
Judiciary Committee

HB 1504

Title: An act relating to reducing criminal justice expenses by eliminating the death penalty in favor of life incarceration.

Brief Description: Reducing criminal justice expenses by eliminating the death penalty in favor of life incarceration.

Sponsors: Representatives Carlyle, Orwall, Pedersen, Jinkins, Fitzgibbon, Cody, Ormsby, Hudgins, Tarleton, Wylie, Riccelli, Moscoso, Farrell, Kagi, Appleton, Ryu, Walsh, Habib, Maxwell, Santos and Pollet.

<p style="text-align: center;">Brief Summary of Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eliminates the death penalty, and provides that all persons convicted of Aggravated first-degree Murder must be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of release or parole.

Hearing Date: 3/6/13

Staff: Edie Adams (786-7180).

Background:

Washington has had some form of capital punishment since territorial days, with the exception of several periods where the death penalty was either legislatively abolished or ruled unconstitutional. Washington's current death penalty statute was enacted in 1981. Of the 32 people that have been sentenced to death since 1981, five persons have been executed, and eight persons are currently undergoing appellate review of their death sentences. Of the remaining 19 persons, 18 had their death sentences overturned, and all but two of those persons were subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of release or parole.

Under the death penalty statute, a death sentence may be imposed only against those persons convicted of Aggravated first-degree Murder and only after a special sentencing proceeding has

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

been held to determine whether the death penalty is warranted.

Aggravated First-Degree Murder.

Aggravated first-degree Murder means Premeditated first-degree Murder when any of a specified list of 14 aggravating circumstances exists. Examples of aggravating circumstances include, among others:

- The victim was a police officer performing official duties, or a judge, juror, witness, or attorney and the murder was related to the victim's official duties.
- The murder was committed while the person was incarcerated or on leave from a detention facility.
- The murder was committed in the course of, in furtherance of, or in immediate flight from certain crimes, such as first- or second-degree Robbery, Rape, or Burglary.
- The murder was committed in exchange for money or to conceal a crime.
- The person committed the murder to obtain or maintain a position in the hierarchy of an organization.
- There was more than one victim and the murders were part of a common scheme or plan, or the result of a single act.

Special Sentencing Proceeding.

A person convicted of Aggravated first-degree Murder is subject to the death penalty only through a special sentencing proceeding. During the special sentencing proceeding, the jury must determine unanimously that "there are not sufficient mitigating circumstances to merit leniency" in order for the death penalty to be imposed.

The jury may consider any mitigating factor in its deliberation. Examples of mitigating factors are set forth in statute and include: prior criminal activity; extreme mental disturbance or duress at the time of the murder; whether the defendant was substantially impaired as the result of a mental disease or defect; whether the defendant acted under duress or domination of another; youth of the defendant; and likelihood of future dangerousness.

If the jury finds that there are sufficient mitigating circumstances to merit leniency, the defendant receives a sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of release or parole.

Mandatory Review.

All death sentences are subject to a mandatory review by the Washington Supreme Court (Court) that is in addition to other appellate rights. The Court in the mandatory review is required to determine whether:

- there was sufficient evidence to justify the finding that there were not sufficient mitigating circumstances to merit leniency;
- the sentence of death is excessive or disproportionate to the penalty imposed in similar cases;
- the sentence was the result of passion or prejudice; and
- the defendant had an intellectual disability.

The Court engages in a proportionality review to determine whether imposition of the death penalty in a particular case is proportionate to the penalty imposed in similar cases, considering any reported case that carried the possibility of a death sentence. The Court considers four factors: the nature of the crime; the aggravating circumstances; the defendant's criminal history;

and the defendant's personal history. According to the Court, the purpose of proportionality review is to avoid random arbitrariness and imposition of the death sentence in a racially discriminatory manner. The Court has held that the death penalty is not disproportionate in a given case if death sentences have generally been imposed in similar cases, and its imposition in the present case is not wanton or freakish.

Execution Procedures.

The death penalty in Washington is carried out by lethal injection or, at the election of the condemned person, by hanging. The execution of an inmate under a death sentence is carried out at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla under the supervision of the Superintendent, and in accordance with a Department of Corrections policy governing capital punishment procedures.

Summary of Bill:

The death penalty is eliminated, and all statutory procedures for imposing and carrying out a sentence of death are repealed.

A person convicted of Aggravated first degree Murder must be sentenced to life without the possibility of release or parole.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 28, 2013.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.