. Every part of me feels pain for the family members of violent crimes.

The violence is horrifying and unthinkable. I am a family member who has experience with violent crime. A young man hooked on cocaine took my aunt's life in 1986. He is currently serving a life sentence in the State of Montana. I did not support the use of the death penalty prior to her death, and I don't support it now.

My reasons for coming here today are to outline why I think we need to abolish the death penalty. First of all, state-sanctioned murder is still murder. When an individual kills, it is an individual act condoned by no one. Condoning murder on behalf of the citizens of the State of Connecticut is, for me, unconscionable.

Secondly, the act of an execution is a violent act in a world already filled with violent acts. It is an unnecessary act to protect the citizens of the State of Connecticut and by its very nature makes the state and the world more

violent. Certainly, the United States of America and the State of Connecticut must hold themselves up, in my opinion, to be a beacon of freedom and democracy.

We are the keystones of the free world, as such must lead with the most profound example of justice. As long as the United States, and in particular the State of Connecticut allow state-sanctioned murder, it is impossible for us to hold ourselves up as a civilized society. We cannot hold other countries accountable for their acts of violence when we commit them ourselves.

There are many other reasons why the death penalty doesn't make sense, in part, because of the way it's applied in an endless, endless struggle to reach fairness. As members of the Judiciary Committee, you know all these reasons. I don't need to go over them. I am asking you to do the right thing, to abolish the death penalty. Life without parole serves justice. We must, as a state, make a commitment to justice, but not to violence. I thank you very much for listening to me.