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## Public hearing turns into passionate debate on death penalty

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It was supposed to be a dry public hearing on a "notice of proposed regulations," a meeting to let citizens speak about technical aspects of how lethal injection is administered to condemned inmates.

But anti-death penalty groups galvanized hundreds of their supporters to file into a Sacramento auditorium Tuesday for an emotional, day-long debate on whether capital punishment is justified or should be abolished.

It was clearly a one-sided debate.

By the time the scheduled 3 p.m. close of the hearing arrived, nearly 100 people had spoken – only two in favor of the death penalty – and the hearing was extended two hours because so many more people wanted to talk.

"I have a commission from on high," Bill Babbitt, a 66-year-old Elk Grove man who travels the nation speaking out against the death penalty, said before he took the lectern. "God has told me what he wants me to do with my life."

Babbitt has believed that since he watched his brother, Manny, die in the San Quentin death chamber in 1999 on Manny Babbitt's 50th birthday.

He was executed for killing a 78-year-old Sacramento grandmother, Leah Schendel, in 1980, despite pleas that he be spared because his service in Vietnam had left him with mental disorders.

Many of the witnesses Tuesday had similar, personal connections to the death penalty: a mother whose daughter was stabbed to death but who opposed the death penalty for the killer; a former Death Row inmate from Oklahoma who was later exonerated and freed; a witness to the execution of Stanley Tookie Williams in 2005.

Ostensibly, the hearing was simply to allow comment on new lethal injections guidelines drafted by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, part of an effort to fend off legal challenges that have kept the death penalty on hold in California since 2006.

To allay legal challenges, corrections officials drafted 42 pages of procedures for administering three drugs to kill a condemned inmate, bolstered the amount of training execution teams receive and built a new death chamber at San Quentin.

Now, the department has until May 2010 to submit them to a federal judge in San Jose for approval, which likely will be followed by further legal challenges.

Supporters of the death penalty on Tuesday called the legal challenges "frivolous" and urged a resumption of executions.

John Mancino, a leader of the movement in 1986 that ousted state Supreme Court Justice Rose Bird from her post because of her opposition to the death penalty, told the hearing that 108,000 murders have been committed in California since 1963, while only 14 executions have.

He added that claims that inmates may suffer pain during the lethal injection process are a "smoke screen" aimed at ending capital punishment.

"If you have even been anesthetized for a tonsillectomy, you don't feel a thing," Mancino said.

But he clearly was in the minority at the hearing, where teachers, doctors, clergy and college professors gathered to speak out against capital punishment.

One woman drew loud applause when she noted the irony that a hearing on executions was being held in an auditorium at the state health department.

Some wore T-shirts or carried signs with slogans such as "Execute Justice, Not People," "The Death Penalty is Killing California's Budget," and "Money for Education, Not Executions."

With California teetering on the financial brink, many speakers said abolishing the death penalty could save the state millions of dollars, despite the corrections department's statement that the new lethal injection process would have no fiscal impact.

Proponents of abolishing the death penalty cite a state study that says housing 680 inmates on death row and trying to implement the death penalty costs \$137 million each year, while placing them all in prison for life would save \$125 million.

Mike Farrell, the former M\*A\*S\*H star who now heads the anti-death penalty group Death Penalty Focus, said there are too many unknown costs associated with capital punishment, including psychological pressures on execution team members and wardens.

Lance Lindsey, the group's executive director, called the death penalty procedures "heinously flawed," and said it was something "you will take with you for the rest of your lives."

But the very first speaker of the day provided one of the most poignant – and personal – arguments.

Donna Doolin-Larsen said her son Keith is on death row at San Quentin, and facing the prospect of his execution is "terribly painful and dehumanizing."

She described her son as "factually innocent," and said the death penalty "has impacted me and my family in many ways."

"I visualize in my nightmares the moment when I may have to witness Keith entering the death chamber, being strapped to the death gurney, seeing the death catheter inserted into his vein for the death poison to be administered, hearing Keith's last dying words, and thinking, 'Save my son,' " she said.

Keith Zon Doolin was convicted in 1996 and sent to California's death row for shooting six prostitutes in Fresno County, two fatally.

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