



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

NEWS RELEASE

PO BOX 004
CONTACT: Jayne O'Connor
Julie Plocinik
(609) 777-2600

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Gov. Whitman Calls for Panel to Expedite Death Penalty Process

Gov. Christie Whitman today signed an executive order creating a commission to recommend how the death penalty process can be expedited while ensuring fairness. On the 15th anniversary of the enactment of the death penalty, she called for more efficient and effective implementation of capital punishment in New Jersey.

Outside of death row at New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, Gov. Whitman signed the executive order and addressed law enforcement and victims advocates.

"It has been 15 years since the death penalty was enacted and ten years since the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that capital punishment was constitutional. In that ten years, not one murderer sentenced to death has been executed. We have not carried out the will of the juries in even one instance," said Gov. Whitman.

"The commission that I am creating today will bring together all of the appropriate interests to make recommendations on how to expedite the death penalty process while ensuring that it is administered in a just manner," she said. "That's only fair to the all of those who have suffered -- and continue to suffer -- the loss of a loved one at the hands of a violent criminal. For every criminal who receives capital punishment, there is a path of violence that has forever crushed a family's hopes for a future."

The Governor stressed the importance of preserving defendants' rights and due process but expressed frustration at the often protracted appeals and post conviction process that has prevented the true implementation of capital punishment in New Jersey since the Supreme Court's affirmation of the law ten years ago.

The Governor signed Executive Order No. 72 creating the "Study Commission on the Implementation of the Death Penalty." In reviewing the death penalty process, the commission will consider issues including streamlining the appeals process, modifying the rules governing applicability of evidence in the death penalty phase of a capital trial, and also considering aggravating factors, such as a victim's physical or mental impairment or a defendant's prior record, during a death penalty decision by a jury.

The commission will consist of up to 15 members, including: the Attorney General, the Public Defender, a Senator and one public member appointed by the Senate President, an Assembly Member and one public member appointed by the Assembly Speaker, a county prosecutor or appointed by the Governor, a crime victims' advocate appointed by the Governor, a retired member of the state judiciary appointed by the Governor and up to six public members appointed by the Governor.

The commission shall organize and meet as soon as possible following the appointment of its members and will file a report with the Governor and the Legislature within six months after its first meeting.

Gov. Whitman today also appointed former Congressman Dick Zimmer to be chair of the commission. Zimmer has been an activist for crime laws and victims' rights. In Congress, he was a sponsor of the federal version of Megan's Law and as an Assemblyman was

supporter of New Jersey's death penalty legislation in 1982 and a sponsor of legislation to expand the death penalty.

A copy of the executive order is available upon request of the Communications office.

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